

Research Briefing

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Leadership elections: Conservative Party



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Summary

The leader of the Party must be a sitting MP.

Conservative Party leadership elections consist of two stages:

- Stage 1 – Conservative MPs choose two candidates to put forward to stage two.
- Stage 2 – Party members are balloted. The candidate with the most votes wins.

A leadership contest will occur if a sitting leader resigns or if they lose a vote of no confidence of MPs.

A vote of no confidence in a sitting leader must be held if 15% of Conservative MPs write to the chairman of the 1922 Committee saying they no longer have confidence in the leader. The current 15% threshold is 54 MPs. MPs may withdraw letters at any time.

The rules for votes of no confidence are a matter for the 1922 Committee and are not available in the public domain.

Stage 1

The rules and procedures for stage 1 of a leadership election are determined by the Executive of the 1922 Committee in consultation with the Conservative Party Board. This will include how an MP can be validly nominated.

The rules are not in a publicly available document. Each time a leadership election is held the chair of the 1922 Committee will announce the rules to be followed and the timetable.

If there are more than two candidates the field is whittled down. This will usually involve a series of ballots, depending on the number of candidates. If multiple ballots are required, the candidate(s) with the lowest vote is/are eliminated and MPs are re-balloted until only two candidates remain.

In 2019 there were initially 10 candidates in the first ballot and six rounds of balloting were required before the final two candidates were known.

In the event of only one candidate being successfully nominated they become leader of the Party. However, they may be subject to a vote of Party members to ratify the result.

Stage 2

The two MPs selected in stage 1 face a ballot of Party members. This is done on the basis of one member one vote. The candidate who receives the most votes wins.

2022 contest

On 7 July 2022, Boris Johnson [announced he would resign](#) as Conservative Party leader. He pledged to remain Prime Minister until a new leader was in place and said the timetable for the leadership election would be announced in due course.

Johnson had [survived a vote of no confidence](#) from his own MPs in June 2022. He won the confidence vote by 211 to 148 and under the Parliamentary Party's rules another vote could not be held for a year.

The announcement of his resignation followed a string of ministerial resignations [and concern over his handling](#) of sexual misconduct allegations against Deputy Chief Whip, Chris Pincher.

The Party [announced the timetable](#) for the election. Nominations close at 18:00 on Tuesday 12 July with candidates needing 20 MPs to nominate them. MPs will vote to narrow the field of candidates to two by Thursday 21 July, with the winner of the membership ballot announced on Monday 5 September.

1

Current rules

The current rules for electing the leader of the Conservative Party were introduced in 1998.

A leadership contest can be triggered in two ways:

- If 15% of Conservative MPs write to the Chairman of the 1922 Committee saying they no longer have confidence in the leader of the Conservative Party, and the leader then loses that vote; or
- If the current leader resigns.

Votes of no confidence

The rules around votes of no confidence are a matter for the Party's 1922 Committee. The 1922 is a committee of backbench Conservative MPs that meets weekly when the Commons is sitting (see section 4). Its chair is elected by Committee members.

If 15% of Conservative MPs lodge a request for a vote of no confidence with the chair of the 1922 Committee the chair will inform the leader and make arrangements for the vote of no confidence to take place. The total is calculated from the current number of Conservative MPs, sometimes referred to as those holding the party whip. MPs elected as Conservatives but who subsequently resign the party whip or have the whip removed are not included.

Following the 2019 General Election the required 15% threshold is 54 MPs.

If a vote of no confidence is called and the leader wins, they remain in place and cannot be challenged again for a year.

If the leader loses the vote, a leadership contest would take place. A leader that had lost the confidence vote would not be permitted to stand in the subsequent leadership contest.

Vacancy

If a vacancy occurs the leadership elections consists of two stages.

- Stage 1 - Conservative MPs select two candidates to present to the membership of the whole Party.

- Stage 2- Party members vote on a "one member one vote" basis for their preferred candidate from the shortlist of two.

A leader who resigns is not eligible to contest the subsequent leadership election.

The constitution of the Conservative Party says is the duty of the 1922 Committee to present a choice of candidates for the membership to vote on.¹ The schedule to the constitution is reproduced in the appendix.

The 1922 Committee will set the rules and procedures for stage 1 having consulted the Party's Board. The elected chair of the 1922 Committee is a member of the Board. Other Board members are set out in Part IV of the Party constitution.

The detailed rules for stage 1 are not in the public domain and in the event of a contest the Chairman will announce the procedure and timetable to be followed.

In the event of only one candidate being nominated in stage 1 the candidate is declared the leader, but the Party Board may order a ballot of party members to ratify the result.

The Party constitution states that eligibility for Party members to vote in a contested election in stage 2 of leadership elections are those:

...who were members of the Party from the time of the call for nominations by the Chairman of the 1922 Committee for the election of the Leader and have been members for at least three months immediately prior to the close of the ballot for the election of the Leader shall be entitled to vote.²

Michael Howard attempted to change the leadership rules in 2005 but this failed. Section 5 provides more information.

¹ Schedule 2 of the [Constitution of the Conservative Party](#) (PDF), p18

² As above

2

Conservative Party leaders since 1900

Conservative Party leaders - 1900 to present

Date	Leader
April 1881	Marquess of Salisbury
14 July 1902	Arthur Balfour
13 November 1911	Andrew Bonar Law
21 March 1921	Austen Chamberlain
23 October 1922	Andrew Bonar Law
28 May 1923	Stanley Baldwin
31 May 1937	Neville Chamberlain
09 October 1940	(Sir) Winston Churchill
21 April 1955	Sir Anthony Eden
22 January 1957	Harold Macmillan
11 November 1963	Sir Alec Douglas-Home
02 August 1965	Edward Heath
11 February 1975	Margaret Thatcher
28 November 1990	John Major
19 June 1997	William Hague
13 September 2001	Iain Duncan Smith
06 November 2003	Michael Howard
06 December 2005	David Cameron
13 July 2016	Theresa May
24 July 2019	Boris Johnson

Formerly when the Party was in Opposition there were separate Party leaders in the Commons and the Lords.

Stafford Northcote was leader in the House of Common from 1881 to 1885 while the Marquess of Salisbury was the leader in the Lords. Salisbury was Prime Minister 1885 to 1886, 1886 to 1892 and 1895 to 1902.³

³ UK Government website, [Past Prime Ministers](#)

Arthur Balfour was leader of the Conservative Party in the Commons 1891-1902. During this time, he was also First Lord of the Treasury and Leader of the House of Commons when the Conservatives were in Government.⁴

Bonar Law (1911-21) and Austen Chamberlain (1921-22) were Leaders of the Conservative Party in the House of Commons.

Since October 1922, when Bonar Law was elected for his second term of office as Prime Minister, there has been one leader.

When Neville Chamberlain was succeeded as Prime Minister by Winston Churchill on 10 May 1940 Chamberlain remained the Leader of the Conservative Party until 4 October 1940. Chamberlain resigned from the Government on 30 September 1940.

⁴ Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Robert Gascoyne Cecil - 3rd M of Salisbury and Arthur James Balfour

3 Contests under current rules

This section briefly summarises previous leadership elections and confidence votes held under the current rules. The most recent are shown first.

3.1 2022

Confidence vote

On the morning of 6 June 2022 Sir Graham Brady, chair of the 1922 Committee, announced in a short statement the 15% threshold for a vote of confidence in the leader had been reached. There had been speculation for weeks that a confidence vote was likely.⁵

He did not disclose the actual number of letters received but confirmed some of those received were post-dated to take effect after the Platinum Jubilee celebrations for the Queen had come to a close.

The vote took place between 18:00 and 20:00 on the same day, with the result declared at 21:00.⁶ The Prime Minister won the confidence vote by 211 votes to 148.⁷

Contest

On 7 July 2022 Boris Johnson [announced he would resign](#) as Conservative Party leader. He pledged to remain Prime Minister until a new leader was in place and announced the timetable for the leadership election would be announced in due course.

The announcement of his resignation followed a string of ministerial resignations [and concern over his handling](#) of sexual misconduct allegations against for Deputy Chief Whip, Chris Pincher.

On Monday 11 July, Sir Graham Brady announced the timetable and nomination requirements for MPs hoping to succeed Boris Johnson.

Candidates would need to be nominated by 20 MPs and nominations would close at 18:00 on Tuesday 12 July. In the first ballot, held on Wednesday 13 July, candidates will need to secure 30 votes to progress to later ballots.

⁵ BBC News, [Something's changed in the last fortnight for angry Tory MPs](#), 6 June 2022

⁶ Independent, [Boris Johnson to face no confidence vote. Graham Brady announces](#), 6 June 2022

⁷ Guardian, [Boris Johnson wins no-confidence vote despite unexpectedly large rebellion](#), 6 June 2022

Subsequent rounds must be completed by 21 July. Bob Blackman, joint-executive secretary of the 1922 Committee, had said: 'We've got to slim down the list of candidates pretty quickly to two.' Candidates will have a £300,000 spending limit, excluding travel expenses.⁸

Candidates

A large field of eleven candidates announced their intention to run in advance of the leadership rules being announced:

- Suella Braverman – on 6 July, the evening before the Prime Minister had made his announcement⁹
- Tom Tugendhat – 8 July 2022¹⁰
- Rishi Sunak – on 8 July¹¹
- Kemi Badenoch – on 9 July¹²
- Jeremy Hunt - on 9 July¹³
- Nadhim Zahawi - on 9 July¹⁴
- Sajid Javid - on 9 July¹⁵
- Grant Shapps - on 9 July¹⁶
- Penny Mourdant – on 10 July¹⁷
- Rehman Chisti – on 10 July¹⁸
- Liz Truss – on 11 July¹⁹

On 12 July Grant Shapps withdrew from the race.²⁰

3.2

2019

On 24 May 2019, Theresa May announced she would resign as leader of the Conservative Party on 7 June.²¹ This was five months after she had won a vote of no confidence (see below).

⁸ Daily Mail, [New Prime Minister on September 5: Tory timetable to replace Boris Johnson as leader is announced with each candidate needing the backing of 20 MPs to get on the ballot](#), 11 July 2022

⁹ Telegraph (sign in required), [Suella Braverman announces leadership bid on live TV](#), 6 July 2022

¹⁰ Huffington Post, [Tom Tugendhat Announces He Is Standing To Be Prime Minister](#), 8 July 2022

¹¹ BBC News, [Ex-Chancellor Rishi Sunak launches bid to be Conservative leader](#), 8 July 2022

¹² Times (sign in required), [Kemi Badenoch: I want to set us free by telling people the truth](#), 9 July 2022

¹³ Times (sign in required), [Jeremy Hunt, Nadhim Zahawi, Sajid Javid and Grant Shapps announce Tory leadership bids](#), 9 July 2022

¹⁴ As above

¹⁵ As above

¹⁶ As above

¹⁷ Mail, [Penny Mordaunt becomes the latest to launch her bid for Prime Minister and Tory party leader](#),

¹⁸ KentOnline, [Gillingham and Rainham MP Rehman Chishti in running to be next Tory Party leader](#), 11 July 2022

¹⁹ BBC News, [Foreign Secretary Liz Truss joins Tory leadership race](#), 11 July 2022

²⁰ Independent, (sign in required), [Grant Shapps pulls out of Tory leadership race and backs Rishi Sunak](#), 12 July 2022

²¹ BBC News, [Theresa May quits: UK set for new PM by end of July](#), 24 May 2019

On 4 June 2019, the 1922 Committee confirmed the detailed rules for the leadership election.²² An MP wishing to stand needed the support of eight other Conservative MPs, with nominations closing at 5pm on Monday 10 June 2019.

The first ballot of MPs was on Thursday 13 June.

The large number of potential candidates led to a rule change where candidates receiving fewer than 17 votes in the first and fewer than 33 votes in the second round would be eliminated. Subsequent rounds would see the candidate with the fewest votes eliminated and MPs re-balloted. There were 313 Conservative MPs eligible to vote.

The returning officers for the election were Dame Cheryl Gillan and Charles Walker, the joint acting Chairs of the 1922 Committee.²³ The previous Chair, Sir Graham Brady, resigned as Chair of the 1922 Committee shortly before the formal announcement that Theresa was resigning on 7 June, reportedly to consider running for the leadership.²⁴ He later returned to the chairmanship after the contest and was re-elected chair in January 2020.²⁵

2019 Leadership election - Stage 1

Candidates	Rounds of balloting				
	1-13 June	2-18 June	3-19 June	4-20 June	5-20 June
Boris Johnson	114	126	143	157	160
Jeremy Hunt	43	46	54	59	77
Michael Gove	37	41	51	61	75 *
Dominic Raab	27	30 *	-	-	-
Sajid Javid	23	33	38	34 *	-
Matt Hancock	20 ‡	-	-	-	-
Rory Stewart	19	37	27 *	-	-
Andrea Leadsom	11 *	-	-	-	-
Mark Harper	10 *	-	-	-	-
Esther McVey	9 *	-	-	-	-

* Eliminated

‡ Withdrew

²² The following outline of the process has relied on press reports of the 1922 Committee's decision – BBC News, [Tory leadership contest: Rule change agreed to limit candidates](#), 4 June 2019; Jessica Elgot and Rowena Mason, [Conservatives slash timetable for leadership contest](#), Guardian, 5 June 2019

²³ ConservativeHome, [The timetable for the Parliamentary stage of the Conservative leadership election](#), 4 June 2019

²⁴ Metro, [Sir Graham Brady quits as head of 1922 committee 'to be Theresa May's successor'](#), 24 May 2019

²⁵ ConservativeHome, [Brady re-elected Chairman of the 1922 Committee](#), 20 January 2020

Boris Johnson led throughout the series of ballots. Jeremy Hunt was the second candidate to make it to stage 2.

In the ballot of Party members Boris Johnson won with 66% of valid votes.²⁶

2019 Leadership election - Stage 2		
Candidates	Votes	%
Boris Johnson	92,153	66.4
Jeremy Hunt	46,656	33.6
Eligible voters	159,320	
Turnout	138,809	87.4

2018 confidence vote

On 12 December 2018 Sir Graham Brady confirmed that the required number of letters asking for a no confidence vote in Theresa May had been received.

This followed weeks of speculation that the number of letters submitted calling for a vote was approaching the threshold. The Government was attempting to get approval for its Brexit deal and the Prime Minister had just deferred further votes in Parliament.²⁷

At the time the threshold of 15% of the Parliamentary Party was 48 letters.

Sir Graham's statement gave the arrangements for the conduct of the vote:

In accordance with the rules, a ballot will be held between 18:00 and 20:00 on Wednesday 12th December in committee room 14 of the House of Commons. The votes will be counted immediately afterwards and an announcement will be made as soon as possible in the evening.²⁸

According to Sir Graham the threshold had been reached the previous day (Tuesday 11 December). He told reporters that some letters had been withdrawn as well as new letters being submitted:

It can go down as well as up. But during the course of yesterday we reached a point where it was clear the threshold had been passed – though with an element of traffic in both directions.²⁹

²⁶ Guardian, [Boris Johnson elected new Tory leader](#), 23 July 2019

²⁷ See Library Insight, [The “meaningful vote” deferred: What now?](#), 13 December 2018 for more background

²⁸ Reuters, [Statement on vote of confidence in British Prime Minister May](#), 12 December 2018

²⁹ Guardian, [The last-minute pledges and promises that helped May survive leadership challenge](#), 12 December 2018

The result was announced shortly after 9pm in Committee Room 14 of the House of Commons. Mrs May won by 200 votes to 117.³⁰ The result meant she could not be challenged in a confidence vote for a further year.

3.3

2016

On 24 June 2016, the day following the UK's referendum on membership of the European Union, David Cameron announced his resignation. He stated that in his view, the aim should be to have a new Prime Minister in place by the start of the Conservative Party conference in October:

There is no need for a precise timetable today, but in my view we should aim to have a new Prime Minister in place by the start of the Conservative party conference in October.

Delivering stability will be important and I will continue in post as Prime Minister with my Cabinet for the next 3 months.³¹

The 1922 Committee met on 27 June 2016 and recommended that the election should be completed by 2 September 2016. The following day the Conservative Party Board met and instead proposed the leadership election should be completed by 9 September 2016 to allow for the “full participation of members”.³² This timetable was agreed by the Board of the full 1922 Committee on 29 June.

Nominations opened immediately and closed on Thursday 30 June at midday.³³ A spending limit of £135,000 per candidate was agreed for the campaign.³⁴

The first vote among MPs took place on Tuesday 5 July. A further vote was then to be held on Thursday 7 July. If more than two candidates remained in the race voting would take place every Tuesday and Thursday until there were two candidates left.³⁵

There were five candidates in the first ballot held on Tuesday 5 July.³⁶

- Stephen Crabb
- Liam Fox
- Michael Gove
- Andrea Leadsom
- Theresa May

³⁰ BBC News, [Theresa May survives confidence vote of Tory MPs](#), 12 December 2018

³¹ David Cameron, [EU referendum outcome: PM statement, 24 June 2016](#)

³² BBC News, [New Tory leader 'should be in place by 9 September'](#)

³³ BBC News, [Brexit, Labour and Tory Leadership: rolling news](#), 29 June 2016

³⁴ BBC News, [Guide to the Conservative leadership race: May v Leadsom](#), 8 July 2016

³⁵ BBC News, [Tory Leadership: Runners and Riders](#), 30 June 2016

³⁶ As above

Voting took place between 11:00 and 18:00 with the results announced by Graham Brady, the chairman of 1922 Committee.

Theresa May topped the poll with 50% of the votes with Andrea Leadsom the next placed candidate with 20%. Liam Fox was eliminated having polled the fewest votes – 16 (5%).

Later in the evening Stephen Crabb confirmed he too would drop out. It left three candidates to go forward to the next vote on Thursday 7 July.³⁷ The top two candidates from that ballot were then due to go forward to the ballot of party members.

In the second round of voting, Theresa May again finished top, with 60% of the vote. Andrea Leadsom beat Michael Gove into second place. It meant Leadsom and May were due to go forward to the ballot of the Conservative Party membership.

2016 Leadership election - Stage 1

Candidates	Rounds of balloting	
	1-5 July	2-7 July
Theresa May	165	199
Andrea Leadsom	66	84 ‡
Michael Gove	48	46 *
Stephen Crabb	34 ‡	-
Liam Fox	16 *	-

* Eliminated

‡ Withdrew

The leadership ballot of the party membership was due to last about nine weeks with the result to be announced on 9 September 2016. However, on Monday 11 July Andrea Leadsom announced she was withdrawing her candidacy. In a statement she said:

A nine-week leadership campaign at such a critical moment for our country is highly undesirable.

For me personally, to have won the support of 84 of my colleagues last Thursday was a great expression of confidence for which I am incredibly grateful.

Nevertheless, this is less than 25% of the parliamentary party and after careful consideration I do not believe this is sufficient support to lead a strong and stable government should I win the leadership election.³⁸

³⁷ BBC News, [Tory leadership: Theresa May tops first vote but Liam Fox out](#), 5 July 2016

³⁸ ConservativeHome, [Leadsom's statement](#), 11 July 2016.

The chairman of the 1922 Committee, Graham Brady, said Mrs May would be formally confirmed as the new party leader as soon as the Conservative Party board had been consulted - saying there would be "no need to re-run the election".³⁹

Later in the afternoon the Prime Minister, David Cameron, confirmed that he would resign as Prime Minister on Wednesday 13 July, with his last audience with the Queen at 17:00.

3.4

2005

Michael Howard announced he would resign as leader of the Conservative Party following the Party's general election defeat in May 2005.⁴⁰ However, the contest did not start immediately. Howard attempted to change the leadership rules but was unsuccessful (see section 5).

Nominations for candidates officially opened on 7 October 2005, the day on which Michael Howard formally resigned.⁴¹ When they closed at noon on 13 October, it was confirmed that four candidates were standing for the leadership:⁴²

- Kenneth Clarke⁴³
- Liam Fox⁴⁴
- David Davis⁴⁵
- David Cameron⁴⁶

A fifth candidate, Sir Malcolm Rifkind, who had declared that he would stand on 29 August 2005,⁴⁷ pulled out on 11 October 2005.⁴⁸

The first ballot was held on 18 October 2005. A second ballot was required on 20 October.

³⁹ BBC News, [Theresa May set to be UK PM after Andrea Leadsom quits](#), 11 July 2016

⁴⁰ BBC News, [Howard will stand down as leader](#), 6 May 2005

⁴¹ BBC News, [Tories nominate as Howard Resigns](#), 7 October 2005

⁴² Conservative Party, Leadership Election Timetable, 13 October 2005

⁴³ Candidacy announced 30 August 2005, Clarke's decision to stand for Tory leadership aimed at besting rivals, Financial Times, 31 August 2005, p2

⁴⁴ Candidacy announced 8 September 2005, Fox begins bid to lead Tories with Union flag policy for all schools, Evening Standard, 8 September 2005, p8

⁴⁵ Candidacy announced 29 September 2005

⁴⁶ Daily Telegraph, Candidacy announced 29 September 2005 The two David's come out fighting, 30 September 2005, p4

⁴⁷ Daily Telegraph, Rifkind is 'one nation' candidate, 30 August 2005, p6

⁴⁸ Daily Telegraph, Then there were four as Rifkind quits Tory race, 12 October 2005

2005 Leadership election - Stage 1

Candidates	Rounds of balloting	
	1-18 October	2-20 October
David Davis	62	57
David Cameron	56	60
Liam Fox	42	51 *
Kenneth Clarke	38 *	-

* Eliminated

Members of the Conservative Party were therefore asked to choose between David Cameron and David Davis in a postal ballot, which closed on 5 December 2005.⁴⁹ The Conservative Party Board announced that the result of the contest would be announced on 6 December 2005.⁵⁰

The ballot forms were sent out at the beginning of November.⁵¹ During the voting period, eleven regional hustings meetings were held. The first hustings took place in Leicester on 14 November 2005, and the last took place in Exeter on 30 November 2005.⁵²

On 6 December 2005, the result of the ballot was announced by Sir Michael Spicer, then Chairman of the 1922 Committee.⁵³

2005 Leadership election - Stage 2

Candidates	Votes	%
David Cameron	134,446	67.6
David Davis	64,398	32.3
Eligible voters	253,689	
Turnout	198,844	78.4

⁴⁹ Conservative Party, Leadership Election Update, 20 October 2005

⁵⁰ Conservative Party, Statement from the Conservative Party Board, 29 September 2005

⁵¹ Daily Telegraph, Cameron gets vital 100 MPs as Fox supporters switch to join his side, 31 October 2005

⁵² Daily Telegraph, We go to the wire, says defiant Davis, 15 November 2005

⁵³ Conservative Party, David Cameron elected new Conservative Leader, 6 December 2005

3.5

2003

On 28 October 2003, Sir Michael Spicer announced that he had received 25 letters from Conservative Members of Parliament requesting a vote of confidence in the leadership of Iain Duncan Smith. This followed weeks of speculation about the leadership.⁵⁴

Once the vote of confidence was announced, Iain Duncan Smith stressed the support he had among the Conservative Party's wider membership:

I know I have the confidence of the grass roots – and I look forward to their original election of me, and their continued support, being validated by my parliamentary colleagues. Then we can begin the campaign to win the next election.⁵⁵

The motion before the Conservative Members of Parliament was:

I have confidence in Iain Duncan Smith as leader of the Conservative Party

The vote was held, and result announced on 29 October. Duncan Smith lost the vote 90 to 75. He announced he would step down as leader when his successor was appointed.⁵⁶

Nominations for the next leader closed on 6 November with the first ballot of MPs due on 11 November.⁵⁷

When nominations closed, only one had been received, and accordingly Michael Howard was declared elected.⁵⁸ Before his election was confirmed, he 'promised to submit his likely "coronation" victory to ratification by the wider party membership',⁵⁹ because of the 'wrath of the constituencies which remain resentful at the way Duncan Smith was removed from power'.⁶⁰

However, it was subsequently reported that:

The speed of the bloodless coup was underlined when the party's board announced his leadership would not be subject to a formal ratification ballot of the membership. Following "overwhelming representations" from members, "informal consultation" with activists will instead be carried out over the weekend.⁶¹

⁵⁴ 25 MPs equated to 15 per cent of the 165 Conservative MPs. See BBC News, [Duncan Smith faces leadership vote](#), 28 October 2003

⁵⁵ The Independent, 'I have the confidence of the grass roots', 29 October 2003, p4

⁵⁶ BBC News, [Tory leader ousted](#), 29 October 2003

⁵⁷ As above

⁵⁸ Guardian, [Howard wins Tory leadership by default](#), 6 November 2003

⁵⁹ Guardian, [Howard: 'defeat changed me'](#), 4 November 2003, p12

⁶⁰ John Gray, New Statesman, Michael Howard may turn out to be the Tory leader who lays Thatcher's ghost, 10 November 2003, pp29-31

⁶¹ Independent, New leader takes charge with hint of Portillo role, 7 November 2003, p8

3.6

2001

William Hague announced his resignation as Leader of the Conservative Party on 8 June 2001, following the Conservative Party's defeat in the General Election.

The position of 1922 Chairman was vacant at the start of the 2001 Parliament, following the retirement as an MP of Sir Archibald Hamilton at the General Election. The leadership election could not therefore take place until the 1922 Committee had elected a new Chairman. This took place on 27 June 2001 and Sir Michael Spicer, the former Environment Minister, was elected.⁶²

Following his election Sir Michael Spicer announced that the closing date for nominations for the leadership would be Thursday 5 July.⁶³

Five Members stood for the leadership in the ensuing election contest:

- Michael Portillo⁶⁴
- Iain Duncan Smith⁶⁵
- David Davis⁶⁶
- Michael Ancram⁶⁷
- Kenneth Clarke⁶⁸

Three ballots were required to narrow the field to two candidates. In the first ballot two candidates tied for last place (which was not explicitly provided for in the rules⁶⁹) and so all five went forward to a second ballot.

⁶² The results of the election: Sir Michael Spicer – 79 votes; Gillian Shephard – 66 votes; John Butterfill – 11 votes. For further details see [BBC Online](#)

⁶³ Taken as the date of call for nominations

⁶⁴ Candidacy announced 13 June 2001, [BBC News Online](#)

⁶⁵ Candidacy announced 19 June 2001, Times, Rightwingers enter Tory marathon, 20 June 2001

⁶⁶ Candidacy announced 19 June 2001, Times, Rightwingers enter Tory marathon, 20 June 2001

⁶⁷ Candidacy announced 21 June 2001, Times, Ancram joins Tory leadership contest, 21 June 2001

⁶⁸ Candidacy announced 26 June 2001, Times, Forget Europe, back a winner says Clarke, 27 June 2001

⁶⁹ Subsequent rules have made provision for a tie. In the first instance, the ballot is re-run. If there is again a tie among candidates with the least votes, those candidates are eliminated. However, if only three candidates are involved in the ballot, the ballot is re-run until only one candidate has the least number of votes.

2001 Leadership election - Stage 1

Candidates	Rounds of balloting		
	1-10 July	2-12 July	3-17 July
Michael Portillo	49	50	53 *
Iain Duncan Smith	39	42	54
Kenneth Clarke	36	39	59
David Davis	21	18 ‡	-
Michael Ancram	21	17 *	-

* Eliminated

‡ Withdrew

A postal ballot of Conservative Party members was held over the summer.⁷⁰ The Conservative Party website indicated that ballot papers were sent out in mid-August and had to be returned by 11 September.⁷¹

Due to events in the United States on Tuesday 11 September, the result was delayed twenty-four hours and was announced on 13 September, by Sir Michael Spicer.⁷²

2001 Leadership election - Stage 2

Candidates	Votes	%
Iain Duncan Smith	155,933	60.7
Kenneth Clarke	100,864	39.3
Eligible voters	328,000	
Turnout	256,797	78.3

⁷⁰ Those who have been members for at least 3 months at the date of the call for nominations (27 June)

⁷¹ According to press reports there were queries from about 3,000 members about missing ballot papers Times 14 September 2001 'Tory rivals welcome 'fantastic poll return'

⁷² BBC News, [Duncan Smith elected Tory Leader](#), 13 September 2001

4

The 1922 Committee

The 1922 Committee has traditionally been responsible for the organisation of the ballot for leader.

The Committee is chaired by a senior backbencher, who enjoys access to the party leader and keeps the leadership informed of backbench opinion. Other office-holders are elected annually to form, with the Chairman, an Executive Committee. The Committee acts as a “sounding board” of opinion among Conservative Members.

It is sometimes thought that the Committee is so called after the famous meeting of Conservative Members at the Carlton Club in October 1922 which led to the ending of the 1916-1922 Coalition Government and the departure of Austen Chamberlain as leader. In fact, Philip Goodhart’s history of the 1922 Committee states that the Committee was actually set up in April 1923 following an initiative by new Conservative Members elected at the 1922 General Election to facilitate cooperation within the party and assistance in integrating new Members.⁷³

From its inception until 2010, the 1922 Committee had comprised all Conservative private Members of Parliament. When in Government, that meant the entire backbench membership of the Conservative Party in the House of Commons; when in Opposition, it meant all Conservative Members bar the Leader.

On 20 May 2010, Prime Minister David Cameron won a vote among Conservative MPs by 168 to 118 to reform the committee.⁷⁴ The reform was to allow frontbenchers, ministers, government whips and the Prime Minister, to attend meetings. Frontbenchers, however, do not get to vote.⁷⁵

The current chair, Sir Graham Brady, former Shadow Minister for Europe and Shadow Minister for Education, was elected Chairman on 26 May 2010, after Sir Michael stood down as an MP and after the rule changes approved earlier in the month.⁷⁶

⁷³ The 1922: the story of the Conservative Backbenchers’ Parliamentary Committee, 1973, pp 14-5

⁷⁴ BBC News, [1922 Committee: David Cameron wins vote on rule change](#), 20 May 2010

⁷⁵ New Statesman, [The 1922 Committee](#), 11 October 2017

⁷⁶ ConservativeHome, [Profile: Graham Brady, who played a quiet part in deposing May, and now keeps a watchful eye on Johnson](#)

5 2005 proposals for rule changes

Before Michael Howard stood down as leader of the Party, following the Party's election defeat in 2005, he set out a proposal to amend the leadership contest rules. These were rejected in a vote by the 1922 Committee.

An alternative set of rules, put forward by the 1922, were voted on by the Party's Constitutional College. The Convention was made up of three sections – MPs, Peers and MEPs, and party volunteers. Although the vote was in favour, it did not reach the required threshold of 66 per cent of the National Convention members (the volunteers) voting in favour. The proposals therefore were not adopted.

5.1 Initial proposals for electing a new leader

Following the Conservative Party's defeat at the 2005 general election, Michael Howard announced his intention to retire as leader of the Conservative Party in a speech on 6 May 2005.

However, he indicated that before he stood down he wanted to oversee changes to the Party's process of electing a new leader.⁷⁷ These new proposals were set out in principle in the Conservative Party document A 21st Century Party. The proposals were:

- Candidates would need the support of 10% of MPs to be nominated.
- If a candidate was nominated by over 50% of MPs they would automatically be declared leader.
- If no candidate was declared leader by gaining 50% of nominations, validly nominated candidates would each address and answer questions from the National Convention. The Convention would then vote and the result of this election would be published.
- MPs would then make the final choice. It would be for the 1922 Committee to determine how they do this but the candidate who received most votes from the National Convention would be guaranteed a place in each ballot including the final ballot.
- Candidates would be allowed to spend up to £25,000 from the opening of nominations. The Party Treasurer would be responsible for raising this

⁷⁷ Guardian, Full Text: Michael Howard's Resignation Speech, 6 May 2005.

money for each candidate. Any money raised from other sources would be deducted from the money they receive from the Party Treasurer.⁷⁸

This proposal was put to the 1922 Committee on 15 May 2005. The proposal was rejected with reportedly only a 'handful' MPs supporting Howard's reforms. About 100 of the 180 backbenchers that attended the meeting instead endorsed a motion drawn up by the executive of the committee. The 1922 Committee proposal included a consultative period with all local associations, but the choice of leader would ultimately be decided by the parliamentary party.⁷⁹

5.2 Revised proposals

Under the 1922 Committee proposed system:

- Contenders would need the support of 5% of the Conservative MPs to stand.
- Once nominations had closed MPs would then start a two-week consultation process with their constituency associations, MEPs and local councillors to ascertain their preferred candidates.
- MPs would then report back to the Chair, who would assess their findings and inform MPs of the two candidates who gained most support, in order of preference.

MPs would then hold the first ballot, in which all nominated candidates would be able to participate. As in the current system the MP with the lowest number of votes would be eliminated. The process would then be repeated, as required, until one candidate remained.⁸⁰

The proposal was backed by the parliamentary party by 127 votes to 50. Supporters called the result as a "victory for common sense" but some warned grassroots members, who might be angered at their loss of power, might mount "a final campaign against the plans over the summer".⁸¹

In a letter to the Daily Telegraph a number of MPs including David Willetts, Michael Ancram, Andrew Lansley, Theresa May and Iain Duncan Smith, wrote:

It is not too late for the parliamentary party to find a way of involving grassroots members in the Conservative Party's most important decisions. Any

⁷⁸ The Fresh Future: A consultation paper setting out proposals to reform the Conservative party's organisation, 25 May 2005.

⁷⁹ Financial Times, Tory backbenchers rebuff Howard's blueprint for rules reform, Financial Times, 16 May 2005, p2.

⁸⁰ Times, Rule change puts the choice of Tory leader into hands of MPs, 21 July 2005, p8

⁸¹ Telegraph, Tory MPs wrest back the power to choose leader, 21 July 2005, p2.

proposals that do not facilitate democratic involvement deserve to be defeated.⁸²

5.3 Constitutional College

The proposal was put to a postal vote of the Constitutional College of the Party. The Constitutional College had a total of 1,141 members and was made up of MPs, MEPs, the officers of the Association of Conservative Peers, frontbench spokesmen in the Lords, and members of the National Conservative Convention (Association Chairmen, area and regional officers, members of the Board and other senior volunteers).

The results of the vote were announced on 27 September 2005. For the changes to be approved, 50 per cent of all those eligible to vote were required to vote in favour, along with 66 per cent of MPs who voted and 66 per cent of the National Convention members who voted.

A total of 1,001 (87.7% of full membership) ballots were returned. Although all section of the college approved the proposals, the volunteers of the national Convention failed to approve by the required 66 per cent threshold.⁸³

Constitutional College vote					
	For	%	Against	%	
MPs	132	71.4	53	28.6	
Peers and MEPs	33	58.5	19	41.5	
National Convention	446	63.5	317	36.5	

⁸² Daily Telegraph Grassroots involvement, 19 July 2005, p23.

⁸³ Daily Telegraph, Clarke boost as grassroots Tories keep vote Rank and file members will have the final say in the leadership race as party rejects moves to change its rules, 28 September 2005

6 Previous arrangements

Leadership rules for the Conservative Party leadership were introduced in 1965. Before 1965 a new leader would ‘emerge’ after discussions within the Party.

The first leader elected under the 1965 rules was Edward Heath.

The rules were altered in 1998 under the leadership of William Hague. The rules resulted from reforms to the organisation of the Conservative Party following its defeat in the 1997 general election.

6.1 Pre-1965

Before 1965, leaders of the Conservative Party were not elected, but emerged after discussion among Conservative MPs and others in the Party, a system which has been described by one academic as “an opaque process of negotiation and ‘soundings’ involving senior party figures”.⁸⁴

The leadership race that took place at the 1963 Conservative Party Conference following Prime Minister Harold Macmillan’s resignation through ill-health proved most controversial.⁸⁵

Sir Alec Douglas-Home, who emerged as the new leader, was not considered a front runner but Rab Butler, Reginald Maudling and Quentin Hailsham, who were considered to be contenders, all suffered from poor publicity at the conference.

At the time there were suggestions that the Palace had been involved as it is the monarch that appoints the Prime Minister. In truth, the Palace made it clear that the choice of a new leader should be for the Conservative Party alone. The Queen maintained the monarchy’s political impartiality, waiting for a name to be brought to her at Windsor Castle.⁸⁶

Macmillan therefore recommended to the Queen that Home be invited to form a new administration. This was a process that prompted Ian Macleod’s well-

⁸⁴ P Webb, *The Modern British Party System*, 2000, p 197-8

⁸⁵ ConservativeHome, [Lewis Baston: The day 50 years ago when our last unelected Prime Minister faced the voters](#), November 2013

⁸⁶ History of government blog, [Queen Elizabeth and her 12 Prime Ministers](#)

known reference in an article for the Spectator in January 1964 to a “magic circle” within the Party.⁸⁷

6.2 1965 rules

In 1965, when back in Opposition, Home responded to the criticism of the secretive way he had been appointed leader and introduced a procedure for the leader to be elected by a ballot of Conservative MPs.⁸⁸

To succeed on the first ballot a candidate had to obtain more than 50% of the vote, and also be 15% clear of the second placed candidate. This additional requirement was designed to ensure the new leader enjoyed the overwhelming support—expressed in actual votes—of the party’s MPs.⁸⁹

If there was no clear winner on the first ballot, the election went on to a second ballot. In a second ballot, a candidate could win with an overall majority of the vote only. If the second ballot failed to produce a winner with more than 50% of the vote, a third ballot was held.

There was no requirement for contenders in the second ballot to have contested the first ballot.

Until 1975, contests were only allowed when a vacancy occurred. Changes in 1975 meant the leader was officially elected annually, although on most occasions this was a formality as no challenge was made.⁹⁰

The rule changes were suggested by a committee led by Alec Douglas-Home, who was by this time Lord Home. The committee also included 1922 chair, Edward du Cann.⁹¹ This included a change that the 15% margin over the second-place candidate should be calculated using the total number of Conservative MPs eligible, not just of those who cast a ballot.⁹² On the second ballot (which could still include those who had not contested the first ballot) a candidate would need to win over 50% of the votes. If this failed to occur the third ballot would be held between the top three candidates from the second ballot using the alternative vote system. If a candidate still failed to win over 50% of the vote, the third place candidate’s second preferences would be redistributed.⁹³ This was amended in 1991 to confine the third ballot to the top two candidates.

⁸⁷ Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Home, Alexander Frederick [Alec] Douglas-, fourteenth earl of Home and Baron Home of the Hirsell, by Douglas Hurd, 23 September 2004

⁸⁸ As above

⁸⁹ Andrew Denham, Hague Rules OK? Electing and Ejecting Conservative Leaders, 2010, Representation, 46:1, pp81-89

⁹⁰ As above

⁹¹ Times, harder rules for Tory leadership ballot, 16 December 1974, p1

⁹² Times, Heath chances of staying on look good, 18 December 1974, p1

⁹³ Times, Mr Heath steps down as leader after 11 vote defeat by Mrs Thatcher, 5 February 1975, p1

There was still no requirement for a candidate in the second round to have been in the first round. This sometimes led to so-called ‘stalking horse’ candidates in the first round. This was where a candidate mounted a leadership challenge with the intention of testing the confidence of the leader and forcing a second round rather than with a serious intention of leading the party. This was to enable other higher profile candidates to enter at the second round, without having been seen to topple the leader. Under the current rules this can no longer happen – leadership contests now only occur when there is a vacancy and candidates must declare their candidacy from the outset.

The 1991 amendments also required that the chairman of the 1922 Committee must be notified by 10 per cent of MPs that they wanted a leadership election if there was no vacancy. The call for a ballot would have to be made within three months of the start of a new Parliament and within 14 days of the opening of a new session.⁹⁴

The procedure decided in 1965 was used six times. Three times a leader was confirmed on the first ballot:

- Edward Heath in 1965, after Sir Alec Douglas-Home resigned. He had not initially reached the 15% rule over second place candidate Reginald Maudling, however Maudling and Powell withdrew in favour of Heath;⁹⁵
- Margaret Thatcher in 1989 (after being challenged by ‘stalking horse’ candidate Sir Anthony Meyer)⁹⁶ and,
- John Major in 1995 (after he resigned as party leader and challenged his critics to stand against him).⁹⁷

The other three occasions additional ballots were required:

- Margaret Thatcher won in 1975 on the second ballot to replace Edward Heath. Heath had finished second in the first ballot after being challenged by Thatcher. She had won but was not 15% clear of Heath. Heath did not contest the second ballot, but four new candidates did. On the second ballot the winner had needed 139 votes to win.⁹⁸
- John Major won in 1990 on the second ballot. Michael Heseltine had challenged Margaret Thatcher on the first ballot. Thatcher had won but was four votes short of required 15% threshold and withdrew. 16 MPs had abstained in the first round.⁹⁹ Major was two votes short of receiving over

⁹⁴ Guardian, Tories alter rules on leadership contest: Election must be backed by 10pc of MPs following criticism at ease of mounting challenge to Prime Minister, 10 August 1991

⁹⁵ Times, All rivals bow out to Mr Heath, 29 July 1965, p1

⁹⁶ Times, Clear-cut win as 314 vote for Thatcher, 6 December 1989, p1

⁹⁷ Times, Major wins outright victory, 5 July 1995

⁹⁸ Times, Mrs Thatcher wins outright and asks shadow team to stay on, 12 February 1975, p1

⁹⁹ Times, Feverish arithmetic of the West, 22 November 1990, p3

50% on the second ballot, however the other two candidates withdrew.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Times, Major wins battle for Number 10, 28 November 1990, p1

Leadership elections 1965-1997

Year	R ounds of balloting	
1965	28 July	
Edward Heath	150	
Reginald Maudling	133 ‡	
Enoch Powell	15 ‡	
Eligible MPs	303	
1975	4 February	11 February
Margaret Thatcher	130	Margaret Thatcher 140
Edward Heath	119 ‡	William Whitelaw 79
Hugh Fraser	16 ‡	Sir Geoffrey Howe 19
		James Prior 19
Eligible MPs	276	John Peyton 11
1989	5 December	
Margaret Thatcher	314	
Sir Anthony Meyer	33	
Eligible MPs	374	
1990	20 November	27 November
Margaret Thatcher	204	John Major 185
Michael Heseltine	152	Michael Heseltine 131 ‡
		Douglas Hurd 56 ‡
Eligible MPs	372	
1995	4 July	
John Major	218	
John Redwood	89	
Eligible MPs	329	
1997	10 June	17 June
Kenneth Clarke	49	Kenneth Clarke 64
William Hague	41	William Hague 62
John Redwood	27	John Redwood 38 *
Peter Lilley	24 ‡	
Michael Howard	23 ‡	
		19 June
		William Hague 92
		Kenneth Clarke 70
Eligible MPs	164	

* Eliminated

‡ Withdrew

Source: Butler & Butler, Twentieth Century British Political Facts 1900-2000, 2000, p 135-6

The number of MPs eligible to vote is taken from the following articles in the Times Digital Archive:

- Both Camps Prepared For Inconclusive Ballot, 27 July 1965, p1
- Support in country raises Mr Heath's hopes on eve of vote, 4 February 1975, p1
- Ministers braced for Thatcher abstentions, 5 December 1989, p3
- How the ballot decision is made 20 November 1990, p2
- Result will be announced in live broadcast, 4 July 1995 p9

Appendix

Schedule 2 of the Conservative Party constitution sets out the rules for leadership elections. It is reproduced below. Source: [Conservative Party Constitution](#) (PDF), first published 1998, most recent amendment – January 2021, and accessed 18 March 2022.

SCHEDULE 2

RULES FOR THE ELECTION OF THE LEADER

1. The Leader shall be elected by the Party Members and Scottish Party Members.
2. A Leader resigning from the Leadership of the Party is not eligible for re-nomination in the consequent Leadership election.

Election of Leader

3. Upon the initiation of an election for the Leader, it shall be the duty of the 1922 Committee to present to the Party, as soon as reasonably practicable, a choice of candidates for election as Leader. The rules for deciding the procedure by which the 1922 Committee selects candidates for submission for election shall be determined by the Executive Committee of the 1922 Committee after consultation of the Board.
4. If there is only one candidate at the time laid down for the close of nominations, that candidate shall be declared Leader of the Party.
5. Only those Party Members and Scottish Party Members who were members of the Party from the time of the call for nominations by the Chairman of the 1922 Committee for the election of the Leader and have been members for at least three months immediately prior to the close of the ballot for the election of the Leader shall be entitled to vote.
6. A candidate achieving more than 50% of the vote among the Party Membership shall be declared elected Leader of the Party.

7. In the event of there being only one valid nomination at the close of nominations prior to the first ballot being held by the Parliamentary Party for the election of the new Leader, the election of the nominee may if so ordered by the Board be ratified by a ballot of the Party Members and Scottish Party Members to be held within one month of the close of nomination.
8. Subject to the provisions of this Constitution, the rules for the conduct of the ballot or ballots of Party Members and Scottish Party Members shall be agreed by the Board and the Executive Committee of the 1922 Committee.
9. The Chairman of the 1922 Committee, acting on behalf of the Party, shall act as Returning Officer for all stages of the election.

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