Election analysis
Michael Steed discusses the outcome of the 1868 general election

The General Election of 1868: the Results

THE 1868 GENERAL election gave Gladstone and the Liberal Party an undisputed landslide victory, such that Disraeli accepted the outcome by resigning when the results became clear rather than waiting to meet the new parliament. See Table.

The apparent pattern, of a net Liberal advance everywhere except in the English counties, belies some interesting regional cross-currents.

Most notably, there was a sharp Conservative advance in the North-West region, where Conservatives won both all the new county divisions created by the 1868 redistribution and some existing Liberal boroughs. Notable Liberal casualties there included Gladstone himself in the redrawn South-West Lancashire division and Milner Gray

(MP since 1857 and President of the Board of Trade in the previous Liberal cabinet) in Ashton-under-Lyne. Though other factors were involved, this was widely seen as a response to Gladstone's policy of disestablishment of the Church of Ireland in the part of England most affected by Irish immigration, where anti-Catholic sentiment had recently been aroused by a Protestant Evangelical Mission (see Chapter 14, 'A Lancashire Election: 1868', especially pp. 304–08 regarding the Mission, in H. J. Hanham, *Elections and Party Management* (2nd edition, Harvester, 1978)).

Elsewhere there was a small Conservative gain of three seats in the London area, that in the City of London being due to the introduction of the limited vote, a crude form of proportional

The 1868 general election result in seats				
	Boroughs	*Counties*	*Universities*	*All*
England	Lib 197 Con 89	Con 127 Lib 45	Con 4 Lib 1	Lib 243 Con 220
Wales	Lib 13 Con 2	Lib 9 Con 6	n/a	Lib 22 Con 8
Scotland	Lib 28	Lib 24 Con 8	Lib 2	Lib 52 Con 8
Ireland	Lib 28 Con 11	Lib 37 Con 27	Con 2	Lib 65 Con 40
House of Commons total	Lib 267 Con 108	Lib 243 Con 220	Con 6 Lib 3	Lib 382 Con 276
Change compared with 1865				
	Boroughs	*Counties*	*Universities*	*All*
England	Lib –1 Con –33	Con **+28** Lib –3	Lib **+1**	Lib –3 Con –5
Wales	Lib **+1**	Lib **+3** Con –3	n/a	Lib **+4** Con –3
Scotland	Lib **+3**	Lib **+6** Con –4	Lib **+2**	Lib **+11** Con –4
Ireland	Lib **+5** Con –5	Lib **+5** Con –5	n/c	Lib **+10** Con –10
House of Commons total	Lib **+11** Con –38	Lib **+11** Con **+16**	Lib **+3**	Lib **+22** Con –22

The figures in this table are taken from C. Cook & J. Stevenson, *A History of British Elections Since 1689* (Routledge, 2014), using their Table 5.1 for 1868 and Table 4.9 for 1865. There are inevitable minor differences between the sources for summary totals of mid-nineteenth-century elections. Apart from uncertainties about the party designation of some MPs, there were occasional double returns (both of individual MPs returned for more than one constituency, and of constituencies for which an excess of candidates were declared elected, since prior to 1872 there was no casting vote in the case of a tie). Sources also differ in the treatment of results altered following election petitions and the allocation of Monmouthshire (then in England, now in Wales). F.W S. Craig (*British Parliamentary Elections 1832–1885* (MacMillan, 1977)) gives the overall 1868 result as 387:271 and the overall 1865 result as 370:288 (Table 2, p. 622), writing: 'There were always a number of candidates who could equally well have been classed as Liberal or Conservative' (op. cit. p. xv).

A LONG PULL. A STRONG PULL. AND A PULL ALL-TOGETHER!

representation, but another in Westminster (where John Stuart Mill lost his seat) reflecting the start of the clear movement to the Conservatives in the metropolis that was to become more evident in 1874. These regional exceptions mean that in most of urban England, as in Scotland and Wales, the Liberals clearly gained ground between 1865 and 1868.

This, however, cannot easily be measured in the votes cast. First, there were no votes cast in nearly one-third of the constituencies: 212 of the 658 MPs were returned unopposed. This had been normal in mid-century elections; in 1865, there had been 303 MPs returned unopposed, and of the 141 by-elections since then, only 45 had been contested. The 1868 election marked the start of a trend to more widespread contests, as unopposed returns dropped to 187 in 1874 and 109 in 1880.

Then, most constituencies were multi-member until 1885. In 1868, 196 MPs were returned for a single-member constituency, 422 for a double-member one and 40 for 13 multi-member constituencies in which the limited vote was used. In many of these, parties put up incomplete slates, most often the Conservatives fielding a single candidate against two (or more) Liberals. Consequently, Liberal electors were enabled to cast more votes.

This differential opportunity includes several constituencies, generally the more populous working-class ones, where all the candidates standing were regarded as Liberals – i.e. the actual contest was between different strands of Liberalism, or over the choice of a candidate in a strongly Liberal area. The 1868 election was the last with public voting, in which a continuous tally could be kept of votes cast during polling day, and it was still not unusual for a candidate to drop out when it became apparent that another, of the same political family, was better placed to win.

If the actual votes cast are added up, there was a massive Liberal superiority. The figures used by Roy Jenkins – Liberal 1,355,000 to Conservative 883,000 – in *Gladstone* (Macmillan, 1995) are typical of those quoted. That equates to a popular voting lead of well over twenty points, far greater than Thatcher's best (nearly 15 points in 1983) or Blair's (12.5 in 1997). However, Gladstone did not truly win such a lead.

If that lead had reflected the actual balance of party strength among voters, then the well-known exaggerative character of the first-past-the-post system should have produced a Commons of over 500 Liberal MPs to only some 150 Conservatives. The difference between such an imbalance and the actual balance indicates that if due allowance were made for uncontested seats, multiple votes and the greater number of Liberal candidates available, the real balance of popular support at the 1868 election was very much closer than the simple voting figures suggest.

Michael Steed wrote (or co-wrote with John Curtice) the analytical appendix to the Nuffield series of general-election studies 1964–2005. and stood as a Liberal parliamentary candidate seven times between 1967 and 1983.

Cartoon drawn by J. Priestman Atkinson, one of a series that appeared weekly during the 1868 election, subsequently collected and re-published in book form in *East Derbyshire Election Cartoons, 1868*. The contest for East Derbyshire was a hard fought affair, with the Liberal candidates, Francis Egerton and Henry Strutt, victorious over their Conservative opponents by narrow margins. Cartoon reproduced by kind permission of the University of Leicester.