

# UK GENERAL ELECTIONS CASE STUDY CARDS (1980s)

These General Election and Referendum case study cards have been prepared for AQA A-Level Students from AMSR NOP and MORI reports on the Elections, produced at the time, plus 2 detailed analyses of the AMSR Archive Content produced by AMSR Volunteers: *"Polling in UK Elections Since 1945"* (focussed on Voting Behaviour and the Media) & *"Why Polls Go Wrong"*.

## 1983 General Election — Conservative Landslide (1)

### Wider Context

- Britain was emerging from recession, with the Falklands War boosting the government's confidence and public perceptions of leadership.
- Labour was deeply divided, with Michael Foot leading a party split between left and right.
- The SDP–Liberal Alliance was a new force, hoping to break the two-party system and capitalise on dissatisfaction with both major parties.

### Campaign Techniques

- This was one of the most heavily polled elections in British history up to that point: **50 national polls** were conducted by six organisations, compared with 26 in 1979.
- NOP alone conducted **six campaign polls**, with sample sizes around 1,000 and fieldwork across 52–54 constituencies.
- Polling was used intensively by newspapers (Daily Mail, Mail on Sunday, Guardian, Sun, TV-AM, etc.), shaping daily media narratives.
- The Alliance campaigned heavily on momentum and "breaking the mould", hoping rising poll numbers would trigger tactical voting.

### Issue Salience

- Economic competence remained central: unemployment, inflation, and recovery were dominant concerns.
- Leadership mattered: satisfaction with Mrs Thatcher was high among Conservatives (91% of intending Tory voters were satisfied), while Labour's Michael Foot had very low ratings (only 19% satisfied).
- Nuclear weapons and the Common Market were also significant issues, with clear divides between parties.

### Polling & Media

- Poll accuracy was strong: across six prediction polls, the average error was **1.2%**, and MORI famously predicted the result *exactly*.
- Telephone polling (Audience Selection) consistently overestimated the Alliance, illustrating early methodological problems with phone samples.

- NOP's voting-intention figures showed remarkable stability in Conservative support: **47% in three of six polls**, and never below 44%.
- Labour's support fell sharply during the campaign; the Alliance rose late but too slowly to convert votes into seats.
- Social-group patterns were striking:
  - Conservatives led strongly among ABC1 voters (63%).
  - Labour led among DE voters (46%).
  - The Alliance drew support evenly across classes and ages.
- NOP found that **nine in ten 1979 Conservative voters** intended to vote Tory again, compared with only two-thirds to three-quarters of Labour's 1979 voters — a major factor in the scale of the Conservative victory.
- Tactical voting did **not** materialise:
  - "84%... said they would still vote for their first choice party" even if their party had no chance locally.
  - Most voters believed a Conservative victory was inevitable (80% in mid-May).

### Outcome

- The Conservatives won a decisive landslide: **44% of the vote and 397 seats**, the largest Con/Lab vote share gap since 1931.
- Labour collapsed to **28%**, its worst performance since 1918.
- The Alliance achieved **26%** of the vote but only 23 seats — a dramatic illustration of how Britain's electoral system penalises evenly spread support.

### Key AMSR Insights

- **Polls were highly accurate**, reinforcing public trust after the failures of 1970 and the volatility of the 1970s.
- **Certainty-to-vote weighting** proved crucial: NOP, Gallup and MORI all used it, improving accuracy.
- **Telephone polling was not yet reliable**, consistently inflating Alliance support.
- **Labour's working-class base fractured**: even among the unemployed, one in four intended to vote Conservative.
- **Leadership mattered**: Michael Foot's low satisfaction ratings were a major drag on Labour's campaign.
- **Alliance momentum was real but too late**, rising only in the final week and failing to reach the "magic 30%" needed for significant seat gains.

**AMSR Link:** [NOP Political, Social, Economic Review Issue no.42 1983 June - Page 1 - NOP Reports - The AMSR Online Archive](#)

# 1987 General Election — Thatcher's Third Victory

## Wider Context

- The Conservatives entered the 1987 election from a position of strength: economic recovery, falling inflation, and Thatcher's dominant political profile.
- Labour under Neil Kinnock had rebuilt significantly since the 1983 defeat, modernising its image and distancing itself from the hard left.
- The SDP–Liberal Alliance remained a substantial third force, but internal tensions and leadership duality (Steel/Owen) limited its momentum.

## Campaign Techniques

- NOP conducted a sophisticated **marginals-focused polling programme**, breaking from the traditional “1,000 interviews in 50 constituencies” model.
- The marginals were divided into:
  - **Conservative/Labour battleground**
  - **Labour/Conservative battleground**
  - **Conservative/Alliance battleground**
- Fieldwork was carried out in **four waves** (19 May, 26 May, 2 June, and 10 June recall).
- The final prediction poll used a **telephone recall method**, carefully structured to avoid bias between phone-owners and non-owners.
- All interviews in earlier waves were conducted **face-to-face in respondents' homes**, with working men interviewed after 5pm.

## Issue Salience

- Economic competence remained central.
- Leadership perceptions were stable across the campaign:
  - Thatcher's “approved rating” stayed high (62% → 59% → 58%).
  - Kinnock's ratings showed **no significant improvement**, contradicting media claims that Labour “won the campaign”:

“Little evidence there of a winning campaign.”

- Steel's ratings declined (56% → 51% → 49%).
  - Owen remained steady but less popular than Steel among Labour voters.
- Party image attributes were sharply polarised:
  - **Conservatives**: “strong government” (47–50%), but also “divide the country” (36%).
  - **Labour**: “influenced too much by extremists” (35–39%).

- **Alliance**: widely seen as the party that would “govern fairly” (55–57%).

## Polling & Media

- The national prediction polls were highly accurate:

“The error on these final polls was far less than one would normally expect.”

- Five national polls (Harris, Gallup, ASL, MORI, Marplan) plus NOP’s marginals-based projection all fell within **1–1.5% average error**.
- ASL’s telephone polling — a failure in 1983 — was among the most accurate in 1987.
- The BBC experienced two polling controversies:
  - A Gallup poll suggesting a narrow Conservative lead (40/35) led the BBC to open its election night coverage with a projected majority of only 26 seats.
  - BBC *Newsnight*’s student-run marginal polls were “very misleading” and even triggered stock-market panic when leaked.
- Rumours of poll results circulated in the City, despite NOP’s strict data security:

“Poll-induced panic swept the City... most of the rumours were pure fabrication.”

## Voting Behaviour

- **Voting intention was remarkably stable** across the campaign:

“No party’s vote varied by more than 3% throughout the campaign.”

- Labour did not “win the campaign” overall, but **did improve** in the seats it needed most:
  - In Labour target seats: **34% → 41%** over the campaign.
- Demographic patterns:
  - Women slightly more Conservative than men.
  - Under-35s strongest for Labour; over-55s strongest for Conservatives.
  - ABC1 voters strongly Conservative (52%); C2DE voters strongly Labour (up to 49%).
  - Council renters overwhelmingly Labour; owner-occupiers overwhelmingly Conservative.
  - Telephone owners more Conservative than non-owners.
- Loyalty rates were high:
  - Around **85%** of voters intended to repeat their 1983 vote.
  - Labour defections split between Conservatives (5%) and Alliance (10%).
  - Alliance defections went both ways (8% to Conservatives, 11% to Labour).

## Tactical Voting

- Tactical voting did **not** materialise in any meaningful way.
- Three-quarters of voters said they would “still vote for their party even if it had no chance of winning”.
- Labour tactical switching to the Alliance was real but limited:
  - Overall: 17% of Labour voters might switch.
  - In Alliance battlegrounds: 23%.
- Alliance voters were split:
  - 7–8% might switch to Conservatives.
  - 8–11% might switch to Labour.
- Crucially:

“The survey showed little possibility of a consistent anti-Tory tactical vote.”

### Outcome

- The Conservatives won a third consecutive victory (officially certified result).
- Labour improved significantly from 1983 but remained far behind.
- The Alliance’s vote share held up, but seat gains were minimal — confirming the structural difficulty of translating third-party support into parliamentary representation.

### Key AMSR Insights

- **Polling accuracy was exceptionally high**, reinforcing confidence after earlier failures.
- **Marginals polling** provided deeper insight into seat-level dynamics than national polls alone.
- **Leadership perceptions were stable**, contradicting media narratives of dramatic campaign shifts.
- **Alliance voters were not a reliable anti-Conservative bloc**, limiting tactical voting potential.
- **Demographic segmentation** (age, class, tenure, telephone ownership) remained a powerful predictor of voting behaviour.
- **Media misreporting and rumour-driven market reactions** were significant features of the campaign.

**AMSR Link:** [NOP Political, Social, Economic Review Issue no.65 1987 June - Page 1 - NOP Reports - The AMSR Online Archive](#)

## Technical Appendix

### About the Archive (AMSR)

The Archive of Market and Social Research (AMSR) preserves the original reports, surveys, and polling data produced by Britain's major research organisations from the 1940s onwards, offering an unparalleled record of how public opinion was measured, reported, and understood at the time. Because the Archive contains the *contemporary* documents — Gallup, NOP, MORI, and others — it shows elections, referendums, and polling debates exactly as they were experienced, without hindsight or reinterpretation. This makes AMSR uniquely valuable for A-Level Politics: students can see how campaigns unfolded, how issues rose and fell in importance, how voters behaved, and how polls influenced expectations. The Archive also reveals why polls sometimes go wrong, how methods evolved, and how media reporting shaped political understanding. In short, AMSR provides the evidence base that allows students to evaluate elections, referendums, voting behaviour, and the reliability of political information using authentic historical sources.

### **Why AMSR does not cover all Elections**

This AMSR teaching resource draws on two archive documents: *Polling in UK Elections Since 1945* (which is focussed on Voting Behaviour and the Media) and *Why Polls Go Wrong*. These sources provide detailed historical context, polling evidence, and campaign analysis for UK General Elections from 1945 to 2015. Since these documents were produced the Archive does have a complete summary of the 2024 Election prepared by Ipsos especially for the Archive. To maintain academic accuracy and ensure all content is grounded in verifiable AMSR evidence, this resource therefore covers uses AMSR sources for elections where we have them and uses publicly available Ipsos, BES, BBC/ITV exit-poll findings, and ONS turnout statistics in other cases. This is always clearly stated in the introduction to the particular Election/Referendum.

**Links to be added**

**Polling in UK Elections Since 1945**

**Why Polls Go Wrong**