







UNITED KINGDOM

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PART



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	International boundary
	Territory boundary
	Lieutenancy boundary
	Capital city
	Administrative seat
	Largest cities (by population)



1.1

THE CONTEXT OF UK POLITICS

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Compare and contrast the laws, language, religions, and economies of the four nations of the United Kingdom.
- Describe the key areas of social, economic, and political change in the United Kingdom from Victorian to present times.
- Identify the key changes in UK political culture from traditional to modern times.
- Discuss changes in the role of social class in the UK political landscape.
- Explain the tenets of the Conservative and Labour party values and their recent convergence.
- Describe Great Britain's evolving relationship with the European Union over recent decades through the advent of Brexit.

The most seismic event in recent British political history was the 2016 referendum on the United Kingdom's (UK) membership of the European Union (EU). After a heated campaign, a narrow majority (51.9 percent) voted in favor of exit. That earthquake result has had profound implications for the core institutions and conventions of the British state. Parliament, the Union, and the Constitution are still feeling the tremors and will be working through the consequences for years to come. The referendum result also highlighted deep social divides between those who voted "Leave" and "Remain." These attitudinal differences went so deep that two political scientists characterized the United Kingdom in an influential book as "Brexitland": a country divided into Leavers and Remainers who have very different approaches to diversity, values, and economics. "Brexit," as the United Kingdom's EU withdrawal is known, has also had profound electoral consequences, contributing to the Conservative Party in 2019 winning its largest parliamentary majority since the 1980s by making inroads into areas traditionally held by the center-left Labour Party. This has accelerated long-term trends of the Labour Party becoming the party of educated liberal graduates and the Conservatives gaining much more support from working-class voters.

Having once been a byword for stability, therefore, the United Kingdom is going through a period of upheaval at home and abroad. Its flexible constitution has dealt well in the past

with national pluralism but the process of implementing Brexit has put it under extreme strain. The Scottish Government is demanding another independence referendum; the new trade agreement with the European Union has created a set of complicated problems in Northern Ireland; and the long-dormant question of how to accommodate England is becoming more difficult to ignore. The United Kingdom also must craft a new strategy for its place in the world in terms of foreign policy and trade. In short, the United Kingdom is facing some fundamental questions about its future.

A UNITED KINGDOM OF FOUR COUNTRIES

Diversity in British politics stems in part from the fact that the United Kingdom is a multinational state composed of four parts. This section begins, therefore, by introducing some nomenclature with real political importance. The proper name of the nation usually referred to as Great Britain is the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Great Britain, in turn, is a geographic, as well as cultural, identifier referring to the island that comprises England, Wales, and Scotland. All are constituent parts of the United Kingdom, albeit rather unequal partners in terms of population and economic productivity. More than 84 percent of the total population of the United Kingdom lives in England, 9 percent in Scotland, 5 percent in Wales, and the remainder in Northern Ireland. More than 90 percent of total wages and salaries in the economy are paid in England, with only 1 percent going to residents of Northern Ireland.

The three non-English components of the United Kingdom, sometimes called the Celtic fringe, joined with England at various times and various ways.² Wales was added first, by conquest, in the early fourteenth century. The English and Scottish crowns were united in 1603 when the Scottish king, James VI, also became King James I of England. The parliaments of the two countries were joined by the Act of Union in 1707. This unification did not, however, alleviate the conflict between the northern and southern portions of Great Britain. Scottish uprisings in 1715 and again in 1745 resulted in English occupation of Scotland and the outlawing of some Scottish customs such as the kilt and bagpipes. But these restrictions were removed, at least informally, by 1822, and manifestations of Scottish nationalism, despite being prominent, have been substantially less violent since that time.

The desire of some Scots (and substantially fewer Welsh) for greater autonomy or even independence has been apparent for quite some time. A nationalist party began to run some candidates in Scottish elections during the 1880s and gained one seat in a by-election in 1945. Since 1967, the Scottish National Party (SNP) has been able to secure representation in Parliament in every election. During the 1970s, the support for the SNP was sufficiently strong to force a referendum on the issue of home rule. That referendum failed, but the issues of self-determination and autonomy did not go away.³ As the United Kingdom continued to elect Conservative national governments through the 1980s and early 1990s, the push for home rule among the mostly Labour-voting Scots grew in intensity. Another referendum in 1997 approved the devolution of some powers to a Scottish parliament, which formally took office in July 1999.

Although its relationship with the British national Parliament at Westminster is complicated at best, the Scottish Parliament exercises primary legislative authority over most domestic policy areas within Scotland. It was granted further powers, particularly over taxation and welfare policies, in 2012 and 2015.

Wales also received its own assembly in 1999, although that body has had substantially fewer powers than the Scottish Parliament. However, in a 2011 referendum, the Welsh voted to expand the powers of their assembly, giving it direct legislative authority over devolved policy domains.⁴ Devolution in Wales remains less extensive than in Scotland, but the Welsh Assembly has also gained more powers since 1999 and is now known as the Welsh Parliament. There exists a Welsh nationalist party, Plaid Cymru, but it has not been as electorally successful as Scotland's SNP.

The involvement of the British government in Ireland has had a long and tortuous history. English armies began invading Ireland in 1170; the island was finally conquered in 1603 and was formally joined with Great Britain to form the United Kingdom in 1800. The unity created was more legal than actual, and Irish home rule was a persistent political issue during the second half of the nineteenth century. Political arguments were accompanied by increasing violence and then by armed uprisings against British rule. The most famous of these was the Easter Uprising of 1916, which marked the onset of years of serious violence. After a long period of negotiation, the twenty-six southern counties of Ireland were granted independence in 1922 as the Irish Free State (later the Republic of Ireland), and six northern counties in Ulster remained part of the United Kingdom. But this partition did not solve the "Irish Question." The ongoing tensions and outbreaks of violence in Northern Ireland between Catholics seeking to join with the rest of Ireland and Protestants desiring to maintain unity with the United Kingdom have been a problem for British governments since the beginning of the "troubles." The London government did try in various ways to establish a political settlement—all in the general context of Ulster remaining within the United Kingdom. For a short time, it devolved substantial rule to Belfast and experimented with arrangements for power sharing with Catholic groups. But none of the plans was successful, and they were followed by a return to direct rule and the large-scale use of British troops in Ulster.

A highly significant step toward resolving the question of Northern Ireland was the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, signed by Prime Minister Blair, the Irish prime minister or Taoiseach (pronounced Tee-shook), the leaders of Sinn Fein (the political arm of the Irish Republican Army [IRA]), and the Ulster Unionists. The agreement called for electing a new assembly for Northern Ireland, establishing institutions formed from both the nationalist and Unionist communities, and creating a joint consultative body between Dublin and Belfast to address issues that affect all the island of Ireland. The most fundamental point was that a greater measure of self-government was to be returned to the province. A referendum on the agreement passed overwhelmingly in Northern Ireland and even more so in a simultaneous vote in the Republic of Ireland.

The Northern Ireland Assembly has been successful in closing the door on political violence and getting Nationalists and Unionists to work together. Its consociational arrangements require an executive to be formed that involves the two biggest parties in the Assembly and ministerial portfolios are allocated according to a party's size. However, these "forced coalition"

arrangements have resulted in frequent suspensions of the Northern Ireland executive, lasting until the two largest parties could hammer out a compromise through negotiation. Perhaps the thorniest of these disagreements has been the question of the new trading arrangements between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom resulting from the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union.

Preserving the unity of the United Kingdom does not prevent the expression of differences among its constituent parts—and to some degree those differences are enshrined in law and the political structure. Before devolution, each of the three non-English components of the United Kingdom had a cabinet department responsible for its affairs. Most laws were passed by Parliament with separate acts for England and Wales, for Scotland, and for Northern Ireland. This differentiation stems, in part, from the fact that both the Scottish and Ulster legal systems are substantially different from the English (and Welsh) systems, and legislation had to be tailored to conform to those differences.

With the devolution of many issues to the new legislative bodies in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, this system was amended, although not simplified. In Scotland, most domestic matters—such as agriculture, education, criminal law, social welfare, health care, and the environment—are handled by the Scottish Parliament, while the UK Parliament at Westminster retains the right and responsibility to regulate all policy areas that have national and international implications. Broadly, intergovernmental relations between the UK government and the devolved regions were marked until 2016 by pragmatism on both sides, rather than open conflict.⁵ Perhaps the most symbolic example of this cooperation was the agreement between the UK government and the Scottish government about the process and terms for the 2014 Scottish independence referendum. The UK government agreed to give the Scottish Parliament the power to hold a referendum and both sides agreed to be bound by the result. The UK government promised and delivered further powers for the Scottish Parliament when Scots voted by 45 to 50 percent to remain in the United Kingdom.

Law, language, and religion differ in the four parts of the United Kingdom. Scottish law is derived in part from French and Roman law, as well as from common law. Various legal procedures and offices differ between English and Scottish practice. Language is also different in various parts of the United Kingdom. Welsh is recognized as a second language for Wales (and all official government documents in Wales must be published in both English and Welsh), although only about 20 percent of the population can speak Welsh and a mere 1 percent speak it as their only language. Some people in Scotland and Northern Ireland speak forms of Gaelic. The Scottish Parliament allows its members (members of Scottish Parliament, or MSPs) to address the Parliament in Gaelic or Scots (providing they give the presiding officer prior notice) and publishes most of its official documentation in both English and Gaelic.

The established religions of the parts of the nation vary as well: the Church of England (Anglican) in England and the Church of Scotland (Presbyterian) in Scotland. Wales and Northern Ireland do not have established churches because of their religious diversity. The diversity in Wales between Anglicans and various “chapel religions” (Methodism in particular) has not produced the dire consequences of the differences between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, but it has been a source of political diversity and somewhat different patterns

of voting than in England.⁶ These traditional religious divisions are becoming less important as church membership declines, but they are being replaced by differences with non-Christian religions, especially Islam.

Finally, the four components of the United Kingdom differ economically. This difference is less true of their economic structures than of their economic success. Unemployment levels are on average higher in the non-English parts of the United Kingdom (especially Northern Ireland) than in England. Another measure of economic success, average personal income, is lower in all three parts of the Celtic fringe than in England and by a large margin for Northern Ireland. Differences in the proportion of the working population employed in manual jobs, or even in the proportion employed in agriculture, are relatively slight between England and the Celtic fringe. The major difference in employment patterns is the substantially higher rates of public employment in the Celtic fringe, especially in Northern Ireland. All that said, it is difficult to talk broadly about “England” as a whole when referring to the economy since, in economic terms, the divide is between the south of England and the rest of the country. Unemployment rates in some parts of northern and eastern England are as high as or even higher than in Scotland or Wales, whereas the southwest and southeast have at times in the recent past experienced shortages of workers (see Table 1.1). London is a special case, having

TABLE 1.1 ■ Unemployment Rates by Region: United Kingdom, 2022 (Percentage)

England	3.7
Northeast	4.7
Northwest	3.5
Yorkshire and Humberside	4.5
West Midlands	4.6
Southeast	3.5
East Midlands	2.8
Southwest	2.7
East England	3.1
London	4.2
Scotland	3.1
Wales	3.2
Northern Ireland	2.9
United Kingdom	3.6

Source: Office for National Statistics, “Regional Labour Market Statistics, September 2022,” September 13, 2022, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/regionallabourmarket/september2022>.

boroughs with some of the lowest (3.5 percent) and highest (7.1 percent) unemployment rates in the country. All these economic differences have political importance, because they create a sense of deprivation among non-English groups within the United Kingdom, as well as among residents of northern England. Since 2010, the United Kingdom has enjoyed a relatively stable period of low unemployment.

Although the differences among the four nations of the United Kingdom are manifested politically, fortunately, they are seldom with the violence of Ulster politics. Scottish nationalism did not die after the Act of Union but has experienced cyclical declines and surges. Votes for the SNP surged from 1959 to 1974: The SNP at least doubled its vote in every election during that period. In the 1970s and 1980s, the SNP's growth rate slowed, however. The party received more than 6 percent of the Scottish vote in the October 1974 Westminster election, but only 14 percent in 1987, some 13 years and three elections later. In the Westminster elections of 1992, 1997, and 2001, the SNP held steady with slightly more than 20 percent of the Scottish vote (1992, 21.5 percent; 1997, 22.04 percent; 2001, 20.06 percent). With the redrawing of the constituency boundaries in Scotland for the 2005 elections (and Scotland's drop from 72 MPs to 59 MPs), the SNP garnered almost 18 percent of the Scottish vote. The SNP's best result in a Westminster election occurred in 2015 when they secured 50 percent of the vote and won all but three seats in Scotland.

Support for the SNP within Scotland, however, may be greater than it appears when simply focusing on Westminster votes and seats. In the 2011 Scottish Parliament election, the SNP managed a feat previously thought impossible—despite an electoral system designed to discourage parliamentary majorities, the SNP secured a decisive majority of parliamentary seats. Analyses of the 2011 Scottish Election Study survey show that Scots seem to be developing multilevel partisan allegiances with one set of allegiances for the Scottish system and another for the UK system. This, then, leads to greater support for the SNP when discussing Scottish politics than might be evident when examining general UK politics.⁷ The SNP is the third-largest political party in the United Kingdom, as well as by overall representation in the House of Commons. Nicola Sturgeon has served as First Minister since 2014.

Although Welsh nationalism has been less successful than Scottish nationalism as a political force, Plaid Cymru, the Welsh national party, did win over 13 percent of the Welsh vote in the October 1974 Westminster election. Nationalist voting declined after 1974 but remained a significant factor in these Celtic portions of the United Kingdom. In the 1997 election, Plaid Cymru won 10 percent of the vote and continued to push for the referendum that eventually approved setting up the National Assembly for Wales. The party received 14.3 percent in 2001 but slipped to 12.6 percent in 2005 and dropped again to 11.3 percent in 2010. In June of 2017, Jonathan Edwards of the Plaid party made history both by being elected as a member of Parliament for the third time and by winning by a landslide of 39.31 percent of the vote.

Party politics in Northern Ireland, which has been based as much on cleavages of the seventeenth century as those of the twenty-first century, bears little resemblance to politics in the rest of the United Kingdom. Two parties represent the Roman Catholic population, and one has been allied with the former IRA. Two parties also represent the Protestant majority,

varying primarily in the intensity with which they express allegiance to the United Kingdom and distrust of Roman Catholics, especially because of the previous association with the IRA. Finally, one party attempts to be a catchall for the two confessional groups. Some elements of economics and class are in the political party equation—one of the Roman Catholic parties also has a moderate socialist agenda—but the fundamental basis of politics has been religion.

Thus, the first feature of the context of contemporary politics in the United Kingdom is that it is a single state composed of separate parts. Unlike the states of the United States, these elements of the union possess no reserved powers—only the powers delegated to them by the central government. This delegation of powers is true even for the Scottish and Welsh Parliaments. Although these institutions were created in response to regional referendums, they exert only the authority delegated to them by Westminster. Nevertheless, in practice, it would be politically impossible for a UK government to abolish these institutions. Such a move would likely provoke a strong nationalist backlash that could lead to the secession of Scotland. The political system might therefore best be described as quasi-federal. It retains many of the features of the centralized and majoritarian democracy, but, increasingly, as the devolved parliaments and assemblies are granted more powers, it is coming to resemble a more federal-like union.⁸

It is not altogether surprising, therefore, that this uneasy compromise is under such strain. Scotland and Northern Ireland did not vote for Brexit, but it is being imposed on them anyway. The implementation of Brexit has also led to conflicts between the UK government and the devolved administrations whose preference was for a much closer relationship with the EU. A key feature of devolution in the United Kingdom is also its lopsided nature. There has been no comparable devolution to England, the part of the United Kingdom that represents the greatest share of population and economic output. There is no English Parliament, and the UK Parliament must act as both the “federal” Parliament for the whole of the United Kingdom and the legislature that represents England.

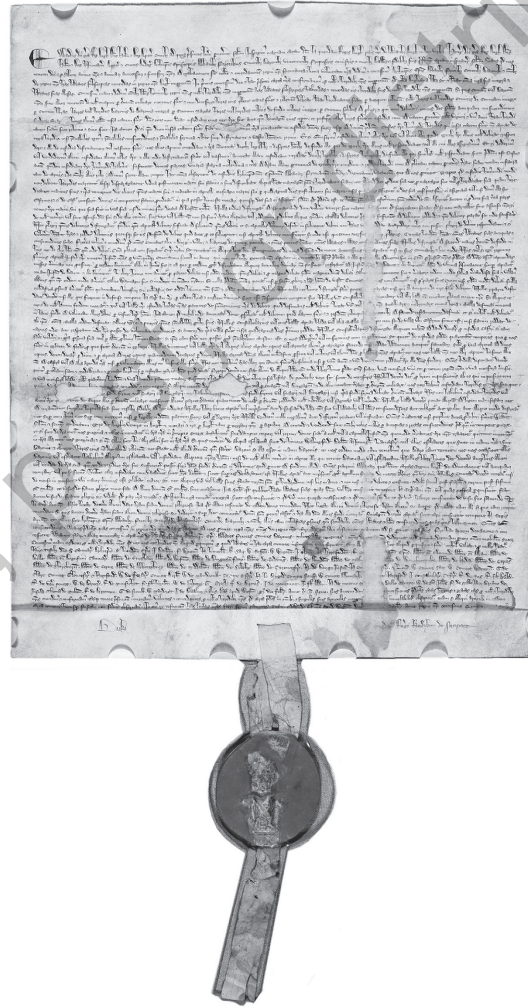
STABILITY AND CHANGE

A second feature of the context of contemporary politics in the United Kingdom is the continuity of social and political institutions, combined with a significant degree of change. If a subject of Queen Victoria were to return during the reign of the present monarch, King Charles III, he or she might comment that—at least on the surface—little had changed. Laws are made by the House of Commons and the House of Lords. The leader of the party who commands a majority in the House of Commons is prime minister.

Yet, there is a great sense of change in the United Kingdom. The political system has been greatly democratized since Victorian times. When Queen Victoria came to the throne in 1837, only about 3 percent of the adult population was eligible to vote, despite the Great Reform Act of 1832. During the reign of Elizabeth II, who passed away in 2022, the voting franchise was extended to almost all adult citizens. Before 1911, the House of Lords was almost an equal

partner in making legislation; since then, the House of Lords has exercised far less influence over policy. A Victorian prime minister was definitely *primus inter pares* (first among equals), whereas in the twentieth century, collegial patterns of decision making changed to create something approaching a presidential role for the prime minister. The monarchy in Victoria's day still had substantial influence over policy, but today it has been constitutionally reduced to virtual impotence. Finally, but not least important, the United Kingdom has evolved from perhaps the strongest nation on earth and the imperial master of a far-flung empire to a second-class power—economically and militarily—in a nuclear age.

Social and economic trends have paralleled political trends. Just as the monarchy has been preserved, so, too, has a relatively stratified social system that includes hereditary (as well as life) peerages. Meanwhile, working-class organizations such as trade unions have tended to lessen the domination of the upper classes and to generate some democratization of the society as well as the political system. The economic structure of the United Kingdom is still primarily based on free enterprise, but government ownership and regulation have had a significant, if declining, impact. The decade and a half of Conservative Party domination of politics that ended in 1997 weakened the unions and enhanced the power of business interests, and “New Labour” governments under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown did little to strengthen the influence of the unions. One strategy of the Conservatives in their conscious attempts to reinforce capitalism was the spread of wealth in the society through selling off public housing and privatizing public corporations. The Labour government first elected in 1997 continued to follow many of the same policies, albeit for different ideological reasons. The Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government generally pursued right of center “austerity” economic



The Magna Carta is one of the world's oldest constitutional documents. It was signed by King John in 1215 in response to noble demands to restrict the arbitrary power of monarchs. The Carta proved an early step in the eventual development of parliamentary democracy in Britain.

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policies in dealing with the effects of the global economic downturn, while simultaneously moderating social policy positions, such as support for same-sex marriage, which was passed in July 2013. Since the Brexit referendum in 2016, the United Kingdom has had four Conservative prime ministers, with Boris Johnson and Theresa May each serving a bit more than three years.

Compared with those of many other industrialized nations, the British economy is no longer the great engine of production it once was. The relatively constrained economy of the United Kingdom, when it is compared with its European and North American counterparts, has severely restricted the policy options available to British government. This is especially true following the global banking and economic crisis that began in 2008. The government invested a great deal to prop up the financial industry in the United Kingdom, sending the public treasury deeply into debt. The coalition government elected in 2010 significantly restrained public spending in an attempt to create a period of public austerity. Yet despite these efforts, the UK credit rating was downgraded in early 2013 (just as the U.S. rating was reduced in 2011), reflecting the massive debt the country has accrued over a prolonged period. (Credit ratings are determined by financial service companies, such as Standard & Poor's, Moody's, and the Fitch Group.) UK credit took another hit after Brexit, with the pound continuing to plummet in value. The instability of the United Kingdom is best exemplified by the General Election in June 2017, which resulted in a “hung parliament,” that is, no party secured an outright majority in the House of Commons. This was only the third hung parliament since 1974.

The evolutionary change so characteristic of British political life has been facilitated by the absence of a written constitution. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say the absence of a single written constitution. Petition of Right, the 1911 Parliament Act, and the Statute of Westminster—have constitutional status. In addition, the Parliament of the day, expressing the political will of the British people, faces fewer checks on its power without the limitations of judicial review that exist in the United States. For example, the Scotland Act and the Government of Wales Act create a quasi-constitutional form of government that would have been alien to a centralized regime. Such constitutionally unlimited powers had the potential for great tyranny, inasmuch as only other politicians, the threat of elections, and their own good sense restrained governments.

Although many aspects of the monarchy and Parliament have changed little, the executive branch of government underwent a revolution during the Thatcher government (1979–1990), and the pace of change lessened little during Major's tenure (1990–1997). Among other changes, large cabinet departments were broken up into “executive agencies” headed by chief executives who could be recruited from outside the civil service or other government organizations. In addition, in major policy areas, such as those covering the National Health Service (NHS), market-based instruments were introduced in an attempt to increase the efficiency of those services. Procedural changes also were introduced to improve the efficiency and economy of the public sector. The Blair government embraced many of these changes, with some retreat from the internal markets in health, but with a continuing interest in using market mechanisms in public services to improve efficiency and customer service. Governments since then have continued along this path, with greater freedoms for “Academy” schools outside local control and choice for patients in the National Health Service.

TRADITIONAL AND MODERN: THE POLITICAL CULTURE OF THE UNITED KINGDOM

In the United Kingdom, much of the ability to accommodate political change while maintaining older political institutions may be explained by its political culture—that is, the values and beliefs that political elites and ordinary citizens have about politics and government. One way of describing this culture is “traditionally modern.” Specifically, traditional views are combined with modern elements to produce a blend that, if apparently internally contradictory, appears to produce effective government. This culture has not been static; rather, it has permitted relatively gradual change based on pragmatic acceptance of changing national needs and changing social values. The traditional elements of the political culture are best known, with deference, trust, and pragmatism still important to understanding how the British political system functions.

As for deference, the British population has historically been deferential to authority. Deference implies citizens’ lack of opposition to the actions of their government—or perhaps even positive acceptance of those actions. The British government enjoyed a large reservoir of authority, since few citizens in the past questioned the correctness of the political arrangements or the right of the government to make and enforce laws. Until recently, the populace exhibited diffuse support for the political system and was willing to obey laws and accept the authoritative decrees of institutions of government, hence the United Kingdom was an easier nation to govern than many.

Over the years, the authority of elected governments in the United Kingdom has encountered only a few major challenges aside from the peculiar politics of Ulster. The trade unions attempted to bring down Conservative governments and their economic and industrial policies, succeeding against the government of Edward Heath in 1974 but not against Thatcher in the mid-1980s. In both attempts, the miners’ union was central. The miners were able to bring about the changes they desired with the fall of Heath, but a yearlong strike against mine closings and working conditions under Thatcher resulted merely in a reassertion of the power of government to make law. During the early 1990s, the Thatcher government’s attempt to change the system of local government finance from property taxes (rates) to a per capita community charge (poll tax) provoked political violence and significant tax evasion. More recently, the 2011 London protests and riots and the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, which spread across the whole of the United Kingdom, might be considered signs that deference had its limits in the United Kingdom.

The obverse of the public’s trust is the responsible behavior of elected leaders. Government has generally conducted itself responsibly, and, for the most part, has not violated existing political norms. When those norms have been violated, such as when elections were suspended during the two world wars, it has been by broad agreement among the political parties. Responsibility has also meant that parties and governments are expected to deliver more of what they promised in election campaigns than would be expected of American parties.

However, again, the implementation of Brexit has severely tested many of these unspoken assumptions. For instance, the convention that the UK government will not normally legislate on devolved matters without the devolved governments’ permission was ignored by the UK

government when implementing its agreement with the European Union. Boris Johnson's governments (2019–2022) have also taken a much more cavalier attitude towards traditional institutions and conventions. Johnson's resignation as Prime Minister was also in part prompted by the discovery that illegal parties had been taking place in Downing Street during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Johnson himself was fined by the police for taking part in one of these. In the past, that might have meant that a Prime Minister felt compelled to resign, but Johnson tried to hold on until it became impossible due to a record number of ministerial resignations.

Despite relatively broad diffuse support, specific support for governments and institutions (i.e., trust in the government of the day) in the United Kingdom has declined over the past two decades. In response to this decline and to public scandals during the Thatcher decade, in 1994, Major established the Committee on Standards in Public Life.

Scandals have continued to undermine specific support of elected politicians and civil servants. Many MPs in Britain questioned the Blair government's motivations in invading Iraq, going so far as to call the prime minister "George [W.] Bush's poodle."¹⁰ Further, the 2009 scandal over expenses claims submitted by MPs, with daily revelations in the *Daily Telegraph* newspaper, has not helped politicians' image. Certainly, the revelations that among some of the parliamentarians' expenses were the costs of creating a "duck island" in a pond, repairing a tennis court, and moat cleaning—all at MPs' private residences—caused taxpayers to question politicians' integrity. Indeed, somewhat over a month after the scandal first broke, the British Election Study's Continuous Monitoring Survey found that 59 percent of survey respondents said that the expenses scandal proved that most MPs are corrupt.¹¹

These outbursts serve to undermine the traditional British norm of deference over time, but another feature of the political culture that remains secure is pragmatism. Although ideologies are frequently spouted during campaigns or in speeches delivered for mass consumption, British politics is extremely practical. Indeed, an empirical, pragmatic mode of political thought has so dominated British political life that the preservation of traditional political institutions such as the monarchy is justified not on grounds that they are right and just but simply on grounds that they have worked. Even in the more ideological Thatcher government, there were enough turn-arounds and changes in policy to illustrate the pragmatic mode of thinking about government at work. This pragmatism certainly infused the Blair and Brown Labour governments in their support of privatization in the public sector, and the political compromises struck within the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government all but enshrined the idea of practical, pragmatic politics. Obviously, such a political epistemology will be associated with continual adjustment to changing conditions, thereby helping the system to modify all but its essential features to accommodate a modern world.

The traditional values of deference, trust, and pragmatism exist even in the context of a modern, or even postindustrial, political system. The policies pursued, the presence of mass democracy and mass political parties, a very high level of public revenues and expenditures, and some increasingly close linkages between state and society are evidence of the modernity of the political system. Yet with all that, political leaders are allowed the latitude to discuss and decide political issues without directly involving the public or press. This is a modern democracy, but it is a democracy that allows an elite to govern and exercises latent democratic power only at agreed-upon times.

CLASS POLITICS, BUT...

Social class (meaning primarily levels and sources of income) has been the principal basis of social differentiation and political mobilization in the United Kingdom, although education and ancestry still matter as well. Traditionally, the major partisan alignments in politics are along class lines, with the Labour Party representing the interests of the working classes and the Conservative Party (and to a lesser extent the Liberal Democrats) reflecting the interests of the middle and upper classes. The correspondence between class and party is far less than perfect and has declined substantially over time, but the generalization remains a useful one if only because the party-class linkages still pervade popular political discourse.

Social class is both an objective and a subjective phenomenon. Objectively, the United Kingdom has significant inequalities of income, even after the effects of redistribution of taxes and government expenditures are taken into account. The United Kingdom experienced a sharp increase in income inequality during the 1980s, and it remained at that higher level since the 1990s.¹² Britain now generates most of its wealth through services. Service industries accounted for 79 percent of economic output and 82 percent of jobs in 2022.¹³ Finally, according to some of the most recent evidence, in the United Kingdom, intergenerational mobility is, at best, “limited,” signifying that younger generations generally do not dramatically improve their socioeconomic standing relative to their parents’ position in their own generation. This limited mobility is, however, not markedly different from that in other European countries, and intergenerational mobility has been declining in the United States as well.

Subjectively, people in the United Kingdom are generally more willing to identify themselves as members of a particular social class than are Americans, who overwhelmingly identify themselves as members of the economic middle class. Issues of all kinds may become polarized on a class basis. Any policy that preserves or extends the privileges and power of the more affluent is immediately held suspect by the Labour Party and the trade unions, even when the policy (such as selling council houses to their current tenants) may have benefits for working-class families as well as the government.

Several caveats must be raised about a simple class model of British politics. The first is that it is changing. The rise of the working classes into the middle class, so obvious in many European nations, has occurred in Great Britain as well. Manual labor is a declining share of the labor force. Also, the wages paid to manual workers now often approach or even surpass wages and salaries paid to many nonmanual workers, and manual workers find some of their economic interests served by the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives. These 0class on politics, making class a less resolute predictor of voting behavior across the country than it once was.

Other factors also have reduced the dominance of class. The ethnic and regional cleavages based on the national constituent elements of the United Kingdom were noted earlier. Within those cleavages, nationalism in Scotland and Wales has tended to cut broadly across class lines. The 2021 census showed that the white ethnic group was 81.7 percent of the residential population in England and Wales, a decrease from 86 percent in 2011.¹⁴ Ethnic minorities

now dominate many of the older industrial towns such as Birmingham, Manchester, and Nottingham. Because these groups are also multiplying more rapidly than white Britons, the specter of nonwhite domination and the loss of jobs by whites is a powerful weapon for some political groups, especially the British National Party, which won two UK European Parliament seats in the 2009 elections, and the UK Independence Party (UKIP), which had an exceptionally strong showing in the 2013 English local elections. Pressure by minorities for representation has already begun to affect the local and national political systems, with the main political parties attempting to court the ethnic minority vote. Meanwhile, shortly after the Conservatives took office in 2010 and the summer of 2016, homelessness among black and minority ethnic households increased by 52 percent, compared with 13 percent among people identified as “White British.” Ethnic minorities now account for about 40 percent of all homeless households in England, though they are only 15 percent of the population.

Religion also plays a role in British politics. The monarch is required to be a Protestant, which, in practice, has meant a member of the Church of England, though prominent politicians have suggested that the ban on Catholic monarchs instituted in the 1701 Act of Settlement should be repealed.¹⁵ While that repeal may be some time in coming, changes to the rules of succession that followed the announcement in 2012 that Kate Middleton, the Duchess of Cambridge, was pregnant allow for sex-neutral primogeniture and future monarchs to marry Catholics (or people of other religious faiths). The Anglican monarch (Presbyterian while in Scotland) rules a population that is only about two-thirds Christian and contains a significant Roman Catholic minority. This characteristic has been most visible in Northern Ireland, but cities such as Liverpool and Glasgow also have large and politically relevant Roman Catholic populations. Overall, however, Christianity in Great Britain is, with the exception of Northern Ireland, of decreasing relevance, because only a small and declining proportion of the population actually practices its nominal religion. For many, “Christianity” is a cultural—not religious—identification.

Perhaps even more important, the fastest-growing religions in Great Britain are not Christian of any denomination but rather are Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist. As well as affecting political behavior, these religions raise questions about civil liberties and tolerance in a country without a formal bill of rights. The tensions created by the growing ethnic diversity are not as great as in France or Germany, but they are present nevertheless, and racial tensions are becoming of increasing concern to the police and civil libertarians alike. Ethnic and religious tensions have increased since the July 7, 2005, bombings in London that killed 56 people (including the four suspected bombers) and injured 700 people. This was the worst terrorist attack in the United Kingdom since the 1988 bombing of a Pan Am jet over Scotland. Although these attacks were not as severe as those that brought down the towers of the World Trade Center in New York City on September 11, 2001, they shocked Britons and were the catalyst that dramatically increased religious and racial tensions across the country. The most recent terrorist bombing occurred on May 22, 2017.

Twenty-two people, including seven children, were killed and 59 people were injured when a bomb detonated after an Ariana Grande concert. UK prime minister Theresa May raised the UK’s terror threat level to “critical,” its highest level. Operation Temperer was started, allowing 5,000 soldiers to replace armed police in protecting parts of the country.

In summary, politics in Great Britain is not entirely about class, but social class is still relevant for politics. The importance of other cleavages varies with the region of the nation (with the Celtic fringe being the most influenced by other cleavages) and with the time and circumstances of the controversy. That said, politics in Great Britain also may revolve around substantive issues. For example, the green (environmental) movement has not been as powerful in Great Britain as in most of the rest of Europe, but its influence is growing. The Green Party has consistently enjoyed success in the Scottish Parliament elections, winning 8 seats on 8.1 percent of the (regional) vote in 2021. In the 2010 general elections, the Green Party elected its first MP to Westminster (Caroline Lucas, Green Party chair, received 31.3 percent of the vote in the Brighton Pavilion constituency), but has failed to extend the number of seats since then. The nature of the electoral system prevents new parties or social movements from gaining representation in the British Parliament rapidly, but there does appear to be a real interest in issues that go beyond simple class politics.

CONSERVATIVELY LIBERAL POLICY IDEAS

Another apparent paradox about British political life is the “conservatively liberal” nature of many UK policies and policy ideas. For much of the postwar period, members of the Labour Party regularly spoke about the virtues of socialism, and they often sang the “Red Flag” at their party congresses. Members of the Conservative Party regularly spoke about restoring *laissez-faire* economics, dismantling a good deal of the welfare state, and returning Great Britain to its more significant role in the world.

In practice, however, during the postwar period, most of the policies adopted by most of the governments bore a remarkable resemblance. The Labour Party accepted the fact that most of the British economy would be privately owned, and at the same time, it pressed for the nationalization of certain large industries and the extension of social services to the disadvantaged. The Conservative Party generally accepted the virtual entirety of the welfare state, as well as limited government ownership of some industries. The major deviation from this pattern was Thatcher’s Conservative government, which began to sell off government stock in nationalized industries such as British Gas, British Telecom, British Steel, and British Airways and began to encourage local authorities to sell off their council housing to sitting tenants. Meanwhile, some social programs were cut or more stringent requirements for recipients were introduced.

These Thatcherite policies, largely continued by the Major government that followed, represented a significantly more ideological approach to policymaking than has been true for most postwar governments in the United Kingdom. The public water supply system was sold off to the private sector, and some local government services such as garbage collection were contracted out to the private sector under a system of “compulsory competitive tendering.”¹⁶

In something of a return to the traditional British consensual style, the Blair government continued many of the programs of the previous governments. “New Labour” was much less interested in talking seriously about socialism than was old Labour. Instead, there was a good deal of discussion about how to use the private sector to provide many public services and the need to make government more like the private sector. The Blair government pursued the “third

way,” by seeking to inject “competition” in the system through programs such as quasi-privatization schemes within the NHS.¹⁷ Following the 2010 election, the coalition government headed by David Cameron was a clear expression of consensual politics, with its pursuit of austerity in the public accounts yet moderate social policies such as the proposal to allow same-sex marriage. There has also been a degree of continuity in major domestic policy areas in England. The use of market-based mechanisms in the NHS, expanded by the Labour governments (1997–2010), has been continued. The coalition government’s education reforms, including the major expansion of academy schools (similar to charter schools in the United States), can also be seen as a mark of continuity rather than radical change.

This chapter began, however, by describing the substantial change in the United Kingdom due to the decision to pull out of the European Union (EU). Since the Brexit referendum in 2016, politics in the United Kingdom have been dominated by the “divorce negotiations” with the European Commission and the substantial changes to domestic policy promoted by the pro-leave “Brexiters” May and Johnson Governments. It is no understatement to say that the decision to leave the European Union has, so far, served to somewhat reshape and realign British politics, upending some long-held norms. In the 2019 parliamentary elections, constituencies that had voted Labour for generations switched and voted for a Conservative candidate. Clearly the Brexit shockwaves will continue to undermine the previous sense of stability in British politics for some time to come.

ISOLATED BUT EUROPEAN

One of the standard points made about the history of Great Britain is that its insular position in relation to the European continent isolated the country from various influences and allowed it to develop its own particular political institutions and political culture. The mental separation from Europe was to some degree greater than the geographic separation, and so Great Britain may have looked European from North America, but Britons have not always felt European. The separation of Great Britain from the continent and from the world can, however, be overstated; as John Major said, “We are only an island geographically.” The country has not been invaded successfully since 1066, but it has been deeply involved in European politics and warfare. Also, Great Britain has by no means been insular when dealing with the rest of the world, managing a far-flung empire and even more far-flung trade routes from its little islands.

One of the major changes in the political environment of the United Kingdom was its entry into the European Union four decades ago, and recently, its decision to leave the European Union in June of 2016. After two denials of admittance, largely at the instigation of France and Charles de Gaulle, Great Britain joined the European Union in 1973, followed by the first advisory public referendum in its history. Many citizens felt that joining the European Union not only brought Great Britain closer to its continental counterparts but also had important domestic consequences, including the introduction of a whole new level of government—some of the previously exclusive rights of Parliament to legislate for British subjects were transferred to Brussels. In addition, in keeping with the EU’s move toward closer integration of the Europe market, some economic decision-making power was also transferred to Brussels. Meanwhile,

the move toward greater political integration arising from the Maastricht treaty of 1992, the subsequent Lisbon treaty of 2007, and the adoption of the euro as a common currency by most EU member states (but not the United Kingdom) placed even more pressure on the British government to bring its policies in line with those of the continental countries. The Blair government pressed, if gingerly, for greater involvement in the European Union, but it faced stiff opposition from Conservatives and from the half of the population that expressed “euro-skeptical” views.¹⁸ The British people, more than those of any other nation in Europe, were reluctant to accept any greater economic and political unification by the European Union. Great Britain may be a part of Europe, but it maintains some distance (psychological as well as geographic) from its EU partners. As an overt demonstration of this skepticism, 16.5 percent of those who voted in the 2009 European Parliament elections (turnout was only 34 percent of the voting population) voted for UKIP, the party that advocated for separation from the European Union. The June 2016 decision to leave the European Union has been building for a long time, reaching its crescendo in the past decade.

1.2

WHERE IS THE POWER IN THE UK?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Name the distinguishing features of the British Parliamentary Government.
- Summarize the powers of the Monarchy as well as its limits.
- Summarize the powers of the Prime Minister as well as its limits.
- Explain the roles of the Cabinet and the Government.
- Describe the power, members, and organization of Parliament.
- Describe the role of the Civil Service including recent changes.
- Describe the powers of the Judiciary as well as its limits.
- Explain the functions of local government, public corporations, regulatory bodies, and quasi-governmental sectors.

THE GOVERNMENT OF THE UNITED KINGDOM IS PARLIAMENTARY, and in such, government executive powers are linked directly to legislative powers. The executive of a parliamentary government is not elected directly by the people but by the legislature. Therefore, voters know that when they vote for a party that achieves a majority in the legislature, the leader of that party is likely to serve as the country's next prime minister. The British people did not elect Rishi Sunak as prime minister in October 2022. Instead, enough citizens voted for Sunak's Conservative Party in their constituencies in 2019 to give it a majority of seats in the House of Commons.

And if a single party cannot achieve a parliamentary majority on its own, then it needs to negotiate with other parties to win their support. In 2010, David Cameron's Conservatives failed to secure an overall majority and negotiated a formal coalition government with the Liberal Democrats. In 2017, Theresa May called a snap general election to give her a mandate to negotiate Brexit. However, the campaign did not go to plan, and she lost the majority she had inherited from David Cameron. She negotiated a deal with Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party to keep her in power.

This form of parliamentary government was described by Arend Lijphart as "majoritarian."¹ The operative tradition is that at least a majority of members of the lower house must

support the government. Failing that, a government can remain in power if a majority of the members of Parliament (MPs) do not disavow it in a vote of no confidence. For most of the modern era, British government has been in essence a two-party system so that governments have generally been composed of members of a single political party. Even though the electorate is increasingly fragmented, the first-past-the-post electoral system still produces parliamentary majorities. The period of coalition government (2010–2015) was followed by a Conservative majority (2015–2017), Conservative minority (2017–2019), and then, again, a Conservative majority (2019–).

Remaining the “queen’s first minister”—and especially an effective prime minister—requires the continual support of the majority of Parliament. If that support is lost, the prime minister and the other ministers must, by convention, either reorganize themselves or go to the people for a new election.² Prime ministers can be replaced between elections by their own parties if they lose support from their own ministers and MPs. Boris Johnson was forced to resign in 2022 because so many of his ministers resigned from the government. The Conservative Party held a leadership election, and the winner was Liz Truss. She was appointed prime minister by the Queen in September 2022. However, Truss stepped down after only 50 days in office, becoming the UK’s shortest-serving prime minister. The financial markets reacted negatively to her tax-cutting budget, and she decided that she could no longer continue in office. Rishi Sunak, the runner-up in the previous contest, was then elected unopposed as leader of the Conservative Party. He was appointed prime minister by the King on 25 October 2022. Sunak’s parents were of Indian descent and came to the United Kingdom from East Africa in the 1960s. He is the first-ever British prime minister from an ethnic minority background. The prime minister has overall responsibility for who serves in government and can appoint any member of the House of Commons or House of Lords to a government position. These appointments are not subject to parliamentary approval.

The prime minister’s cabinet is said to share “collective responsibility” for the government’s policies and actions. This implies that government decisions must be made collectively and be supported by the entire cabinet. Ministers are expected to argue for their positions in cabinet, but once the cabinet has made its decision, they must all support that decision publicly. If a member of the government cannot support the decision, then he or she should resign, which David Davis and Boris Johnson did in 2019 because they disagreed with Theresa May’s Brexit deal. Furthermore, ministers are expected to respect the secrecy of the Cabinet Room and not reveal who was on which side in the discussion. In practice, a significant amount of leaking and briefing occurs, and this has only become more the norm under the recent governments, especially during the long Brexit negotiations under Theresa May. Even under a coalition, though, the government is expected to present a united front to Parliament and to the public.³

One virtue of a parliamentary government, especially a majoritarian one, is that it allows an executive, once elected to office, to govern. In presidential governments—even “semipresidential” regimes such as that in France—the legislative and executive branches frequently disagree over which body should control a policy issue, but such disagreements rarely occur so overtly in a parliamentary regime.⁴ A political executive who cannot command the acquiescence of the legislature will soon cease to be the executive. This unity of the two institutional forces enables

a strong prime minister such as Margaret Thatcher (prime minister between 1979 and 1990) to push through policies, such as the poll tax, that are unpopular even within her own party in Parliament.⁵ Even less powerful British prime ministers such as John Major (prime minister between 1990 and 1997) or Gordon Brown (prime minister between 2007 and 2010) are able to exert much stronger policy leadership than would be possible in more consensual parliamentary regimes, much less in presidential regimes. And when a prime minister such as Tony Blair (prime minister between 1997 and 2007) has a substantial majority of his or her party in Parliament (355 of 646 seats in the House of Commons elected in 2005), there is an almost unlimited capacity to implement a desired program of legislation, provided the prime minister does not stray too far from that party's traditions and programs.

BRITISH PARLIAMENTARY GOVERNMENT

Although many political systems practice parliamentary government, each practices it differently. Several features characterize parliamentary government as practiced in the United Kingdom. The first is the principle of government and opposition. With rare exceptions (such as policy affecting Northern Ireland), bipartisanship has little place in this form of parliamentary government; instead, it is the role of the opposition to oppose the government. Even if the opposition agrees with the basic tenets of the government's policy, it still must present constructive alternatives to that policy if it is to do its job appropriately. It is assumed that through this adversarial process better policies will emerge and that the voters will be given alternative conceptions of the common good from which to choose at the next election. The major exception to this principle is in times of war or crisis, but even then, the opposition is expected to question the means by which goals are pursued.

UNITED KINGDOM AT A GLANCE

TYPE OF GOVERNMENT

Constitutional monarchy and parliamentary democracy, Commonwealth realm

Capital

London

Administrative Divisions

England: 27 two-tier counties, 32 London boroughs, one City of London (Greater London), 36 metropolitan districts, 56 unitary authorities (including 4 single-tier counties)

Scotland: 32 council areas

Northern Ireland: 26 district councils

Wales: 22 unitary authorities

Dependent areas: Anguilla, Bermuda, British Indian Ocean Territory, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Falkland Islands, Gibraltar, Guernsey, Isles of Man, Jersey, Montserrat, Pitcairn Islands, Saint Helena and Ascension, South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands, Turks and Caicos Islands

Independence

England has existed as a unified entity since the tenth century. The union between England and Wales, begun in 1284 with the Statute of Rhuddlan, was not formalized until 1536 with an Act of Union. In another Act of Union in 1707, England and Scotland agreed to permanently join as Great Britain. The legislative union of Great Britain and Ireland was implemented in 1801, with the adoption of the name the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. The Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 formalized a partition of Ireland; six northern Irish counties remained part of the United Kingdom as Northern Ireland. The current name of the country, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, was adopted in 1927.

Constitution

Unwritten; partly legislative statutes, partly common law and practice

Legal System

Common law tradition with early Roman and modern continental influences. Has nonbinding judicial review of Acts of Parliament under the Human Rights Act of 1998. Accepts compulsory international Court of Justice jurisdiction, with reservations. Scotland maintains a separate legal system that has many distinct components.

Suffrage

Eighteen years of age, universal

Executive Branch

Chief of state: reigning monarch

Head of government: prime minister

Cabinet: Cabinet of Ministers appointed by the prime minister

Elections: The monarchy is hereditary. National elections to the House of Commons are held at five-year intervals, unless an early election results from a vote of no confidence within the House of Commons. After legislative elections, the leader of the majority party or the leader of the majority coalition is usually chosen the prime minister. He or she is formally appointed by the monarch.

Legislative Branch

Bicameral parliament: House of Lords and House of Commons.

House of Lords: 759 seats (as of September 2022), including 92 hereditary peers, and 25 clergy. In 1999, as provided by the House of Lords Act, elections were held in the House of Lords to determine the 92 hereditary peers who would remain members. Pending further reforms, elections are held only as vacancies in the hereditary peerage arise.

House of Commons: 650 seats since the 2010 election. Members are elected by popular vote to serve five-year terms unless the House is dissolved earlier.

Judicial Branch

Supreme Court of the United Kingdom, established by the Constitutional Reform Act of 2005, began serving in October 2009. The Supreme Court has assumed powers of appellate jurisdiction previously vested in the House of Lords. Other courts include the Senior Courts of England and Wales, the Court of Session and the High Court of Justiciary in Scotland, and the Court of Judicature in Northern Ireland.

Major Political Parties

Conservative and Unionist Party; Democratic Union Party (Northern Ireland); Labour Party; Liberal Democrats; Plaid Cymru (Party of Wales); Scottish National Party (SNP); Sinn Fein (Northern Ireland); Social Democrats and Labour Party (SDLP, Northern Ireland); Ulster Unionist Party (Northern Ireland); Greens.

Source: U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>.

British parliamentary government is also party government. Although there are certainly barriers to the effective implementation of party government, the idea that political parties are extremely important for governing pervades the system. Parties are expected to be responsible, to stand for certain policies and programs, and to attempt to carry out those programs if elected. Once a party is elected to office, some compromises are always necessary, but parties are expected to attempt to implement their programs or to have a reasonable justification for failure to do so.

Finally, British parliamentary government is sovereign. There are, strictly speaking, no legal limitations on the powers of Parliament, and there is virtually no means by which a citizen can challenge an act of Parliament as unconstitutional, although some actions may be found to go beyond the powers of a particular minister. That said, limitations on the discretion of Parliament came into play through Great Britain's membership in the European Union until 2020 and the Council of Europe (e.g., it must adhere to the European Convention on Human Rights), but these are appeals to external standards rather than strictly British constitutional rules.⁶ There are, of course, very real political limitations on the activities of Parliament, but its actions, once taken, are law until Parliament acts again.

These features of Great Britain's parliamentary government provide the context for the rest of this chapter, which briefly describes and discusses the six major institutions of British national government: the monarch, the prime minister, the cabinet and government, Parliament, the civil service, and the judiciary. More specifically, it describes the features most salient for understanding the manner in which the British system converts proposals into law. The final section describes some important actors that do not fit conveniently into those six major structures.

THE MONARCH

The United Kingdom is a constitutional monarchy in which the powers of the monarch are constrained by both law and convention. Britons grumble frequently about the cost of maintaining the royal household and about the wealth of the king and the royal family. At times, critics of the monarchy call for an end of the monarchy in favor of a republic.⁷ The role of the royal family became even more contentious after Diana, Princess of Wales, was killed in an automobile accident in 1997. And her divorce from then Prince Charles and other widely publicized family problems had already brought the monarchy into some disrepute. However, support for the monarchy in the United Kingdom remains extremely high. A poll conducted during the queen's Platinum Jubilee celebrations in 2022 found that 62 percent of people thought that the monarchy should continue, compared to 22 percent who wanted an elected head of state. Fifty-eight percent of Britons thought that the queen had done a very good job.⁸

The powers of the monarchy are very closely circumscribed. Although many acts are performed by the monarch or in the monarch's name, the prime minister or the cabinet makes the actual decisions. Declaring war, making treaties, granting peerages, and granting clemency to prisoners are all royal prerogatives, but in fact, all are exercised only on the advice of the prime minister and other ministers or even by those ministers alone in the case of Orders in Council (described later in this chapter). Similarly, royal assent is needed for legislation to become law, but it has not been refused since Queen Anne in 1707.

One point at which the monarch could wield a major influence over policy and politics is in the selection of the prime minister. If one major party wins a clear majority in Parliament, as the Conservatives did in the 2019 election, there is little or no possibility that the monarch can exercise independent judgment. But if there is no clear winner, the monarch might be able to do so, albeit with the advice of the outgoing prime minister and senior civil servants. The conventions governing such an eventuality only began to be clearly articulated in the early 1990s, and the monarch would have to be extremely careful not to overstep the tacit boundaries.⁹ With predictions of a hung parliament leading up to the election in 2010, the monarch's authority to participate in selecting the prime minister was again heavily scrutinized and debated, highlighting that even among well-respected legal scholars, some provisions of the UK constitution are less than clear. This resulted in the Cabinet Office publishing for the first time a set of guidelines about government formation in the event of no single party commanding a majority in the House of Commons. This guidance emphasizes that the monarch should not be drawn into party politics. In particular, it states the following:

If there is doubt it is the responsibility of those involved in the political process, and in particular the parties represented in Parliament, to seek to determine and communicate clearly to the Sovereign who is best placed to be able to command the confidence of the House of Commons.¹⁰

In the late 1860s, the great commentator on British politics, Walter Bagehot, described the monarch as a real part of the policymaking system in Britain, though concealed in a cloak of dignity and ceremony.¹¹ Indeed, much of the impact of the monarch on policy and politics

remains hidden and subtle. The monarch's influence is exercised through frequent meetings and consultations with the prime minister, preceded by thorough ministerial briefings. The monarch, then, may be as personal as the power of any other political actor, or even more so. But to be effective, the monarch must not only perform the extensive ceremonial functions of the office but also be an effective politician in his or her own right. The most important function of the monarch, however, is to serve as a symbol of the nation as a whole and to rise above the partisan strife. The monarch must be a unifying force when much else in the political system tends to be centrifugal, divisive, and adversarial.

THE PRIME MINISTER

The monarch is head of state—that is, the representative of the nation as a whole and the symbolic head of the entire governing system. The prime minister is head of the government of the day and its chief executive officer. In the United States, the two roles are merged in the president, who is at once head of state and head of government. Because the two roles are separated in Great Britain, a citizen or a politician can more readily criticize the prime minister without being seen as attacking the legitimacy of the entire system of government.

The office of prime minister has evolved slowly since the beginning of the eighteenth century. The prime minister is at once just another minister of the Crown and above the other ministers. Concerns are emerging, however, that the role of the prime minister is becoming presidential, because more power appears to be flowing into Number 10 Downing Street (the prime minister's official residence in London).¹² This alleged “presidentialization” of the prime minister stems from several factors. The first is that parliamentary campaigns have become directed more toward electing a particular prime minister than toward selecting a political party to govern. The personalization of British politics increased substantially while Thatcher was prime minister, but some earlier campaigns were oriented toward the appeal and personality of individuals as well. The Labour government of Tony Blair placed an even greater emphasis on personal loyalty than the Thatcher government.¹³ The introduction of televised debates among the party leaders in the 2010 election emphasized the importance of personality in the choice of prime minister.¹⁴

Other aspects of the presidentialization of the office of prime minister are the staffing and organization of the office. Blair intensified this process through administrative and organizational innovations. Among other things, he appointed special assistants to the prime minister's private office for presentation and planning, significantly expanded the prime minister's policy unit, and created a new strategic communications office. Following the American precedent, Blair also appointed a chief of staff “to pull together the work of the Prime Minister's Office and to co-ordinate it with that of the Cabinet Office.”¹⁵ In addition to the chief of staff, prime ministers now appoint a number of special advisers and “czars” to help them place their personal stamp on a range of policies.

Another innovation under Blair was the integration of the formerly separate Cabinet Secretariat and Office of Public Service into a single Cabinet Office under the management of a cabinet secretary. This move was accompanied by the creation of a Constitution Secretariat in

1997, whose chief purpose is to oversee Labour's constitutional reform program, and a Central Secretariat in 1998 charged with advising on ministerial responsibilities and accountability.¹⁶

The cumulative effect of these moves, dating from the Thatcher years onward, has been the evolution of the prime minister's office in the direction of the executive office of the president in the United States and the Bundeskanzleramt in Germany, although on a much smaller scale.¹⁷ However, there are signs that the 2010–2015 Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government made a difference to policymaking at the center. There was, for instance, a revival of the cabinet committee system to resolve disputes between government departments. In addition to the importance of the relationship between prime minister David Cameron and deputy prime minister Nick Clegg, a committee of senior ministers known as “the Quad” became a major forum for resolving disputes, particularly about public expenditure. This was made up of the prime minister, deputy prime minister, chancellor of the exchequer (George Osborne, Conservative), and chief secretary to the Treasury (Danny Alexander, Liberal Democrat).¹⁸

Certain characteristics and powers of and limitations on the prime minister are important for understanding the office. First, the prime minister is the leader of the majority party in the House of Commons. (Until 1902, prime ministers frequently came from the House of Lords, but by convention the prime minister is now a member of Commons. For that reason, in 1963 Sir Alec Douglas-Home renounced his hereditary title to sit in the House of Commons and eventually become prime minister.) The political party first makes the selection of a potential prime minister. Therefore, whoever would be prime minister must first win an election within the party. Even sitting prime ministers may have to be reelected by their party, because sometimes they lose the confidence of their party, as Thatcher did in 1990. This aspect of the office is but one of many ways in which the customs and conventions of the British political system reinforce the cohesiveness and integration of political parties. The prime minister must be able to command the apparatus both of a political party and of government.

In addition to being the leader of a political party, by convention the prime minister is the political leader within the House of Commons. Becoming prime minister may indeed say more about an individual's abilities in Parliament than about the skills necessary to run a government. The prime minister is expected to lead parliamentary debates, and the ability to win in verbal jousts in the House of Commons frequently appears more important to success as prime minister than winning less visible policy and administrative battles. The prime minister's Question Time, which now occurs only once a week, is closely followed by political observers and is seen as a test of the verbal and political skills of the prime minister.

Although technically the prime minister is only *primus inter pares*, the powers of the prime minister are actually substantial. First, that official is the formal link between the Crown and the rest of government. After the monarch invites a prospective prime minister to form a new government, the relationships between the monarch and Parliament are channeled through the prime minister. In like manner, the prime minister serves as chief political adviser to the monarch, especially on major issues such as the dissolution of Parliament. The monarch and the prime minister meet on a weekly basis.

The prime minister also “dispenses office.” Once the monarch has invited a prospective prime minister to form a government, it is the prime minister who assembles the government

team. This role may be weakened somewhat in a coalition government involving negotiations with the other party, but it remains important. Certainly, members of the team selected will have political followings of their own, and others may have to be included to placate certain segments of the party, but the office held by each cabinet member will be the decision of the prime minister. The prime minister also can decide on life peerages, which nominally are appointed by the Crown but in actuality are the gift of the prime minister. Opposition parties can nominate life peers as well. In all cases, the nominees are subject to scrutiny to ensure their eligibility.

Once in office, the prime minister has considerable personal power over policy and the activities of the cabinet. As the organizer, leader, and summarizer of the business of the cabinet, the prime minister is also in a position to enforce his or her views over nominal equals. As the head of government, the prime minister has substantial public visibility and influence over society. This public influence has increased with the growing power of the media—a situation noted particularly by the Blair government.¹⁹ Boris Johnson had a strong media profile before becoming Prime Minister. Finally, in times of emergency, the powers of a prime minister are not limited by a constitution, as are those of the U.S. president.

The leader of the opposition, who as head of the largest minority party in the House of Commons would probably be prime minister if the sitting government were defeated in an election, is able to wield influence and powers as well. Although lacking the official powers of office, the role of the leader of the opposition is not unlike that of the prime minister: leader of a political party, a leader in Parliament, and the leader of a cabinet, albeit one out of office (the “shadow cabinet”). The adversarial style of British politics obliges the leader of the opposition to oppose the government’s programs and to propose alternatives to government programs in preparation for the day when the opposition becomes the government and must introduce its own policy proposals. As the alternative prime minister, the leader of the opposition receives a salary in addition to that of an MP and is kept briefed on important policy issues and matters of national security, because this member must be ready to become prime minister on very short notice.

THE CABINET AND GOVERNMENT

Working under—or with—the prime minister are the cabinet and the government. Although these terms are often used interchangeably, they actually designate somewhat different entities. The cabinet is composed of the individuals who meet with the prime minister as a collectivity called the cabinet and who make collective policy decisions. The term *government* is more encompassing, including all ministers regardless of their seniority or degree of responsibility. In fact, there are 120 ministerial positions to be filled. The cabinet is technically a committee of the government selected by the prime minister to provide advice in private meetings and to share in the responsibility for policy. Although the prime minister is certainly primarily responsible for government policies, the cabinet is also collectively responsible to Parliament, and cabinet members are generally expected to rise and fall as a unit rather than as individuals.

There are several varieties of ministers—secretaries of state, ministers, and junior ministers—and to some degree, parliamentary private secretaries have some ministerial functions. The distinction between secretaries of state and ministers is rather vague. Each tends to head a department of government, such as the Ministry of Defense, the Department for Work and Pensions, or the Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs. Although all major departments are now headed by secretaries of state, some members of the cabinet may carry titles other than minister: chancellor of the exchequer, the chief Treasury minister, is one example. The government, and in some instances the cabinet, also includes posts without departmental responsibilities—either ministers without portfolios or holders of titles such as the Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal. These officials are included in the government as general or political advisers or in the leadership of the House of Commons or the House of Lords.

Junior ministers are attached to a department minister to provide political and policy assistance in the management of the department, and these positions serve as stepping-stones for persons on the way up in government.²⁰ Ministers of state are junior ministers, placed between parliamentary undersecretaries of state and parliamentary private secretaries. Each department has one minister to deal with Lords business, who may be of any rank. Finally, parliamentary private secretaries are unpaid (aside from their normal salaries as MPs) assistants to ministers and are responsible primarily for liaison between the government and the rest of Parliament.

The job of minister is a demanding one. Unlike U.S. political executives, a British minister remains a member of the legislature and an active representative of a constituency and must fulfill various positions and responsibilities simultaneously. The first of these multiple tasks is to run the department—not only its day-to-day management but also its policies. Because few politicians have experience with the management of such large organizations, most are at some disadvantage in running a department effectively. As for managing the policies of the department, the minister must develop policies appropriate to the department's responsibilities and in keeping with the overall priorities of the government.

In this task, ministers are sometimes hindered by their lack of expertise. Ministers are seldom chosen for their expertise in a policy area; more often, they are appointed for their general political skills and voter support. It is estimated that only five of the fifty-one ministerial appointees in the Harold Wilson government of 1964 to 1970 had any prior experience in the area of their departments' responsibilities, and there is evidence that the knowledge base of ministers has not improved substantially.²¹ The consequences of their lack of expertise are exacerbated by the tendency to shift ministers from one department to another, even during the lifetime of a government. During the three years and 44 days he was prime minister, Boris Johnson oversaw three significant cabinet reshuffles (in 2020 and 2021) in which even ministers with important economic portfolios were moved into new roles. Furthermore, in their departments, ministers are faced with experienced and relatively expert civil servants who tend to have views of their own about proper departmental policies. Inexperienced and inept ministers must then fight very hard just to manage their own departments. The tensions between ministers and top civil servants were even the subject of the British sitcoms *Yes, Minister* and, more recently, *The Thick of It*.

Related to their policy work, ministers are likely to have some personal policy advisers, whether paid by public money or by party funds. The Thatcher government, more than previous governments, sought more partisan and ideological policy advice than it was likely to receive from civil servants. The Blair government continued that practice and to some extent expanded its use so that the role of these advisers has now become more clearly defined and in the process has devalued the role of the civil service.

Ministers who are also members of the cabinet encounter additional demands on their time. Traditionally, the cabinet meets once a week. Membership in the cabinet also requires that each minister be briefed on all current political issues. And ministers must serve on the cabinet committees needed to coordinate policies and deal with issues requiring consideration prior to their determination by the cabinet.²² Ministers cannot afford to take cabinet work lightly, even though they may be only a part of a collective often dominated by the prime minister. In the cabinet, as in the Commons, political reputations are made, and in both bodies, the interests of the minister's department must be protected and advanced.

Because ministers are also active MPs, they must appear in Parliament for a substantial amount of time each week, especially when the government has only a small majority. Ministers also must be prepared to speak in Parliament on the policies of their departments or for the government as a whole. A minister must as well be prepared to respond to questions during Question Time and may have to spend hours being briefed and coached on the answers to anticipated questions. The constitutional responsibility of the executive to the legislature places a great burden on ministers in a parliamentary government.

Finally, ministers must serve their constituents in the districts from which they were elected. This service involves spending weekends in the "surgery" (i.e., the constituency office or other locations in the district) and receiving delegations from local organizations when in London. Unlike politicians in other countries, members of the British Parliament may not reside in the constituencies from which they were elected; therefore, they may have to learn about the local issues.

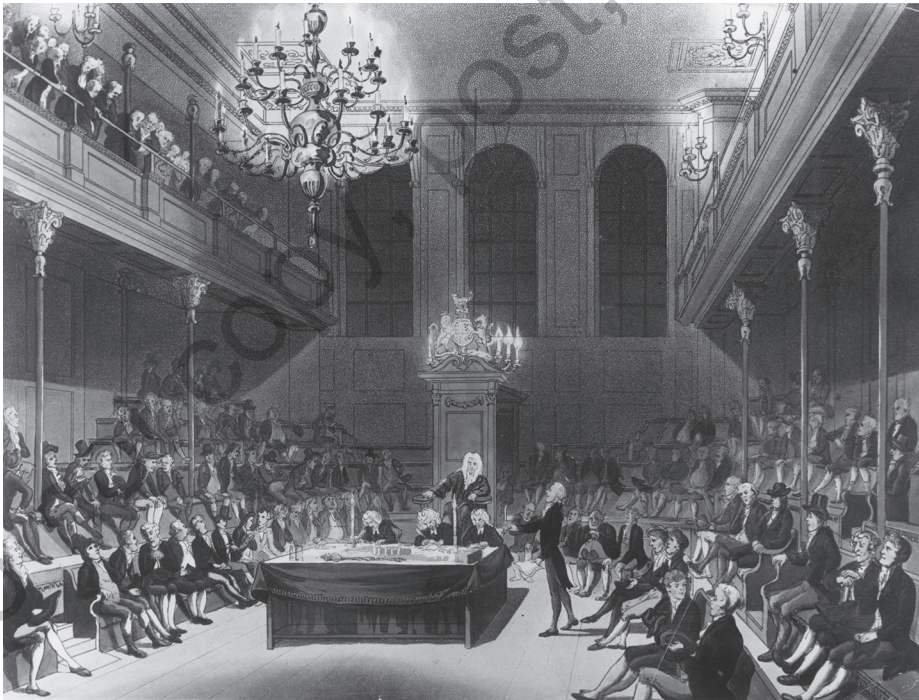
The cabinet is supported in its work by the Cabinet Office. In fact, one of the important innovations in British politics has been the development and expansion of this office, which grew out of the Committee of Imperial Defense in World War I. In recent years, the Cabinet Office has undertaken other important policy functions, including managing British policy toward the European Union.²³ Responsibility for the management of EU relations is shared with the Foreign Office, which runs the UK Mission in Brussels. Currently, the Cabinet Office is composed of a senior civil servant and a small number of associates. The secretary to the cabinet is the head of the UK civil service and sits beside the prime minister at cabinet meetings. The secretary creates the cabinet agenda and distributes cabinet papers to the appropriate individuals. Although the prime minister summarizes cabinet meetings orally, it is the secretary to the cabinet who, based on the meetings, drafts written communications to the departments for action and prepares the formal written records of the meetings. These records are not subject to change, even by the prime minister.

The prime minister's small but growing staff of political and personal advisers also provides the government with support. This group is far smaller than the White House staff in the

United States or even the staff of the Bundeskanzleramt in Germany, but its growth is viewed as just one more bit of evidence that policymaking powers are becoming concentrated in the cabinet rather than in Parliament as a whole.

PARLIAMENT

Despite the nominally strong position of Parliament in the constitutional arrangements of the United Kingdom, serious questions have arisen about the real, effective powers of Parliament. As the political executive grows in strength and political parties become more disciplined, Parliament as an institution grows less capable of exercising control over policies. In response, it has been attempting to create a more powerful position in the political process, especially in the oversight of the executive. The significant majority enjoyed by Labour governments between 1997 and 2010 made Parliament's attempts to serve as a counterweight to the executive all the more difficult. Parliament's visible role in the political process massively increased during the period of minority government (2017–2019) and the Brexit negotiations. However, the large Conservative majority following the 2019 general election again made it difficult for Parliament to act as a check on the government.



The House of Commons at Westminster as drawn by Augustus Pugin and Thomas Rowlandson for Ackermann's *Microcosm of London* (1808–1811). The Commons chamber shown here was destroyed by fire in 1834.

Hulton Archive/Getty Images

Members of Parliament

The average MP represents approximately 90,000 people, compared with the approximately 700,000 people represented by members of the U.S. House of Representatives. Compared with members of most other legislative bodies, MPs have few advantages. Their annual pay, even with continuing raises, is £84,144 (or about \$97,300 at 2022 exchange rates), compared with \$174,000 for rank-and-file U.S. representatives and senators. In previous parliaments, MPs received about the same amount for personal expenses, including weekend travel to their districts and rent for a second residence in London. In 2009, the use of these allowances became a public scandal and produced a political firestorm over the apparent abuse of position by MPs. Some of the more egregious cases were using parliamentary allowances to clean a moat and to build a house for ducks on a private estate.

Some MPs have sponsoring organizations that either help members with their expenses in office or provide some direct remuneration. For Labour politicians, these organizations are commonly trade unions; for Conservatives and a few Liberal Democrats, they are industrial groups or large corporations—or perhaps other types of interest groups. The appearance of corruption, however, is prompting parties to rethink the place of sponsorship. The Labour Party has begun to restrict union sponsorship of its members, for instance. Moreover, the many scandals about the finances of the political parties have tended to make the parties more circumspect in their financial relationships.

In return for relatively modest rewards, MPs work long hours and receive relatively little staff support. Unlike American legislators who, on average, have about fourteen staff members, the average MP receives funding for only around three members of staff, divided between their constituency and Westminster offices. Historically, many MPs lacked private Westminster offices, unless they were in the government or the shadow government, and so they were forced to share small offices with other MPs. Today, most have offices of their own in a new building near the Houses of Parliament, but even there, accommodations remain cramped. The truth is, the job of MP was long ago designed for a person of independent means, and the rewards of office have not kept pace with the demands of modern legislative bodies.

Organization

The House of Lords is composed of the lords spiritual (representing the hierarchy of the Church of England) and the lords temporal. The lords temporal comprise hereditary and life peers. Hereditary peers, who once made up an overwhelming majority of members in the House of Lords, claim their seats based on inherited titles; life peers are appointed by the monarch, on the advice of the government, only for the peer's lifetime. Dating from 1958, the concept of life peers was designed in part to rectify the partisan and ideological bias of the hereditary peers against the Labour Party. In 1999, the Labour majority in the House of Commons voted to abolish the privileged status of the hereditary peers in the House of Lords in favor of a chamber dominated by life peers. As a result of the 1999 constitutional reform, all but 92 hereditary peers were removed from the House of Lords, most elected by their own political party group within Lords.

In September 2022, the House of Lords had some 758 members, including remaining 92 hereditary peers and 25 Church of England bishops. Conservatives, with 250 peers, are the largest group in the chamber (compared with 166 Labour peers and 83 Liberal Democrats). 184 members of Lords are nonparty, “cross-bench” peers.

The impetus for limiting the powers of the House of Lords began with David Lloyd George’s “people’s budget” of 1909. This budget introduced a progressive income tax (the first since the Napoleonic wars) and a rudimentary public health insurance program. The Conservative Lords balked at this Liberal proposal and refused to pass the budget. Parliament was then dissolved, but when the Liberals were returned with a (reduced) majority, the House of Lords accepted the budget. After a second election in 1910, in which the Liberals were again returned with a majority, the House of Lords accepted the Parliament Bill of 1911, which greatly limited its powers.

Today, the House of Lords may not delay money bills longer than one month—nor can it vote them down and prevent their passage—and any legislation passed by the House of Commons in two successive sessions of Parliament, provided one calendar year has passed, goes into effect without approval by Lords. However, the Lords does still occasionally delay or even vote down legislation. For instance, in February 2013, the Lords inflicted a massive defeat on the government on the question of the prime minister’s right to appoint new peers. The House of Lords also attempted to significantly amend the Government’s Brexit-related legislation in 2017–2019. The removal of most of the hereditary peers and the end of the domination of Conservatives has resulted in a more self-confident House of Lords in which peers face fewer questions about their legitimacy. Thus, despite never completing House of Lords reform, the Labour governments (1997–2005) created a stronger second chamber that was much more willing to oppose and attempt to amend government legislation.²⁴

Despite its numerous uses, the House of Lords is still the target of reform efforts. In votes in 2007, the House of Commons expressed strong sentiment for an elected House of Lords, just as there was sentiment in the House of Lords to retain an all-appointive body. This voting registered the opinions of the members but did not move forward toward adoption of real reform. The coalition government formed in 2010 proposed reconsidering the reform of the House of Lords, although conflicts within the coalition meant that it never took place. The partially reformed House of Lords, then, can exert influence on the policy process.²⁵ Whilst it is irritating for the government to be defeated in the Lords and be forced accept some amendments to its legislation, it knows that it will ultimately get its way on important matters. There is, therefore, little incentive to pursue more radical reform that might, for instance, create an elected chamber with even more legitimacy and self-confidence to challenge the government.

The structure and functions of the House of Commons have evolved over centuries and, to some degree, still reflect their medieval roots. Much of the ceremony and procedure derives from the past, but despite complaints about the vestigial aspects of the procedures, they do not appear to inhibit in any significant way the functioning of a modern legislative body. To the extent that other institutions of British government seriously overshadow the House, the fault resides more with the other structural and cultural characteristics of British government than with the quaint trappings of power within the House of Commons.

British politics is conducted in an adversarial style, and even the design of the House of Commons emphasizes that fact. Most legislatures sit in semicircles, and the individual members sit at desks and go to a central rostrum to address the body. The House of Commons is arranged as two opposing ranks of benches, placed very close together in a small chamber that is not actually large enough to accommodate all MPs at the same time. Speakers generally face their political opponents, and although the form of address is to the Speaker, the words are clearly intended for the opponents. Because the proceedings of the House of Commons are broadcast, statements by members are also directed at the voting public and the media. The cabinet and other members of the government populate the front benches on one side of the aisle, while their opposition counterparts are arrayed on the other side. From these two front row trenches, the two major belligerents conduct the verbal warfare that is parliamentary debate. Behind the front benches are the foot soldiers of the backbenches, ready to vote to their party's call, and perhaps little else. The style of debate in the House of Commons, as well as being contentious and rather witty, is very informal, and the MP addressing that body enjoys few protections against heckling.

The House of Commons is both a partisan body and a national institution. Ideas of cabinet government and collective responsibility are closely allied with ideas of party government, and there is a strong sense that political parties, whether in or out of government, should present clear and consistent positions on policy issues that the electorate can then judge when voting in the next election. The dependence of the executive on the ability to command a majority of the House also requires that parties vote together. Political parties in the House of Commons are organized so they can deliver votes when required. Members know that voting against their party on an important issue can be tantamount to political suicide (although it sometimes serves as a springboard to future political success), and each party has a whip whose job it is to ensure that the needed votes are present. The British system of government does not allow much latitude for individual MPs to have policy ideas of their own, although the parties generally do allow their members free votes on issues of a moral nature, such as abortion or same-sex marriage.

From the partisan organization and behavior of the House of Commons, it follows that it is a national institution. The U.S. House of Representatives is usually conceptualized as a group of ambassadors from their constituencies, while European legislatures are more national in focus because of proportional representation and the absence of any real connection to geography. The House of Commons is somewhere between those two extremes, although the British generally acknowledge that MPs are more responsible to the party and its national goals and priorities than to the individual interests of their constituencies. This party allegiance is signaled by the fact that MPs are not required to live in their constituencies, and some may not. Naturally, MPs do try to satisfy their constituencies whenever possible, but it is generally assumed that members owe their offices to their respective parties and the national policies advanced in the election campaigns rather than to any geographically narrow interests of their constituencies. Nevertheless, like the free votes on moral issues, MPs are often allowed to abstain from voting for, and in rare cases voting against, party proposals that clearly would be inimical to the interests of their constituencies.

Perched above this sea of adversarial and partisan politics on a throne between the two front benches is the Speaker of the House, an impartial figure who traditionally has dressed in the style of the eighteenth century. The Speaker is elected from the membership of the Commons—not for having been a vociferous partisan but for being someone who can be elected unanimously rather than produced by a partisan confrontation. Competitive elections for Speaker have occurred in the Commons only six times since the beginning of the twentieth century, most recently in November 2019 when Labour MP Lindsay Hoyle was elected. His predecessor, John Bercow, was a reforming but controversial speaker who faced fierce criticism from his own Conservative Party for the rulings he made about the conduct of votes on Theresa May’s government’s Brexit deal.

Once elected, a Speaker may remain in the office as long as he or she wishes. The Speaker’s parliamentary seat is rarely contested, and another member discharges his or her constituency duties. The Speaker votes only in the case of a tie, but by convention the Speaker’s vote is cast to preserve the status quo. The Speaker is not without real influence over decisions, however; one example is the Speaker’s use of the “kangaroo,” the standing order that allows the Speaker to determine which amendments to legislation will be debated and which will not, and the Speaker’s acceptance of a motion of closure ends debate—but only after the Speaker believes all relevant positions have been heard. Likewise, the Speaker enforces the rules of the Commons not only in debate but also for matters such as suspending members who have violated financial disclosure rules.²⁶

Although the House of Commons does have committees, they are by no means as central to the legislative process as the committees in the U.S. Congress or the German Bundestag. Instead, they are miniature legislatures in which bills are discussed and improved, and the government can accept amendments without jeopardizing a bill’s political stature in the Commons. An indication of this more limited capacity is that a bill enters the committee stage after the principal political debate on the bill rather than before its primary consideration. Therefore, the major battles over legislation occur before the committee sees it. The committee’s task is to refine legislation rather than significantly influence its basic nature and purpose. Unlike congressional committees, committees that consider legislation are not permanent; they are formed and then disbanded after they have considered a particular bill. The composition of the committees reflects the partisan composition of the Commons as a whole.

In addition to the temporary committees that deal with particular bills, select committees carry out day-to-day parliamentary scrutiny of government policy and administration. For example, the Public Accounts Committee is a modern manifestation of the traditional parliamentary function of oversight of expenditures; it monitors the government’s expenditure plans, especially through the postaudit of the final expenditures. It has also at times become engaged in more analytic exercises, such as value-for-money audits, and has gained a reputation as an authoritative body whose reports require some sort of government response. By tradition, this committee is chaired by an MP from the opposition. Its work is greatly aided by the National Audit Office, which, like most other government accounting offices, has become increasingly concerned with value for money in addition to judging the probity of public expenditures.

Parliament also uses select committees to follow the activities of government departments and establish the sort of legislative oversight by committee so familiar to American politics.²⁷ Each of the departmental select committees monitors a government department and holds hearings on and independent investigations into spending, policies, and administration. Although their success has varied, they have provided Parliament with more institutionalized mechanisms for investigation, and some of them have had a substantial impact on the direction of policy. Augmenting the work of the departmental select committees are nondepartmental select committees, which deal with domestic matters cutting across traditional departmental boundaries. Examples include a standing orders committee and a committee on standards and privileges. Other nondepartmental committees have been charged with powers of investigative oversight over matters such as the environment and public administration.

As indicated by the activities of the select committees, an important function of Parliament is the scrutiny of the political executive and its policies. Perhaps the most famous mechanism through which this takes place is Question Time. On four out of five sitting days during the week, the House of Commons opens its legislative day with an hour of questions for the government from members of the House. All members of the government are subject to questioning, but the prime minister answers questions on behalf of the whole government on Wednesdays at noon. Question Time places an additional burden on already overburdened ministers, but in a political system in which the executive tends to dominate, this institution serves as one mechanism for Parliament to find out what is happening in government and draw attention to particular issues.

The UK's tradition of a strong executive has led to debates about whether Parliament has become merely a "rubber stamp" for decisions taken elsewhere. However, many of these complaints seem to also lament the passing of a golden age of parliamentary influence that never really existed.²⁸ We know that today's MPs are more likely to rebel than ever before. When the parliamentary arithmetic is tight and the government cannot afford to lose the votes of even a small number of MPs, Parliament's role in the policy process becomes much more prominent. This increased role was clearly visible in the Brexit debates during Theresa May's minority government (2017–2019). However, even during periods of majority government, Parliament can still have an influence. The lack of government defeats is not necessarily a sign of parliamentary impotence. Rather, Parliament might exert influence in the background before legislation is brought to the House of Commons. Moreover, during the passage of a bill, there is also evidence that governments pay attention to backbench suggestions and often incorporate them at a later stage.²⁹ The UK system still tends towards a strong executive, but we should be careful not to dismiss the importance of Parliament.

THE CIVIL SERVICE

The civil service has changed perhaps more than any other institution of British government. The traditional pattern of a nonpolitical, career civil service with substantial influence over policy has been one of the great paradoxes of British government. On the face of it, the

British civil service has appeared unprepared to perform the expert role expected of it in the policymaking process. The recruitment of civil servants has been less on the basis of expert knowledge in a substantive policy area than on the basis of general intellectual abilities. Also, for a large proportion of their careers, civil servants are moved frequently from job to job (although many remain within a single department throughout their careers), gaining permanent appointments only rather late in their careers. The cult of the “talented amateur” and the generalist has dominated thinking about the selection and training of civil servants, despite attempts at reform following the 1968 findings of the Fulton Committee, which expressed concern about the absence of specialized education in the backgrounds of persons selected for the civil service.³⁰

For several decades after the Fulton report, the pattern of recruitment changed relatively little, with more humanities graduates than scientists or social scientists entering the civil service.³¹ One of the changes introduced during the Thatcher government and continued in subsequent governments was an emphasis on management, rather than policy advice, in the role of senior public servants—political appointees were to gradually fill the role of policy adviser. This change also involved opening recruitment for many senior positions to noncareer appointees and, in general, breaking down the monopoly over these positions that career public servants had enjoyed. This pattern of recruitment has been especially evident in filling the chief executive positions of agencies created to implement public policies. In general, then, the civil service has been somewhat deinstitutionalized, with greater competition and less protection from political influence.

Despite these changes, the civil service continues to have a substantial influence over policy. Several factors seem to be related to this influence. The first is that although its members may lack formal training in a policy area, the senior civil service is composed of a talented group of individuals who have the intellectual ability to grasp readily the subject matter it must administer. Second, despite their lack of specialized training compared with civil servants in other countries, British civil servants are generally more knowledgeable than their political masters about departmental policy.³² They learn a great deal on the job, whereas their ministers are not on the job very long themselves. Civil servants have a much longer time perspective than politicians, and they are able to wait out and delay any particular minister with whom they disagree. Furthermore, their ministries have an even longer collective memory than any single civil servant, so the accumulation of expertise and experience can easily counteract the legitimacy of the political master.

The relationship between civil servants and elected officials is important for defining and understanding the role of the civil service in policymaking. The prevailing ethos of the civil service is that it can serve any political master it may be called on to serve. But ministers may interpret this service—and sometimes rightly so—as an attempt to impose the “departmental view,” or the particular policy ideas of the department, on the minister. Any number of reasons can be advanced to explain why the ideas of the minister are not feasible and why only the proposals made by the department itself will ever work.

The minister’s task of countering a departmental view is further burdened by the fact that the department may appear to speak with one voice. American executive departments tend to be

fragmented, with the independent bureaus advancing their own policy ideas. Executive departments in Great Britain have had few such independent organizations. Policy ideas arising in departments are channeled upward through the hierarchical structure to the permanent secretary, who is the primary link between the political world and the civil service. The permanent secretary is the senior civil servant in a department (several departments now have two or more civil servants of this rank) and serves as the personal adviser to the minister.

The creation of numerous executive agencies has fragmented British cabinet departments, thereby diminishing the power exercised by permanent secretaries and senior public servants. The principal effect, however, has been to separate implementation from policymaking. Indeed, the British central government looks increasingly like Scandinavian governments, with small, policy-oriented departments supervising the larger agencies that implement policies.³³ But that separation is not as easy to make in reality as it is in theory, and indeed the quasi-autonomous agencies are beginning to link their managerial problems with substantive policy changes.

Because ministers lack any substantial personal staff, they have had to rely heavily on the permanent secretaries both for policy advice and for management of the departments. This dependence, in turn, has given the civil service, through the permanent secretary, significant influence over policy. It is not argued here that the civil service has abused this position. In fact, in general, the evidence is that its members have been responsible and scrupulous in the exercise of their duties. Nevertheless, the structural position in which the civil service is placed as the repository of information and of a departmental perspective, and the lack of alternative views presented to most ministers, place the civil service in a powerful position.

A second major challenge to the traditional role and functions of the civil service is that many individual civil servants question whether they have obligations to Parliament and to the public that transcend their loyalty to ministers. Several civil servants have chosen to blow the whistle on malfeasance in government, and in some cases, the courts have supported their actions. But actions of this sort are uncomfortable and difficult in a system built on secrecy and ministerial responsibility, and so the need for greater openness in government has become a political question. In 1994, the Major government adopted rules removing some of the secrecy in the public sector, but achieving the openness found in most other European governments is still a distant goal. In 1999, the Blair government introduced its own legislation to create greater openness in government, but advocates of freedom of information have argued that it is excessively weak.³⁴

The third challenge facing the civil service are the reforms implemented by the Thatcher and Major governments and designed to minimize the policy advice role of the civil service and emphasize its managerial role. The most important of these reforms was Next Steps, which created several hundred semiautonomous agencies (including local National Health Service [NHS] trusts) to implement most government policies.³⁵ The policy and planning functions are being retained within relatively small ministries that are also responsible for supervising the operations of the agencies and are a mechanism for enforcing parliamentary accountability. Overall, few things about the role and status of the civil service in the United Kingdom can now be taken for granted, as the internal machinery of government, and even some constitutional principles, undergo some very fundamental changes.

Finally, the growing use of patronage for government positions is threatening to undermine the tradition of apolitical public servants. As was already noted, some of the policy advice traditionally offered by senior civil servants is now provided by personal advisers selected on partisan grounds. Likewise, the leadership of executive agencies and the boards of the numerous quasi-governmental organizations are all appointed, if nominally on merit grounds.

THE JUDICIARY

Courts in the United Kingdom are by no means as central to the political process as courts in the United States. In large part, this absence of centrality is the result of the doctrine of parliamentary supremacy and the consequent inability of the courts to exercise meaningful judicial review of legislation. In short, there is little or no way that British courts can declare an act of Parliament unconstitutional. As British jurist A. V. Dicey put it many years ago, if Parliament decided that all blue-eyed babies should be murdered, the preservation of blue-eyed babies would be illegal.³⁶

Yet several things have acted to expand the powers and activities of the British judiciary. The most significant change in the role of the courts stemmed from Great Britain's membership in the European Union. While the UK leaving the EU meant that after 31 December 2020, the UK was no longer bound by decisions of the European Court of Justice (ECJ), the ECJ did have a significant influence on UK law up to 2020 and even declared some activities of the British government to be out of conformity with the Treaty of Rome. Conservatives (both small and large) saw the interventions by the European Court as allowing the ECJ too much influence on UK policy and led to the argument that the UK had given up too much sovereignty as a member of the EU. Despite leaving the EU, though, the UK is still subject to the European Court of Human Rights.

The Labour victory in 1997 ushered in a period of substantial constitutional change in the United Kingdom. Under Tony Blair, Britain saw the devolution of powers to Scotland and (to a lesser extent) Wales, the creation of the Greater London Assembly and an elected mayor for London, the adoption of the Freedom of Information Act, reform of the House of Lords, the adoption of the Human Rights Act of 1998, and the creation of the Supreme Court.³⁷

To establish separation between the upper chamber of Parliament and the senior judges in the judiciary, the Constitutional Reform Act of 2005 considerably altered the top-level judicial institutions in the United Kingdom, moving the highest civil law court, the Appellate Committee of the House of Lords, out of Lords to create an independent Supreme Court. The Supreme Court sat for the first time in October 2009. The Court serves as the final court of appeal in all civil cases in the United Kingdom, and it is the final appellate court for criminal cases in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland (Scotland retains its own unique criminal high court). The focus of the Court is largely on cases that deal with points of law of interest to the public at large (much like the U.S. Supreme Court) as well as “devolution” issues, settling legal disputes relating to the powers of the devolved institutions.

The head of the judiciary shifted from the Lord Chancellor to the new Lord Chief Justice, though the Lord Chancellor retains many important duties and roles such as the statutory

obligation to ensure an independent judiciary and the power to appoint justices to the Supreme Court. To ensure some degree of separation of powers, an independent Judicial Appointments Commission was created to propose judicial nominees to the Lord Chancellor. The commission puts forward one nominee at a time to fill a vacancy on the Court, and the Lord Chancellor has the right to either accept the recommendation or ask the commission to reconsider and put forward another nominee.³⁸

To date the Supreme Court has not gained expanded judicial review. That said, under the Human Rights Act of 1998, the Court does have the right to issue a “declaration of incompatibility,” stating that an act of Parliament is at odds with the Human Rights Act of 1998. Although this declaration does not have formal influence on the legitimacy of the statute and does not overturn the offending act (it remains the case that only Parliament may strike down an act of Parliament), it is a clear signal that Parliament should revisit the act to bring it into compliance with the Human Rights Act and the European Convention on Human Rights.

THE REST OF GOVERNMENT

Local governments have a substantial impact on the ultimate shape of public policies in the United Kingdom. In a similar manner, many public activities are carried out through public corporations, quasi-public bodies, and formerly government (but now largely regulated) industries rather than directly by a government department. This choice of institutions for service delivery has consequences for the ability of government to control these functions, as well as for the nature of the services being delivered.

Local Government

British local government is not an independent set of institutions with its own constitutional base of authority such as that found for states or provinces in a federal system. Instead, British local government is the creation and the creature of the central government. Local government is organized in different formats in Scotland and Wales and also in England. In Scotland and Wales, there is a single level of local government, the product of a reform that abolished the previous two-tier system.³⁹ In England, a disparate system of counties, and districts under those counties, serves much of the country, although an increasing number of unified authorities are exercising the responsibilities of both levels. Meanwhile, London has its own integrated government structure.⁴⁰

There have been several innovations in local government in England in recent years. Following the example of the mayor of London, several local areas have decided to create the post of an elected mayor. In traditionally highly centralized England, these changes have created a new voice beyond Whitehall who can claim to speak directly for a local area. The mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, for example, became a prominent advocate for his area in the national media during the coronavirus lockdowns. He argued that central government was not providing enough financial support.

Local areas can also join together in England to create ‘combined authorities’ that receive more powers from central government. These can either be led by a mayor or by another local

leadership structure. Prominent examples include the mayor of the Tees Valley Combined Authority, Ben Houchen. A Conservative elected in a traditionally Labour area, he has attracted attention for his more interventionist approach to economic policy, including by purchasing the local airport to boost the economy.

The Coalition Government also introduced local Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) in 2012 to supervise the work of local police chief constables. These are directly elected roles and there are 40 PCCs in England and Wales. More recently, mayors like Andy Burnham in Greater Manchester have taken on the functions of PCCs for their area. There is the potential for their work to be absorbed into other local mayoral roles as these new offices evolve.

English local government resembles devolution in the rest of the United Kingdom, therefore, because it is a patchwork quilt of different arrangements for different areas. After several areas rejected having a local mayor in referendums in 2012, central government has encouraged the creation of combined authorities as an alternative. The idea that England is too centralised has taken root and the direction of travel for both main parties is for further devolution of power away from Whitehall. However, tax powers are still jealously guarded by the Treasury in London.

Unlike U.S. state and local governments, local governments in the United Kingdom are closely supervised by the central government. The Department of Communities and Local Government has been responsible for supervising local governments in England and for determining their range of activity, funding, and political structures. Because in the United Kingdom a much larger proportion of the expenditures of local governments is funded through grants from the central government than is true in the United States, British local authorities are more dependent on the center.

London has been an especially important locus for issues concerning local government and local democracy. In part because it was headed by Ken Livingstone, a member of the left wing of the Labour Party, the Thatcher government abolished the Greater London Council, an umbrella government for the city's 33 boroughs, and required the boroughs to deliver services themselves. Some common functions, such as London Transport, remained, but the notion of London as a political and governmental entity was largely abandoned. The Labour government recreated a unified government for London, and Livingstone was elected mayor in May 2000. Having an elected mayor initially distinguished London from most other local authorities in Great Britain, but in the end, Westminster can always restrict the relative autonomy given to the capital. The Treasury has recently negotiated very hard with London on a new deal to fund Transport for London. Sadiq Khan, of the Labour Party, became the mayor in 2016.

Public Corporations and Regulatory Bodies

Public corporations have been an important part of the total governmental sector in the United Kingdom even though they are, at least in theory, distinct from the government itself. The Labour government elected at the end of World War II nationalized many of the major British industries, including the railways, steel, coal, telecommunications, electricity, and gas. Government also was heavily involved in other industries such as petroleum.

The central government appointed members to the boards of the public corporations who ran these industries and made broad policy decisions, including about finance. The day-to-day decisions about these industries were made independently, although this independence was constrained by the industries' reliance on government funds to cover operating deficits and to provide capital for new ventures. Also, decisions by a nationalized industry often provoked political discontent with a government, such as in 1979, when the decision by the National Coal Board to close several less productive Welsh pits prompted a strong outcry and again in the mid-1980s when more pit closings led to a bitter yearlong strike.

When the Thatcher government took office in 1979, nationalized industries made up a significant share of economic activity in the United Kingdom. Such a large share of industry in public hands gave the government a great, albeit indirect, influence over the economy, especially in a period of high inflation when wage settlements in the nationalized industries were frequently used as guidelines for settlements in the private sector and when the pressures to keep wage settlements down produced labor unrest.

The Thatcher government was anxious to reduce the role of the public sector in the economy and to strengthen the private economy. This desire led Conservatives to privatize some nationalized industries, including gas, telecommunications, road transportation, and British Airways. The government also sold off much of a major local industry, its council (public) housing, to the occupying tenants (about 80 percent of tenants in London took advantage of this opportunity, but only about 30 percent in the Glasgow region did so). These sales helped to balance the budget and helped to fulfill ideological dreams and campaign promises on behalf of free enterprise. The process of privatization continued with other public assets, including some public utilities such as electricity and water. The British government was becoming much less of a direct economic actor.

Government has not been able to get out of the economy entirely, however. Moreover, almost every privatization has required greater regulatory authority to control the new industries. For example, the privatized electricity companies are supervised by the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets (Ofgem). The principal task of these independent offices was to set the rates that the newly created private monopolies, or oligopolies, could charge and also to set standards of service.⁴¹ Unlike most American regulators, in setting the rates, these offices focused more on the retail price index than on return on capital, attempting to drive consumer prices downward and efficiency up.

Government may have privatized industries and created nominally independent regulators, but it cannot escape the political fallout from the privatized industries. The public still remembers that these enterprises were once public and still thinks of them as public utilities that should be operated with some concern for the common good. Poor service, higher fares, and several accidents have generated controversy over the profits being earned by the firms that now provide railway services. One consequence is that the government has taken back ownership of rails and switches, although the rail companies themselves remain in private hands.

Once installed in 1997, the Labour government maintained much the same policy toward industry as the previous Conservative governments, placing more emphasis on economic growth and job creation than on redistributive issues. Some of the reduced direct public involvement in the economy reflects changes in the economic structure, such as the significant job losses in

heavy industry and rapidly rising employment in service industries. Although employment and growth were high during the Labour Governments (1997–2010), the loss of well-paying manufacturing jobs has tended, as in many other industrialized countries, to raise new issues about economic and social inequality.

The Quasi-Governmental Sector

The quasi-governmental sector is one of the biggest areas of activity in the public sector, representing up to one-third of public spending. A principal example is the NHS, which is the world's fourth largest employer, either public or private. Although government-funded and government-controlled through the Department of Health, it represents an attempt to maintain some independence for the practice of medicine. The same attempt to maintain independence has been directed at the universities, who remain independent charitable bodies, and also at some research organizations funded more or less directly by the public sector.

Other parts of the quasi-governmental sector are kept under somewhat closer control by the government, although the control is indirect through appointments as much as it is through direct accountability mechanisms. Indeed, one of the most important critiques of the quasi-governmental sector is that it is less accountable than the more traditional means of delivering public services. The Thatcher government launched an offensive against quangos early in its time in office, in part to impose greater control over government and public expenditure. By the end of its period in office, however, it had created hundreds of new quasi-governmental organizations. These new organizations helped to make the public sector appear even smaller and also provided ways to diminish Labour Party control over local service delivery activities. The Conservative-led coalition elected in 2010 also pledged to reduce the size of the quasi-governmental sector but, much like previous governments, it found it difficult to shrink quangos in practice. The exact number of quangos is hard to pin down as committees form and petition for funding in a fluid manner, though some estimates propose that there are 10 to 20 percent less than there were two decades ago.

1.3

WHO HAS THE POWER IN THE UK?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Explain the impact of the “majoritarian” style of the British parliamentary system on its parties’ policies and performance.
- Summarize the history and processes of the two-party and electoral systems throughout the United Kingdom.
- Discuss the similarities of the Conservative and Labour parties.
- Describe the origins, values, organization, and leadership of the Labour party.
- Describe the origins, values, organization, and leadership of the Conservative party.
- Name the distinguishing features of British elections.
- Identify key factors that determine British voter turnout.
- Discuss the four interacting factors that determine partisan choice by voters.
- Explain the four major methods for pressure group influence in the United Kingdom.

A DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL SYSTEM REQUIRES MECHANISMS THAT allow the public to influence the decisions of its political leaders. This influence may be exercised only intermittently, such as during elections, but in most democratic systems, it is exercised almost continually through mechanisms such as political parties, interest groups, and, increasingly, public opinion polls and the media. The government of the United Kingdom is no different. Although some commentators have said that the United Kingdom is a democracy only once every five years (the statutory maximum term for a sitting Parliament), the day-to-day decisions of the British government are, in fact, influenced by popular demands and pressures, including through partisan institutions (the majoritarian style of UK politics tends to give substantial power to a single majority party until it is thrown out of office) and pressure groups. Furthermore, the government is attempting to provide more opportunities for participation at times other than elections. That said, the relative secrecy favored by the British government may protect it from the degree of external pressure on policy encountered by some other European countries.

POLITICAL PARTIES

Although British political parties do have discernible policy stances, even if sometimes these are adopted merely to oppose the stated policies of the other party, they are primarily “catchall parties,” so any one party includes a relatively wide range of opinion. In this way, they differ from the more ideological parties found in most other European countries. The catchall feature is applicable to the parties even though Conservatives had an ideological bent during the 1980s and 1990s. After a series of electoral failures during that period, the Labour Party attempted to enhance its image as a broad, nonideological party by purging its more confrontational elements on the left and then revoking its commitment to public ownership of major industries. Labour’s appeal to the middle class helped to produce three consecutive electoral victories in 1997, 2001, and 2005, making Blair and Thatcher the only two postwar leaders to win three consecutive parliamentary majorities.¹ The Labour Party’s policy changes, however, alienated some of its traditional supporters in the working class, who still wanted the party to advocate socialism and vehemently defend the interests of the working class.

Perhaps the major difference between British and continental political parties is that the majoritarian style of the British parliamentary system means that the government is most likely to be formed by a single party. More than in other countries, British elections tend to be about the performance of the party currently in government and the capacity of another (clearly identifiable) party to assume the role of government. Because of this characteristic, which, arises from the majoritarian nature of British parliamentary government, the responsibility for policies and performance is clearer in the British parliamentary system than in many others. That said, the 2010–2015 Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government showed that a “hung parliament,” in which no party controls a clear majority of seats, remains a real possibility in the United Kingdom despite the public seemingly preferring single-party government.² Indeed, one of the clear public concerns with the 2010–2015 coalition government was that the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats negotiated a series of policy agreements after the election; therefore, the public did not “vote for” the policies the coalition agreed.

THE PARTY AND ELECTORAL SYSTEMS

The British party system has been described variously as a two-party system and as a two- and-one-half-party system. Historically, the dominant parties were the Tories (antecedents of today’s Conservatives) and the Liberals, both of which emerged out of legislative factions dating from the seventeenth century. The Tories, who were identified with the more privileged sectors of society, committed themselves to the defense of existing institutions and policies, including the Crown and church at home and imperialism abroad. They also affirmed the need for a strong state, the primacy of “law and order,” the sanctity of private property, and an evolutionary program of social change. The Liberals, by contrast, represented primarily the middle classes and positioned themselves ideologically as a party advocating free trade, home rule in Ireland, and social reform. The failure of the Liberals to accommodate the political and economic demands of Great Britain’s rapidly growing class of industrial workers during the latter part of the nineteenth century prompted

a coalition of trade union leaders, socialists, and more idealistic Fabians to form the Labour Party in 1900 as an extraparliamentary organization dedicated to a more radical course of reform. By the 1920s, the Labour Party had displaced the Liberals as Great Britain's other large party.

Since that time, the United Kingdom has retained a predominantly two-party system in which ideological and regional "third parties" play an important role in the political process. Today, the two major parties in the United Kingdom remain the Labour Party and the Conservative (Tory) Party. They are national parties in every sense of the term and almost always run candidates in virtually every parliamentary constituency in Great Britain, except the Speaker's.

The Liberal Democrats, a party that tends to be more successful on the local, rather than national, level, were formed out of two parties, the original Liberals and the Social Democrats, a moderate faction that broke away from the Labour Party in the early 1980s. The two parties formed the Liberal–Social Democratic Alliance based on their joint opposition to the radicalization of both Labour and the Conservatives, and they pledged not to nominate candidates against each other in national elections.³ In 1987, the Alliance won twenty-two seats scattered from the Shetlands to Cornwall, with most of its support concentrated in Scotland and Wales. After that election, the party divided again, eliminating, at least in the short run, any real potential this centrist grouping had of presenting an electoral alternative to the free market neoliberalism of the Conservatives and the collectivism of the Labour Party. In 1988, the parties again merged as the Liberal Democrats and, despite a few years of troubled consolidation, have performed well in elections between 1992 and 2010. In 1997, they won 17.2 percent of the popular vote and forty-six seats (an increase of twenty-six from the previous election). By 2005, the Liberal Democrats had expanded their support, winning sixty-two seats on a vote share of about 22 percent.⁴ The height of their success came with the 2010 election that catapulted the Liberal Democrats into a coalition government with the Conservatives with just 23 percent of the vote and fifty-seven seats—a loss of five seats. The compromises the Liberal Democrats made during their time in coalition, especially over university tuition fee increases, cost them support, resulted in the crash of their general election vote (down to just 7.9 percent) and seats (to just eight) shares in 2015. While their membership numbers seem to have recovered following the 2016 Brexit vote, as of 2019, the party has yet to rebuild its parliamentary representation beyond about a dozen seats.

The Scottish National Party (SNP) and Plaid Cymru, the Welsh national party, are the two main nationalist parties in the United Kingdom that regularly win parliamentary seats (a third nationalist party, Sinn Fein, is discussed later in this section). Both parties are committed to campaigning for independent Scottish and Welsh states, respectively. First winning seats at Westminster in the 1960s, the parties have seen their electoral fortunes fluctuate since they first won seats in Parliament. With the UK General Election in 2019 and the Scottish Parliament election in 2021, The Scottish National Party cemented its position as the largest party in Scotland, winning forty-eight of Scotland's fifty-nine Westminster seats (with 45 percent of the Scottish vote) in 2019 and sixty-four (of 129) seats in the Scottish Parliament on 47 percent of the constituency vote in 2021. Plaid Cymru has not developed a similar dominance in Wales, having won four (of forty) Welsh Westminster seats on 10 percent of the Welsh vote in 2019 and twelve seats (of 60) on 20 percent of the constituency vote in the 2021 Welsh Senedd election. This result placed Plaid as the third largest party in the Welsh chamber, behind Labour and the Conservatives.

The partisan politics of Northern Ireland reflect the troubled history of that nation and the religious and nationalist cleavages that divide the population. In 2019, four political parties split Northern Ireland's eighteen Westminster seats. The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) is a Protestant party with an intense dedication to the continuing union of Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom. Two of the other parties winning seats in Northern Ireland are primarily Roman Catholic, and they would like to unite Northern Ireland with the Republic of Ireland to its south. The Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) is overwhelmingly Catholic and would like to unite all of Ireland as a single, socialist society. Despite its sectarian appeal, the SDLP is a secular (constitutional nationalist) organization. The other Catholic party is Sinn Féin, once regarded as the political arm of the Irish Republican Army (IRA). Sinn Féin is committed to the unification of Ireland. While the DUP was the largest single party, with 8 seats, following the 2019 general election, for the first time the nationalist parties won more seats combined (Sinn Féin, seven, and SDLP, two) than the unionists. The Alliance Party, a nonsectarian party seeking to "heal the divisions" in Northern Ireland by having the nationalists and unionists find common ground, won one seat in Westminster.

General elections in the United Kingdom are held under a single-member district, plurality system. Each constituency elects a single representative (member of Parliament [MP]), and all that is required for election is a plurality—that is, the individual with the most votes wins whether receiving a majority or not. Such a system has the advantage of usually producing majorities for Parliament, and although no British party since 1945 has won a majority of the popular votes, parliamentary majorities have been produced by each election except those in February 1974, 2010, and 2017. Although some are popular with the broad national electorate, the smaller parties are severely disadvantaged by this electoral system. Partly for that reason, the Liberal Democrats have advocated proportional representation (PR) as a more equitable means of selecting MPs. Because the Liberal Democrat vote is spread widely across the United Kingdom, that party is more disadvantaged by the current system than are the nationalist parties whose votes are more concentrated. In 2010, for instance, they received 8.8 percent of the seats with 23 percent of the vote. In contrast, in 2010, the Conservatives won 47 percent of the seats with 36 percent of the vote, and Labour won about 40 percent of the seats in Westminster with just 29 percent of the popular vote. As part of the coalition agreement struck between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, the Conservatives agreed to put forward a referendum on switching to the nonproportional alternative vote (AV) system.⁵ That referendum went to the British electorate in 2011, with a decisive 68 percent of voters rejecting the change.

Despite the majority of the public in favor of retaining first-past-the-post elections for Westminster, in other elections the United Kingdom is beginning to experiment with PR. Members of the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh parliament and London Assembly are elected using a mixed-member proportional system that elects a portion of the parliamentarians using single-member districts and the rest through a closed-list proportional system. The Northern Ireland Assembly that sprang from the Good Friday agreement is elected entirely by means of the single transferable vote system, the same system used in the Republic of Ireland. The single transferable vote is also used for Scottish local council elections. Finally, the mayor of London, other English and Welsh mayors, and Police & Crime Commissioners are elected using a supplementary

vote system. These are interesting experiments, but as long as the existing Westminster electoral system continues to benefit the parties in power, it is unlikely to be changed.

One aspect of the British electoral system that differentiates it from the U.S. system and most European systems is the importance of by-elections. If a seat becomes vacant during the life of a Parliament, an interim election (called a by-election) is held to fill the seat. As well as ensuring full membership of the House of Commons, by-elections are seen as something of an ongoing vote of confidence in the sitting government by the people, and poor electoral performance can be quite embarrassing—and even end a Prime Minister’s career. Gordon Brown’s government, for example, was plagued by a series of by-election defeats in Norwich North, Glenrothes, and Glasgow East, among others. By-elections were also used as gauges of Margaret Thatcher’s electoral strength, as well as that of the Liberal–Social Democratic Party Alliance, and they became one component of the evidence used in deciding when to call the 1987 election. By-elections also can lead to the loss of a parliamentary majority, as occurred in Parliaments sitting between October 1974 and 1979 and 1992 to 1997.

Local council elections, often referred to as “second-order” elections in that voters tend to see them as less important than “first-order,” parliamentary elections, are similar barometers of public opinion toward the government in power. The Conservatives’ substantial losses across Britain, notably in Scotland, Wales, and London, in the May 2022 local council elections resulted in additional pressure for Prime Minister Boris Johnson, already facing calls to resign following several high-profile scandals, to “consider his position” and step down. By-elections and the second-order local elections provide opportunities for the electorate to send messages to sitting governments as well as cast protest votes between general elections. Though they may be able to ride out these waves of electoral protest, often by-election and second-order losses pile additional pressure on already troubled or beleaguered governments.

THE TWO MAJOR PARTIES

Although many voters may choose other parties, only two parties—Labour and Conservative—can usually be expected to form a UK government, even if these governments may depend on the explicit or implicit support of smaller parties, as did the Conservative Party in May 2010 and in 2017, when it lost its overall majority and relied on the support of the Democratic Unionist Party. In 2010, when it became clear on the evening of the election count that the Conservatives would not win an outright majority, speculation ensued that either Brown’s sitting Labour government would attempt to cobble together a coalition of all the small parties or that the Conservatives might try to form a minority government. Instead, David Cameron, the leader of the Conservatives, and Nick Clegg, the leader of the Liberal Democrats, agreed to a power-sharing coalition government with the Liberal Democrats having a significant but clearly junior role in the government.

A great deal divides the two major parties in Great Britain, but in many ways they are similar. Both are essentially elite, or caucus, parties in that, compared with their electoral strength, they have a relatively small mass membership. The parties are also aggregative—both cover a range of social and political opinion and consequently have internal ideological divisions as well as disagreements with the other party. Finally, compared with decentralized American parties,

both are relatively centralized and disciplined, although not so easy to discipline as some continental parties in which parliament members lack direct links with constituencies.

THE LABOUR PARTY

The roots of the British Labour Party lie in the Industrial Revolution. The Labour Party is the principal representative of the working class in British politics, although its support is broader than just industrial labor. Indeed, all elections since the 1997 elections demonstrated that the Labour Party has substantial appeal among almost all segments of society, but especially those associated with urban areas. Over its history, the Labour Party has, to varying degrees, professed socialism as a major portion of its program, but it is an aggregative party that includes many supporters who do not accept socialism as the goal of the party or society. While the centrist “New Labour,” wing of the party has been muted in speaking about socialism, the leftist “Momentum” movement, which came to prominence with Jeremy Corbyn’s successful bid to become Labour leader in 2015, advocates for the adoption of socialist candidates and policies within the Labour party.

Ideological cleavages within the Labour Party are highly visible and intense. For much of the 1980s, intraparty factionalism prevented the party from being a viable competitor to the Conservatives. In response, party leader Neil Kinnock sought to create a more moderate image and heal some of the strife within the party. In the early 1990s, the Labour Party dropped its campaign pledge of unilateral nuclear disarmament so it might appear stronger in foreign affairs, and it moderated its stances on the renationalization of privatized industries, as well as its earlier criticism of the European Union. In other words, it has behaved like a party in a two-party system should—seeking the electoral center. Tony Blair, the Labour Party’s leader from 1994 to 2007, moved the party even more to the right on traditional class issues. Following his urging, in 1995, the party dropped its commitment to Clause Four of the party’s constitution of 1918 and with that a commitment to government ownership of principal means of production and distribution.⁶ Blair also sought to broaden the appeal of the party to women and minorities. The party pledged to nominate female candidates for half of the safe Labour and winnable marginal seats in the 1997 election.⁷

The organization of the Labour Party outside Parliament becomes clearer once one understands the role that labor unions have traditionally played in the party. The British Labour Party originally was an alliance of trade unions and socialist organizations, with unions traditionally the dominant element in that coalition. Currently, many party members and the majority of the party’s financial base come from the labor movement. Therefore, traditionally when one spoke of the membership of the Labour Party, one was really speaking of the unions. That said, the power of the unions with the Labour party has somewhat diminished as the voting strength of the unions in the annual party conference has been reduced by changes in the party constitution and the membership base has broadly expanded. Individual party members, through socialist organizations and constituency parties, now have influence that is much greater than their numerical strength. Their power was increased by a change in the party’s voting system in 2015 involving the election of the party leader through a one-person-one-vote system, with both Labour party members and members of affiliated trade unions (who have opted-in to the party)

being eligible to vote. Labour members of parliament also have a single vote each in the election, meaning they could be outvoted by the broad party membership.⁸

The National Executive Committee (NEC) of the Labour Party supervises party operations outside Parliament and, to an increasing extent, manages the whole party. Of the 39 members of this committee, 13 are direct representatives of labor unions and nine represent the constituency parties. The remaining members are the leader and deputy leader of the party, the treasurer (who is elected by the annual party conference), three members of the Labour parliamentary party, three front bench representatives, two Labour councilors, and members representing various groups such as Young Labour, BAME (Black and Minority Ethnic) Labour, disabled members, etc. Because of major voices in the NEC and the annual conference that belong to those other than elective politicians, the actions of the Labour NEC are less predictable and manageable than those of the Conservative Party's executive committee. This instability is especially true when the Labour Party is the opposition party and the leader lacks the power of office. The bureaucratic arm of the party is the Labour Party secretary and his or her staff. As noted, the party bureaucracy is closely controlled by the NEC. This control extends to having subcommittees of the NEC supervise various sections of the party organization.

The Labour Party has regional organizations, but these organizations do not have the degree of importance of their equivalents in the Conservative Party. Until the 1980 changes in the party's structure, Labour's constituency parties lacked even the autonomy granted to their equivalents in the Conservative Party. These constituency parties now have the right to reselect their candidates before each election, removing that power from the central party.

The power of the unions in the Labour Party's annual conference has markedly declined. Of the approximately 4,000 participants in these autumn affairs, more delegates represent constituency parties than unions. Voting is not based on the number of delegates present, however, but on the number of dues-paying party members represented by those present. Unions control about 50 percent of the votes in conference, down from around 80 percent in the 1980s and 1990s.

At times, the annual conference has attempted to force its views on the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP). The formal statements of the party do, in fact, indicate that the annual conference has the right to make binding policy decisions for the PLP, but party leaders from the inception of the party have been unwilling to be controlled by policy pronouncements of those out of office, especially when there is a Labour government. The tension arises from the fact that Labour began as a movement that created a parliamentary party to serve its interests, so there is a greater tradition of mass party control than in the Conservative Party, which began as a faction in Parliament.

Following Labour's defeat in the 1992 election, its leader, Neil Kinnock, resigned and was replaced by John Smith. Smith's untimely death soon after his selection led to the selection of Tony Blair, a young, energetic, and reformist leader for the Labour Party.⁹ Blair's subsequent success in transforming Labour into a more centrist New Labour party, embracing neoliberal economic and social policies while distancing itself from organized labor was a principal factor contributing to Labour's landslide electoral victories in 1997 and 2001. With 44.4 percent of the popular vote in 1997 (compared with 34.4 percent five years earlier), Labour won 419 seats to displace the Conservatives as Britain's governing party for the first time since 1979. Popular support declined marginally in the June 2001 election to 42.2 percent, largely because of a low voter turnout, but

with 413 MPs, the Labour Party easily won reelection for a second full term. Prime Minister Blair promptly affirmed his determination to act on the party's campaign promises to improve public services, including education and health care. Blair's electoral successes in 1997 and 2001 then fell victim to the Labour government's decision to join the U.S.-led campaign that invaded Iraq in 2003. This issue deeply divided the country and Blair's party. The election of 2005 returned a weakened Labour government to power with a majority of sixty-six seats (the previous winning Labour majorities were 179 in 1997 and 167 in 2001). Labour lost forty-seven seats and won only 35.3 percent of the vote. With the electoral success of high-profile antiwar activists such as George Galloway, who won a constituency in London, it appeared that Labour and Blair were being widely chastised. After the election, Blair acknowledged that Iraq had been a "deeply divisive" issue and that the public had sent a message to which, he said, "I have listened and I have learned."¹⁰ Despite the importance attributed by the media and prominent politicians to Iraq in influencing the 2005 British vote, postmortem analyses of the election indicate that the Blair government's economic performance and public service delivery, as well as evaluations of the party leaders, were the most significant factors leading to the election outcome.¹¹ Apparently, the influence of the Iraq War on the election of 2005 was indirect, operating through leadership evaluations.

Blair lasted as prime minister until June 2007, when his public support had so eroded that he stepped down, turning over the keys to Number 10 Downing Street to Gordon Brown, the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Given the nature of parliamentary democracy in the United Kingdom, where the majority party selects the prime minister, Blair's relinquishing the premiership to Brown did not require a national election. In some ways, however, Brown's "coronation" as prime minister, without a national electoral mandate, served to undermine his credibility and political capital, setting the stage for Labour's defeat in 2010. During its time in opposition, Labour has struggled finding its political feet, swinging from the centrist Brown and Ed Miliband (2010–2015) leaderships, to a period with committed leftist socialist Jeremy Corbyn as leader (2015–2020) and back again to centrist Sir Keir Starmer (2020–).

THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY

The Conservative Party has its roots in the political conflicts of the eighteenth century, and to some degree, those roots produce conflicts within the emerging character of the Conservative Party today. In the late 1980s, the majority of adherents to the Conservative Party felt akin to conservative parties in Europe and North America, resisting government encroachments into the affairs of individuals. Traditionally, however, the "Old" Conservative Party advocated a strong central government, in part because of an elitist perception that the poor and less educated cannot be counted on to make proper decisions on their own and need guidance by their "betters."¹²

"Thatcherite Conservatives," who came to prominence in the 1980s under Prime Minister Thatcher, tend to advocate free-market principles, including greater freedom for individual and business activities, and consequently they advocate a diminished role for government in economic and social life. However, David Cameron's Conservative Party that came to power after thirteen years in opposition under a coalition government (shared with the Liberal Democrats) in 2010 had moved to a somewhat more centrist position. Though saying he strongly admired

Thatcher, Cameron sought to rebrand the Conservatives, emphasizing green issues and social mobility to make the party more appealing to younger and more centrist voters. Prime Ministers Theresa May (2016–2019) and Boris Johnson (2019–2022) both also tipped their hats to Thatcherism, but declared themselves to be “one nation conservatives,” a phrase coined by Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli (1874–1880) in recognition of a hierarchical society in which those at the top have a moral obligation to look after those at the bottom. Coming to power in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and with an unsettled relationship with the European Union, a series of scandals under Boris Johnson and a worsening economic, “cost of living crisis,” Prime Minister Elizabeth (Liz) Truss (2022) invoked Thatcher’s free market principles, including substantial cuts in taxes and reductions in bureaucratic regulations. However, the economic fallout from her proposals led to her resignation on her forty-ninth day in office, marking her as the shortest serving prime minister. The Conservative Party again faced the challenge of selecting a new prime minister without resorting to a national, general election. Rishi Sunak, a former Chancellor of the Exchequer who had lost his previous attempt to serve as PM to Liz Truss, was elected by Conservative Party members to serve as the Conservative Party leader and prime minister, promising a return to “integrity, professionalism and accountability” in politics.¹³



Rishi Sunak meeting King Charles for invitation to form a government.

Aaron Chown - WPA Pool/Getty Image

The Conservative Party is an elite party, both in terms of the socioeconomic characteristics of the bulk of its adherents and in terms of the relationship between party members and the party’s voting strength. As with all of the parties, the number of British citizens voting for the Conservative Party is many times greater than its formal membership. The party is now thought to have some approximately 172,000 members (roughly 0.4 percent of the British electorate), which is a substantial decline from just a few decades ago.¹⁴ While it remains a relatively small mass organization, its ability to organize voters and to manage national campaigns

remains formidable. The elitism of the party is further typified by the domination of the party by the parliamentary party and perhaps even more by the leader. The party does have some democratic structures which have been expanded in recent years, but in practice a small leadership group tends to be dominant.

The Conservative Party outside Parliament has two major components. The first is a mass organization headed by the National Conservative Convention (NCC) in England and Wales; there are similar bodies in Scotland and Northern Ireland. The governing body of the NCC is its Party Board, which has twenty members.

The territorial organization of the Conservative Party is similar to the national organization. Within each of the provincial area councils, the party is organized by constituencies, each with a leadership structure similar to that of the national party. The constituencies are also served by agents responsible for the administrative functions of the party (this is also true of the Labour Party). The constituency parties are important, because it is at this level that funds are raised and local campaigning is managed. Also, the constituency must select their parliamentary candidates from a list approved by the central party. Over time, constituency parties have grown more assertive and are now willing to deselect even sitting MPs as their candidates or to retain candidates opposed by the party leadership. That said, the Conservative Party is a highly centralized organization, where most power over day-to-day issues such as policymaking and strategy is in the hands of the party leader (especially when the party is in opposition). This led William Hague to observe during the 2010 coalition negotiations that “the Conservative Party is like an absolute monarchy, but this is qualified by regicide.”¹⁵

Assisting the local and national officers is the Conservative Campaign Headquarters (CCHQ), the second major component of the Conservative Party outside Parliament. This office, which is directed by the chair of the party organization, employs various professional workers, including those in the Conservative Research Department. The major officials in the CCHQ are appointed by the party leader, and it is from this direct connection with the party leadership that the CCHQ derives most of its authority. Indeed, this connection highlights the overriding fact that the Conservative Party is largely a party based on Parliament. A leader must pay attention to the mass members of the party, but the real control over a leader is exercised by the party in Parliament, not the mass membership.

The basis of Conservative Party organization in the House of Commons is the 1922 Committee, composed of all Conservative members of the Commons other than ministers when the party is in government. The 1922 Committee has exercised considerable power over Conservative leaders, as became apparent first during the push to remove Prime Minister Boris Johnson from office following a series of high-profile scandals, then the pressure on Liz Truss to resign following her failed attempt to reshape the UK budget. The leader of the Conservative Party does not have to stand for annual election but can be challenged every year and, indeed the Conservative parliamentary party has exercised its ability to remove leaders on several occasions. Serving as prime minister for more than a decade and having molded the party in her own image did not prevent Thatcher from being removed from office when a majority of Conservatives in the House of Commons considered her policies to be poorly conceived and to be leading them toward electoral problems.

In addition to exercising control over the leadership, another function of the party in Parliament is to maintain the voting discipline of the party members. The Conservative Party

leadership can “deny the whip” (expel a member), but it does so only rarely. Until the 1990s, the Conservative Party was not beset with the deep internal splits that plagued the Labour Party, and the Conservatives found it less necessary to employ the available sanctions. However, conflicts over the United Kingdom leaving the European Union brought on by the 2016 Brexit referendum have raised tensions within the party. Rather exceptionally, in 2019, twenty-one Conservative MPs had the whip removed after they voted against the government in favor of MPs asserting control to limit the possibility of there being a no-deal Brexit agreement.¹⁶ By contrast, some Conservative members have resigned the whip, and one conservative MP “crossed the aisle” to Labour in 2007, when Gordon Brown took over as leader of the Labour Party. In 2019, Amber Rudd, then Work and Pensions Secretary, resigned the whip following the sacking of the twenty-one Conservative MPs.¹⁷

While selection of party leader was traditionally left almost entirely to the parliamentary party, in 1998, the party broadened the selection procedure by establishing a two-stage process that largely remains in place. First, the parliamentary MPs taking the Conservative whip use a series of ballots to select their top two candidates for the leader position. Then an electoral college consisting of all party members elects the party leader from these two candidates. In September 2001, a majority of 61 percent of the party’s 318,000 eligible members utilized the procedure to elect Iain Duncan Smith—an erstwhile skeptic of European integration—over Kenneth Clarke, a former chancellor of the exchequer who had advocated closer ties with the European Union. By 2003, a lack of confidence in Duncan Smith’s leadership had led to his ouster through a ballot of Conservative MPs. To avoid a split in the party, only one candidate, Michael Howard, was nominated to replace Duncan Smith. After the parliamentary elections in 2005, Howard announced that he would step down as leader, thereby sparking a contest between the moderate and “euro-skeptic” wings of the party for the leadership position. A hard-fought four-way contest ensued, with David Cameron, the self-described “modern compassionate conservative,” the clear winner.

Cameron served as Conservative Party leader from 2005 to 2016, a period of substantial change in British politics, with the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum and the highly fractious 2016 “Brexit” referendum, which led to the United Kingdom leaving the European Union. With the announcement on 24 June 2016 that 52 percent of the British had voted in favor of the United Kingdom leaving the European Union, a position that Cameron opposed, he resigned, leaving a divided Conservative party to select a new leader (and Prime Minister). Using the method of internal party selection, the Conservatives selected Theresa May to succeed Cameron as Prime Minister (although party members did not get to vote as the second candidate, Andrea Leadsom, withdrew before the end of the contest). In three years, May, too, resigned following a series of contentious votes on Brexit legislation in the House of Commons. May was replaced by Boris Johnson, also selected through the internal Conservative party process, rather than through contesting a general election. A series of scandals and accusations of ethical lapses during the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a mass resignation of members of Johnson’s cabinet and forced his resignation in 2022. This sparked another internal party contest to become leader of the Conservative party and Prime Minister. After a long, divisive, and hard-fought campaign throughout the summer of 2022, Liz Truss was elected by members of the Conservative party as the third woman to serve as UK Prime Minister. Yet her premiership lasted just 49 days and she was replaced by yet another Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, selected using the Conservative Party’s internal process. From 2016 to 2022, the Conservative party

held four separate internal contests to select the nation's Prime Minister, each contest putting on public display the intra-party moderate and "euro-skeptic" divisions and factions.

These crucial divisions within the party over domestic social and economic policy and, even deeper, Europe's and Great Britain's role in an expanding and ever more powerful European Union, however, were not a new phenomenon. Indeed, they were an important factor in the disastrous showing of the Conservatives in the 1997 election, when the party's share of the vote plummeted to 31.4 percent from 41.9 percent in 1992 and the number of Conservative MPs fell from 336 to 165. The Conservatives gained one seat in the June 2001 election, and despite using the hot-button issues of immigration, asylum seekers, and the proposed European constitution to chip away at Labour's parliamentary majority in the 2005 election, the Conservatives barely increased their share of the vote (32.3 percent) over the previous two contests. The 1997, 2001, and 2005 defeats prompted a change of party leadership and intense internal debates over fundamental policy issues. Cameron's initial approach was to remake the Conservative "brand," emphasizing more moderate social policies and promoting green issues and a more "compassionate conservatism" to attract younger, more socially moderate voters.

The 2010 election demonstrated that Cameron's strategy of policy moderation resonated with the British electorate, if not with the more conservative members of his party. In May 2010, the Conservative Party gained 97 seats to make it, with 307 seats, the largest single party in the House of Commons but not large enough to constitute a majority. However, the 2016 Brexit referendum exposed the festering divisions within the Conservative party over the United Kingdom's membership in the European Union. At the same time, the Conservative Party garnered a string of electoral victories (2017, 317 seats, or 48.8 percent of MPs; 2019, 365 seats, or 56.2 percent of MPs) only to be punctuated by internal party upheavals resulting in four different Conservative Prime Ministers within six years.

VOTING AND ELECTIONS

Elections are a crucial driving force of democratic politics. Or are they? Certainly, all conventional analyses of British politics assume that government policies are decided by the clash of political parties over issues. In like manner, voters are assumed to be both interested in politics and to make their choices among parties on the basis of issues. This section looks at the evidence about voter turnout and the reasons for voting choices and then asks a few pertinent questions about the role of elections in policy choice in the United Kingdom.

But first a look at several salient features of British elections is in order. Elections for the House of Commons are national in character, but, in fact, they are national elections conducted in individual constituencies. Although it is clear who will be prime minister should one party or the other win, only one constituency actually votes for the prospective prime minister—the constituency he or she will represent. Also, British constituencies are quite small compared with electoral districts in most Western countries. As of the 2019 election, the average English MP had an electorate of about 73,000 people, the average Scottish MP roughly 68,300 people, and the average Welsh MP about 57,700 people. By way of contrast, the average member of the National Assembly in France represents more than 110,000 people and the average legislator in the United States' House of Representatives about 760,000 people.

In addition to size differences, the expenses of constituency campaigning in Great Britain are regulated during certain periods so that a candidate in 2019 could not spend more than £8,700, plus either 9 pence per elector for rural constituencies and 6 pence per elector in urban constituencies from November 6 to December 16, 2021.¹⁸ Under the new spending limits that went into effect with the 2001 election, parties are limited to spending no more than £30,000 (\$39,000) per contested constituency during this period. These spending restrictions, combined with the short campaign period (usually six weeks or less) and the restrictions on purchasing broadcast media time other than for the limited party political broadcasts provided free on all networks, ensure that British campaigns are very different from those in the United States. An average major-party candidate contesting an election in an urban constituency of 93,000 people would be limited to spending no more than £14,280 (\$18,564) for the duration of the election campaign. When the expenditure allowed to the parties is added, the total on average that could be spent per candidate contesting an urban constituency of 93,000 is £44,280 (\$57,564). The average U.S. House candidate spends about \$890,000, and the average Senate candidate spends around \$4.8 million.¹⁹ These figures do not even include what the parties and other interests spend to support House and Senate candidates. Despite the concerns about the escalating party spending in British election campaigns, they remain relatively inexpensive.

A final difference is that, in Great Britain, the parties control the selection of candidates more centrally than American parties do, although this control has been softening over time. Partially in response to an expenses scandal and partly to fulfill Cameron's desire to attract new voters to the Conservative Party, in August 2009, the Conservatives held Britain's first open primary to select one constituency's parliamentary candidate. Voters in the Totnes constituency selected a physician with no political experience to replace the incumbent, Anthony Steen, who, at the outbreak of the expenses scandal, infamously accused voters of jealousy over his "very, very large" house.²⁰ This innovation in candidate selection, however, has not caught on in other parties and its use within the Conservative party has all but faded away. The traditional method of candidate selection, in which new prospective candidates have to be accepted by the constituency party, with the CCHQ exercising a role in preapproving slates of potential candidates in open seats, remains largely in place. Conservative candidates already sitting for a seat in Parliament are subject to a reselection process that largely tends to be a formality, whereas sitting Labour MPs face a much lower bar within their constituencies to be challenged with a reselection contest.²¹

VOTER TURNOUT

British citizens tend to vote more readily than American citizens, although not so readily as citizens in most other Western democracies. Turnout is also relatively evenly distributed across the country. As is true for most other countries, the abstainers are concentrated in the working class, although it is unclear exactly what impact this "differential turnout" between the social classes has on British election outcomes. In their foundational work on British electoral behavior, David Butler and Donald Stokes asserted that the difference in turnout among members of different social classes could influence election outcomes.²² More recently, Evans and Tilley have shown that overtime working class people have increasingly become election abstainers in Britain.²³ Survey analysts, however, have noted that the individual-level data seem to indicate

that sources of differential turnout between members of different social classes may vary with the context of each election. Therefore, it is difficult to come up with any definitive statement of how working-class or middle-class abstainers may influence electoral outcomes in general and over time.²⁴ Survey data have also shown that people who own their own homes, married people, individuals with higher levels of educational attainment, and older people tend to vote at higher rates—a similar pattern to that found in other established democracies.²⁵

Much was made over the drop in turnout in the 2001 election. From 1945 to 1997, the average British voter turnout was 76.3 percent, with a high of 83.9 percent in 1950 and a low of 71.4 percent in 1997. In 2001, voter turnout fell to 59.4 percent. Why the drop in 2001? Political pundits claimed that either voter apathy or distrust of elected officials was the likely explanation. But the survey evidence reveals a somewhat different story. Evidence from the British Election Study shows that people were dissatisfied enough with the performance of Labour to stay home but not enough to feel inclined to vote (heavily) for the opposition. Further, the general impression seemed to be that the election was a foregone conclusion, so interest in the election was somewhat lower than in previous years.²⁶ From 2001, turnout gradually increased in 2005 (61.4 percent), 2010 (65.1 percent), and 2015 (66.2 percent). With the highly divisive Brexit referendum held in 2016, turnout in the following year's election, 2017, hit 68.8 percent, before sliding back a bit in 2019 to 67.3 percent.²⁷

PARTISAN CHOICE BY VOTERS

As well as deciding whether to vote, a voter must decide for whom to vote. From the substantial research devoted to determinants of the partisan choice of voters, four interacting factors have emerged: social class, regional patterns of residence, demography, and issues. Members of the social classes are not evenly spread across the country; more working-class voters live in Scotland, Wales, and the industrial north and Midlands of England, and more middle- and upper-class voters live in the southeast or southwest of England. The issues to which citizens are assumed to respond also have different impacts on members of different social classes, on different ethnic and age groups, and on residents of different regions of the country.

Social Class

The pioneering studies of Butler and Stokes identified social class as an important factor in explaining voting in Great Britain. As noted earlier, in the past much of British politics has been conceptualized in class terms. And although there is strong evidence that class remains a predictor of voting decisions, there is also evidence that it is no longer as overwhelming as often believed.²⁸ Indeed, Harold Clarke and his colleagues have demonstrated that the relationship between social class and voting behavior has weakened over time to the extent that “at the end of the twentieth century, class had come to play a very limited role in determining the voting preferences of the British electorate.”²⁹ In general, the importance of social class as a predictor of party support has declined in recent elections as other divisions, such as the Brexit debate, and demographic shifts have come to dominate British politics.

That said, some elements of the traditional class divide remain. Not surprisingly, members of labor unions are substantially more likely to vote Labour than are members of the working

class as a whole. According to Rob Ford and his colleagues, in the 2019 election, Labour's vote was five percentage points higher than the Conservatives' amongst working-age, working-class voters.³⁰ However, looking back to 1997, Labour held about a 20 percent advantage amongst working class voters. The Labour party still has a slight advantage amongst those people holding traditional "working class" jobs. At the same time, the number of union members is now substantially less than half of what it was in the 1980s and working-class salaries have increased, meaning that the traditional pool of Labour voters is both shrinking and diversifying. Social class, therefore, is not as strong of a predictor of the Labour vote as it once was.

Patterns of Residence

Where people live seems to affect their voting behavior and the patterns in the different regions of the United Kingdom seem to be moving further apart, rather than in concert, the further we are from the devolution settlements that established the regional parliaments. In Scotland, for instance, the entire party system is different from that in England (and a lesser extent, Wales) given that the Scottish National Party (SNP) has been politically dominant since their unexpected 2011 electoral breakthrough, securing an outright majority in the Scottish Parliament. "North of the Border," that is north of the traditional border between Scotland and England, the SNP has been a political force as it has been able to comfortably rely on the support of the almost 50 percent of the public in favor of Scotland becoming an independent country, whilst the "Unionist Parties," the Conservatives, Labour, and the Liberal Democrats, actively compete for the vote of the other half of the population that supports Scotland remaining within the United Kingdom. In Scotland, a voter's view on the independence question is consistently one of the, if not *the*, strongest predictor of their vote.³¹ Given that for many years Labour could reliably count on Scots to give it their vote, especially in the Westminster constituencies, the dominance of the SNP has been one of the major factors that have kept its leaders out of No. 10 Downing Street.

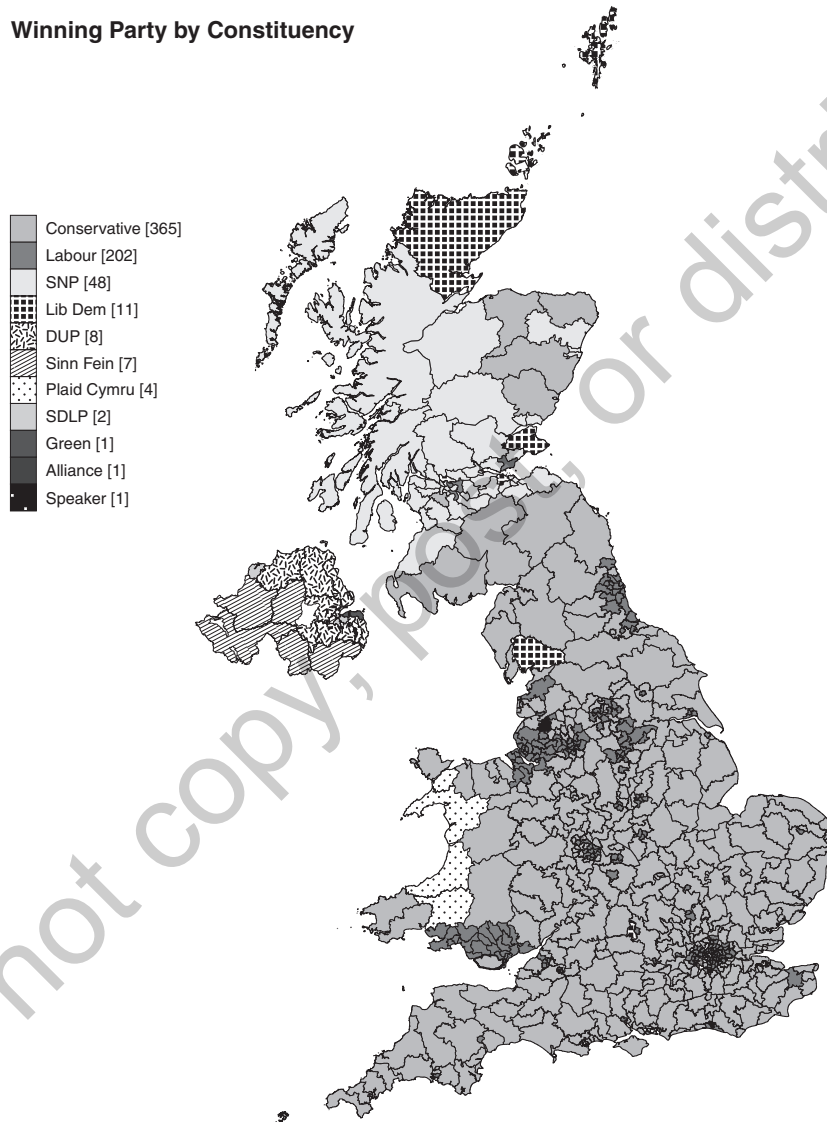
Wales also has its own internal political dynamics with the Welsh nationalist party, Plaid Cymru, distorting the political coalitions one would find in England. That said, Plaid Cymru, thus far, has not become the political force that the SNP has been in Scotland, largely because a far smaller percentage of the Welsh electorate favors independence from the United Kingdom. Plaid Cymru, for instance, won just 10 percent of the 2019 general election vote in Wales, compared to the Conservatives' 36 percent and Labour's 41 percent.³²

In Northern Ireland, the historic sectarian/religious divisions combined with the nationalist/republican debates over the nation's status within the United Kingdom have led to a fractious party system that, in many ways, continues to reflect the social, political, and religious divisions within the nation. Indeed, the parties that we find in the other nations within the United Kingdom hardly exist in the same name or form in Northern Ireland and neither the Conservatives, Labour, nor the Liberal Democrats tend to run candidates in Northern Ireland's elections, instead ceding that political space to the Northern Irish parties.

Traditionally, prior to the 2016 Brexit referendum, the expectation was that while the Conservatives would do well in the South and East of England, Labour held a "Red Wall" in the Midlands and North of England that the Conservatives simply could not breach. Brexit, however, has seemed to partly reshape these traditional political alignments. Indeed, in 2019,

the Conservatives built their 80-seat parliamentary majority (the highest since the late 1980s) by flipping many of these historic “Red Wall” seats, often overturning what had previously been large Labour leads. At the same time, while the Conservatives surged in Red Wall seats that largely supported leaving the European Union, it has fallen in other areas, such as London, which predominantly voted to remain within the EU.³³

Winning Party by Constituency



Post-2017 Election Constituency in the United Kingdom

Source: Uberol, E., Baker, C., Cracknell, R., Allen, G., Roberts, N., Barton, C., Sturge, G., Danechi, S., Harker, R., Bolton, P., McInnes, R., Watson, C., Dempsey, N., & Audickas, L. [2020, January 28]. General Election 2019: Results and Analysis, 2nd ed. Briefing paper Number CBP 8749. UK Parliament House of Commons Library. Retrieved September 5, 2023, from www.parliament.uk/commons-library/intranet.parliament.uk/commons-library Contains Parliamentary information licensed under the Open Parliament Licence v3.0.

Demography

Voters with different fundamental demographic characteristics also appear to behave differently. Women have traditionally tended to support the Conservative Party more than men, although in recent years this gender gap seems to have dissipated or even, according to some survey analyses, flipped.³⁴ The evidence of voting by age group is even less comforting to the Conservative Party. The relationship between age and voting Conservative is clear—the older the voter, the more likely he or she is to vote Conservative. The 2019 election presented the generational divide in stark contrast with Labour clearly leading amongst the under 35s while the Conservatives commanded the vote of the 65 and overs. However, given the difference in turnout between these two groups, there were nearly twice as many over 65s than under 35s in the people showing up at the polls on election day, giving a clear advantage to the Conservatives.³⁵ The education divide also increased in the 2019 election with Labour attracting the vote of university graduates, while the Conservatives fared especially well with people with intermediate or lower educational qualifications. Indeed, some surveys showed that the Conservatives swept around 59 percent of the vote from those with no educational qualifications—and, perhaps not surprisingly, this was a group that disproportionately voted for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union in the Brexit referendum.³⁶

Race and ethnicity are important issues for voting in Great Britain, where the minority population is growing. In 2019, Labour secured a 44 percent lead amongst Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) voters, while the Conservatives had a 19 percent lead amongst White voters. That said, about 65 members of parliament elected in 2019 (or 10 percent of the House of Commons) were from a BME background, an increase from the 52 elected in 2017. And while Liz Truss appointed the most racially (but not socially) diverse cabinet the United Kingdom has seen so far, this was reversed in Rishi Sunak's cabinet appointments, which saw a reduction in the number of women and people with racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds serving as ministers.

Issues

One assumption of democracy is that voters respond to parties and candidates on the basis of the issues. British parties are at once centrifugal and centripetal. They express social differences more clearly than do U.S. parties, but they have also tended to move close enough to the political center to disguise some of their potential policy differences in order to gain votes. In many ways, elections have largely been about government performance in service delivery, rather than large ideological clashes.³⁷

Within the parties, however, disagreement on the issues can be substantial. Both parties have suffered pronounced internal divisions over Brexit. Within the Conservatives, these divisions were substantial enough that they led to the downfall of Theresa May as prime minister and, at times, significantly constrained the government under Boris Johnson, especially over the role of Northern Ireland in the Brexit negotiations. It is reasonable to expect that the issues surrounding the relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union will dominate politics for some time to come, with festering cleavages within and across the political spectrum.

PRESSURE GROUPS AND CORPORATISM

From the 1960s through the 1970s, there was, in Great Britain, like in most industrialized countries, a movement toward “corporatism” in which interest groups were granted something approaching official status as generators of demands for policies and implementers of them once adopted. During this period, Conservative and Labour governments regularly met and consulted closely with pressure and industry groups when formulating policies. Despite Thatcherism in the 1980s marking a shift away from corporatism and the regular consulting of pressure groups, organized interests are still important in policymaking. The role of interest groups in British policy is rarely acknowledged officially—the doctrine of parliamentary supremacy is still invoked—but in practice much public policy is influenced, or even determined, by such groups.

The policies made in conjunction with pressure groups tend to be made through stable patterns of interaction between civil servants and pressure group leaders and through institutionalized processes of advice for the ministries. Changes in government, therefore, would not substantially influence the basic dynamics of policymaking as civil servants remain in post even when ministers change. In Great Britain, interest groups may not be as closely linked to policymaking as in Germany or Sweden, but the connections between government and groups are close and enduring.

MAJOR INTEREST GROUPS

The various interest groups that affect British policymaking range from small pressure groups with narrow and largely noneconomic concerns, such as environmental groups and peace activists, to large, influential interest groups that seek to have their economic interests served through the policy process. The most obvious example of an economic group is the labor unions, although business and agriculture are also highly organized and politically effective. The clout exercised by the large economic groups is substantial, but small pressure groups also have been known to exercise substantial influence over policy.

Labor Unions

Among the largest and most influential the interest groups, trade unions represent about 23 percent of the total labor force.³⁸ Most of the unions are organized into one national federation, the Trades Union Congress (TUC). The Labour Party is directly linked to the TUC, which gained a reputation as one of the world’s most vociferous labor movements because of the large number of strikes called in Great Britain in the 1960s and 1970s. This reputation continues today, with regular references to the 1978–79 “Winter of Discontent” appearing in the media. Unions were once a major counterforce to the power of government, and British elections were fought over whether the unions or the government actually ran the country, with ambiguous results. Indeed, the political power of the unions, combined with the threat of industrial action by their members, made them a formidable political influence until their decline in membership in the 1980s and 1990s and their loss of political influence under Blair’s government (1997–2007).

Several factors help to explain the TUC's loss of some of its power. First, a declining proportion of the labor force belongs to unions. This decline in union membership has a generational component: from 1995 to 2021, trade union membership among UK employees fell 9.4 percent, though there are some signs that the rate of decline is slowing. Second is the shift from blue-collar to white-collar union membership. Although some white-collar unions have shown a willingness to use the strike weapon (e.g., those in the public sector), most are less militant than blue-collar workers. Third, the TUC has not been able to enforce any discipline on its own members. When the miners struck in 1985 and 1986, the TUC, after some negotiations with the government, urged them to return to work, but they refused. The failure of the miners to win concessions from the government weakened the trade union movement and those reverberations are still felt today. Union militancy can still produce widespread and disruptive strikes (e.g., transportation strikes), but a good deal of the power appears to be significantly diminished.

Business and Management

Unlike the single large labor movement, business and management groups are divided into several groups. The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) is the major management organization, but other general and specialized industrial groups speak for management as well. The linkage between management groups and the Conservative Party is not as close as that between the unions and the Labour Party, yet it certainly does exist. The Institute of Directors is another important group speaking for business. Although not really management per se, financial interests in the City of London also have a substantial influence over economic policy. Indeed, the City of London has an historic role within the House of Commons embodied in the office of "the remembrancer," who is the official charged with representing and overseeing the City of London's interests within the parliament.

Professional Organizations

The large number of professional organizations in the United Kingdom include groups such as the British Medical Association, Royal College of Nursing (a trade union affiliated with the TUC), and the British Association of Social Workers. These groups tend to be politically unaffiliated and traditionally more concerned with maintaining professional standards of practice than protecting the political and economic interests of their members. In the former role, professional groups frequently serve in a public capacity as the source and implementers of standards and as accrediting agencies for practitioners. Nevertheless, because the major employer of health care professionals and social service professionals is the government, these associations do press their own political interests. These interests are related to economic issues such as pay and working conditions, as well as social concerns such as the overall level of funding for and service in the National Health Service (NHS). The changes in the NHS imposed by both the Conservative and Labour governments provoked a good deal of opposition from these groups, including strikes and other industrial action.

Education is another service area dominated by the public sector. The major education associations in the United Kingdom are at once professional associations and unions. The National

Union of Teachers (NUT) and the University and College Union (UCU) are both affiliated with the TUC, and both have undertaken significant industrial action over the last several years. They are also vitally concerned with professional issues such as academic freedom and job security. The UCU has been particularly active since the 2010s over issues of pay, job security and pensions, attempting to ward off the effects of resource starvation and the increases in student numbers.

Pressure Groups

The huge number of pressure groups important to British politics almost covers the gamut of social issues. Three sets of groups have been particularly important: the peace movement groups, nature and environmental groups, and human rights groups.

The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) is the longest-lived of the peace movement groups; its first protests were in the 1950s against British nuclear weapons and U.S. weapons on British soil. The CND has been joined by other peace and antinuclear groups in establishing a permanent protest of the United Kingdom's Trident nuclear missile system outside the submarine base at Faslane, Scotland.



The Faslane Peace Camp brings together campaigners against the UK's nuclear deterrent.
 In Pictures Ltd./Corbis via Getty Images

With the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals at one end of a spectrum of tactics and radical anti-vivisection groups at the other, the nature and environmental movement has sought to protect wildlife in Great Britain and beyond.

Among the groups promoting human rights are Amnesty International, Oxfam, Save the Children, Shelter, and a host of other social service and international aid organizations. Partially

in preparation for a large-scale human rights demonstration targeting the 2005 G8 meeting at Gleneagles, Scotland, a grand coalition of these groups launched the Make Poverty History campaign calling for trade justice and forgiveness of developing country debt. The highlight of the campaign was the Live 8 concerts held in ten countries across the globe.

PATTERNS OF INFLUENCE

Like pressure groups in virtually all democratic systems, those in the United Kingdom have access to many different means of influencing government policies. Government in the United Kingdom is formally less receptive to interest groups than many other governments. It lacks institutionalized means of legitimating interest group involvement, and therefore the routes of exerting that influence may be somewhat more circuitous. The four major methods for pressure group influence in the United Kingdom are lobbying, direct sponsorship of MPs, direct representation on governmental bodies, and consultation with ministries.

Lobbying

Lobbying lawmakers is perhaps less common in the United Kingdom than in the United States, in part because party discipline makes it less likely to influence an MP's vote. Lobbying does occur, however, with the purpose of getting a voice, not a vote, in Parliament. MPs receive delegations from their constituencies and from nationally based organizations. Such delegations are particularly influential when a constituency has a single major economic interest. Most large companies, financial institutions, and pressure groups have their own in-house parliamentary affairs divisions or employ political consultants to represent their interests in Whitehall and Westminster. While most of these lobbying efforts are focused on the government and individual ministers, with the increasing willingness of MPs to act independently of their parties, more and more lobbyists target and contact individual backbench parliamentarians.³⁹

Interest groups have increased their lobbying activities over the last several decades. This increase—to some degree—reflects the greater contact between the public and private sectors initiated by the Thatcher government. It also reflects the growth in communications opportunities and activities in contemporary society, as well as society's greater demands for participation and involvement. British government has always been subject to political pressure, but the lobbying is now more overt. Despite living in a democracy of long standing, the British population has been relatively quiescent, but that cultural pattern is rapidly changing.

Direct Representation on Governmental Bodies

In a comparative sense, the British government has experienced less of the corporatist pattern of interest intermediation that has characterized many other European countries. Nevertheless, interest groups have had direct and official links with government in several ways. In some instances, interest groups have been directly represented in the advisory committees attached to ministries. In others, pressure groups have actually composed the majority of public organizations, such as the former National Economic Development Council (“Neddy”), which was

established under Conservative aegis in the early 1960s to promote economic growth through the cooperation of business, labor, and government. This experiment with corporatism was abolished in the late 1980s because of Thatcher's aversion to programs of this type. Finally, interest groups may actually administer programs for government, which the Law Society does with legal aid and agricultural groups do for some farm programs. In all of these cases, it is clear, first, that governments cannot readily ignore interest groups so closely tied to the public sector, and second, that many of the traditional ideas about the separation of state and society in Western democracies make little sense in the light of the greater use of private organizations for public purposes.

Consultation With Ministries

Less formally, government organizations frequently consult with interest groups. Interest groups have expert knowledge of their particular areas, and they are able to predict the reactions of their members to proposed policy changes. From such consultations, a government agency might not only improve the technical quality of its proposals but also gain legitimacy for them prior to enactment. In an era in which delegated legislation is increasingly important, a substantial amount of policy will be determined by consultations between civil servants and interest group members, with a consequent decline in the relative influence of political parties and elective politicians.

1.4

HOW IS POWER USED IN THE UK?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Explain possible scenarios in the implementation of new policies.
- List four key milestones in the process of policymaking in the British political system.
- Explain two key phases in budgeting for new policies.
- List the primary actors in the approval and implementation of new policy.

THIS CHAPTER ATTEMPTS TO BRING THE STRUCTURES OF BRITISH governance to life and to explain how actors and institutions produce public policies. It also demonstrates how the distinctive character of British government institutions affects the policies produced and how policies may differ from those emanating from other political systems, even those faced with similar policymaking problems. In particular, the majoritarian nature of British parliamentary democracy tends to produce somewhat stronger swings in policy than might be found in the consensual democracies, such as Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden.

This discussion considers two broad kinds of policymaking that must go on in any government. The first is making new policies, which occurs when government institutions decide to pursue new activities in the public sector or undertake their current activities in significantly different ways. This type of policymaking typically takes the form of a legislative process, although administrative actors are certainly involved in the propagation of new policy ideas and again during their implementation. The making of new policies tends to be overtly politicized, with parties and interest groups directly involved in the process. Another possibility, however, might be for government institutions to take no action at all on an issue. This, too, may be highly politicized.

The second major form of policymaking is simply maintaining the existing government policies and programs. This kind of policymaking is frequently less political in a strictly partisan sense. Instead, discussions regarding existing programs may involve bargaining among ministers and the managers with their financial overseers (in the United Kingdom, primarily the Treasury), as well as overt or covert competition among the existing programs. For the most part, therefore, this policymaking activity is not legislative but involves executive and administrative actors. Furthermore, government tends to have less of an opportunity to exercise discretion in most decisions in this category of policymaking, because the existing commitments of

government to citizens and organizations must be honored. This chapter will look at the British political system as it processes both kinds of policy decisions.

One important departure from the typical pattern of policymaking has been the greater emphasis given to reducing the size of the public sector. This emphasis means that very few programs escaped serious scrutiny when coming up for funding or reconsideration. The economic crisis that began in 2007¹ emphasized the need for such scrutiny, and the Conservative-led governments between 2010 up to Boris Johnson's government in 2019 adopted stringent "austerity budgets." Although there were assurances that support for services such as the National Health Service (NHS), international aid, and some aspects of education would be maintained, the reductions in public expenditures and, to a lesser degree, increases in taxation were dramatic. Boris Johnson's somewhat less ideological approach to governing, the intense focus on "getting Brexit done," and the massive impact of government spending to mitigate the worst economic effects of the coronavirus pandemic shifted attention away from austerity budgeting and to government investment to shore up the economy. However, the different approaches adopted by the two most recent prime ministers highlight policy divisions within the Conservative party. Upon becoming prime minister, Liz Truss signaled that she and her chancellor, Kwasi Kwarteng, planned to overturn "economic orthodoxy" and return to Thatcher-esque "supply side" economics, substantially cutting taxes and, likely, spending on public services. Yet this approach caused a degree of turmoil in the financial markets and led to Truss having the shortest tenure in office of any UK prime minister. Rishi Sunak, who followed Truss into No. 10 Downing Street, won over Conservative party MPs and supporters by adopting a more technocratic and traditional approach to governing, effectively returning to "economic orthodoxy" and prioritizing economic stability.

THE PARLIAMENTARY PROCESS AND NEW POLICIES

To illustrate how new policies are made and then put into operation, this section follows a typical piece of legislation through the lawmaking process—from its birth as an issue placed on the agenda for consideration through its implementation. In reality, no piece of legislation is typical. Some bills are enacted in a matter of days (or even hours in an emergency) the first time they are proposed, but others must wait for years before being passed. In 2018, legislation facilitating the formation of a Northern Ireland government passed through Parliament in two days, with one day in the House of Commons and one day in the House of Lords. On the other hand, some policy ideas may never evolve into law, or they may have their intentions almost totally altered through implementation. Despite these differences, an underlying policymaking process is common to all proposals.

AGENDA SETTING AND POLICY FORMULATION

The first step in the adoption of legislation is its placement on the policymaking agenda, both in an informal sense in that the policy must be considered sufficiently important for the government to act on and in the more formal sense in that it must be placed before

Parliament for consideration and possible adoption.² In an even more fundamental way, societal problems must be identified before they can be placed on a government agenda in the form of legislation.

Deciding which issues are public and require the consideration of government is a very diffuse and uncertain process in Great Britain, as it is in almost all countries. Political parties and the governments they form are the principal agents in placing issues on the agenda, but other actors are also involved. Individual members of Parliament (MPs) may have special interests and may strive—sometimes for years—to have an issue considered. Interest groups may attempt to dramatize the needs and desires of their members. For their part, the media are actively inserting issues into the consciousness of citizens and that of governing institutions.

In a formal sense, the easiest way for an issue to come before Parliament is its inclusion in the government's legislative program. Parliament's legislative time is limited, and the government must select those issues and bills it believes are most important. To make this selection, the government must make some difficult choices, because it introduces relatively few bills in any one year. Though there was a slight increase during the Blair & Brown years, on average, UK governments tend to introduce around 50 bills per parliamentary session. Because several of the bills introduced annually involve annual budget and financial considerations and a large number of the remaining bills involve consolidation and clarification of existing legislation, few significant policy bills tend to be introduced during each parliamentary session.³ In almost all cases, the policy bills that are passed are a part of the government's program, and the government can if it wishes (and it usually does) control the parliamentary agenda.

Bills and issues not part of the government's program may also come before Parliament. Backbenchers can introduce legislation, but it has little chance of being passed— from 2010 to 2022, only about 4 percent of all legislation passed in Parliament came from MPs with no governmental responsibilities, or “private members.”⁴ Using the main route to introduce legislation, a backbencher must first win a lottery to have the opportunity to actually introduce a bill, but even then consideration of the bill is limited to one of the 13 Fridays—the only day on which private members' bills are debated—during a session.⁵ Bills also can be introduced under the 10-minute rule, which allows 10 minutes of debate, pro and con, followed immediately by a vote. Backbench legislation can raise issues the government may prefer to forget or issues of a moral nature on which the government does not wish to take a stand. Indeed, sometimes private members' bills are submitted as a favor to a government that does not want to have to take a stand on a difficult issue such as divorce or abortion. In July 2013, for example, the Conservative Party had MP James Wharton introduce the bill calling for a referendum on EU membership, because the bill was opposed by the Conservatives' coalition partners, the Liberal Democrats, and had little chance of passage. Most private members' bills are not, however, likely to generate political controversy. One restraint on this form of legislation is that backbenchers cannot introduce legislation involving the expenditure of public funds—only ministers can make those proposals.⁶

It is far easier for the nongovernmental parties and backbenchers in the majority party to bring issues up for discussion in Parliament than to achieve the passage of legislation. Question Time is an obvious opportunity for generating that discussion. Adjournment debates and early

day motions⁷ by private members also allow individual MPs to air grievances; the last 30 minutes of each daily session are devoted to an adjournment debate on matters raised by backbenchers. On one day the issues raised ranged from the serious—farming subsidies—to the trivial—lauding the success of the Harry Potter books; the same would be true for most days. On average, backbenchers receive approximately 15 percent of all parliamentary time, an allocation made by the government, and much of that time is spent discussing specific constituency grievances rather than general issues. Because this allocation permits the average member relatively little opportunity to have an impact on major policy issues, MPs may decide to counteract some of this imbalance of power by specializing in particular policy topics, a strategy made easier by the select committees.⁸ Expanded use of social media gives MPs yet another chance to air their opinions and to have at least an indirect influence over policy.

The opposition receives parliamentary time to present its alternatives to the government program, largely during the extended debate on the King's Speech (actually written for him by the government as a statement of its policy objectives for the session), which opens each session of Parliament, and the 20 "opposition days" scattered throughout the parliamentary session, which allow the leaders of the opposition parties to criticize the government by selecting the topics for debate. Again, however, although this debate may be useful for ventilating opinions, it usually has little real effect on policy choices, in part because the government has already established the agenda and all the opposition can do is react to its propositions. Furthermore, if the government maintains its party discipline (which the Conservative government has not always found an easy task following the 2016 Brexit referendum), the opposition can do little to prevent the government's legislation from being adopted.

In addition to controlling the agenda and timetable, the government is heavily involved in formulating legislation. Most of the broad ideas for policy formulation come from the party's election manifesto but ministers also have their own ideas about good policy. The ministers receive advice on policy initiatives from their civil servants and from political advisers in their departments. Within the cabinet, legislation is typically first considered by a cabinet committee composed of interested ministers (usually with some Treasury representation) before being considered by the entire cabinet.⁹

Parties and political leaders are not the only source of policy intentions and policy formulation—many policy ideas come from the departments themselves and their civil servants.¹⁰ Though department ministers increasingly express skepticism about what they see as a captured civil service with its own agenda and therefore have come to rely on policy advice from (partisan) special advisers (SPADs), think tanks, and external advisory committees, it remains the case that civil service officials may also successfully advocate for policy initiatives developed within the department's ranks.

No matter which set of actors is most powerful, the process of formulating policy is complex, involving the interaction of ministers, partisan advisers, civil servants and, in turn, consultation with the affected interests in society. The increased emphasis on managerialism in the British civil service has weakened its policy capacity, although the separation of many implementation functions, from policymaking through the creation of agencies, provides the remaining civil servants in departments with more time to deal exclusively with policy.

Policy Legitimation

Once the cabinet has agreed on a policy proposal, it is introduced into Parliament as a bill. All politically controversial legislation, by convention, goes first to the House of Commons. For a bill to become law, it must pass the House of Commons, pass the House of Lords (unless it is passed by two successive sessions of the House of Commons or is a money bill), and gain royal assent. But there are ways of shortcutting this process; therefore, a significant amount of law-making in Great Britain is done by the government itself, using orders in council and statutory instruments that do not require the approval of Parliament.¹¹

When a bill is introduced into the House of Commons, it is given a formal first reading and then printed for distribution. After two or three weeks, the second reading takes place, which is the major political debate on the principles of the legislation. For noncontroversial legislation, however, the second reading may occur in committee. After the second reading, a bill typically goes to committee for detailed consideration and possible amendment—that is, after the Commons has agreed to the legislation in principle. Although committees are organized to mirror the partisan composition of Parliament, the government is generally more willing to accept amendments in committee than on the floor of the Commons, where acceptance might be taken as an admission of defeat. Finally, the bill is reported out of committee with any amendments, receives a third reading, and then is usually passed.

After passage in the Commons, a bill goes to the House of Lords for consideration and possible amendment. Any amendments made in the Lords must be later considered by the Commons. In the adversarial political system of the United Kingdom, the House of Lords can be an extremely useful institution. There, the government can accept amendments and negotiate improvements in legislation without appearing to back away from its policy proposals. The House of Lords also has chosen to specialize in several areas such as science policy that are less partisan than many others but for which some longer-term considerations are paramount. A government can even accept defeat in Lords without serious damage to its prospects of retaining office. Although deadlocks between the two houses are possible, they are infrequent, and yet Lords can delay legislation. In recent years, Lords was able to delay the passage of legislation changing some aspects of election law, as well as a bill changing the UK's immigration rules.

After agreement is reached between the two houses, the bill is given to the monarch for royal assent, which is virtually automatic.

In reality, legislation does not necessarily move so easily through the policymaking system; therefore, some way is needed to regulate the flow and, particularly, to prevent the delay of important legislation. At the report stage, amendments may be reported out of committee, and the Speaker is given the power to decide which amendments should be debated and which would be repetitious of debates in committee. The government also strictly controls the parliamentary time spent on debating bills by using program motions.

Although the factor of party discipline seems to foreordain much of the legislative activity of Parliament, that activity is still important. First, the legal and constitutional requirements for the passage of legislation must be fulfilled. Second, amendments must be considered, and the amended legislation must be approved, both at the committee stage in Commons and in Lords.

Finally, some legislation that seems perfectly reasonable to the majority of the cabinet may not appear so reasonable to backbenchers in the government's party; therefore, the legislation may never be passed. For instance, in 2021, the Johnson government had to rethink its plans for "COVID passports" when a significant number of Conservative MPs refused to back the policy. Although the presence of disciplined majorities in the House of Commons is important, legislative action is never certain. Moreover, the latest research demonstrates that Parliament can have a significant influence over legislation not only through amendments but also in shaping the government's thinking in the pre-legislative stage.¹²

The Scottish Parliament and Welsh assembly have adopted many of the same types of procedure used in Westminster. They have, however, attempted to loosen some of the domination of the majority party over the proceedings. The Scottish Parliament has created cross-party committees to consider legislation and to make suggestions without having to abide by strictly partisan considerations.

British democracy has long been representative democracy, but since the 1970s, there have been several interesting uses of direct democracy as a means of legitimating policies. Of particular significance are several referendums on crucial policy issues—in 1975, on whether Great Britain should remain in the Common Market; in 1997, on the devolution proposals in Scotland and Wales; in 2014, on whether Scotland would remain in the United Kingdom or pursue independence; and in 2016, on whether the United Kingdom should leave the European Union. With these and the other issues put to the public in referendums, the government and Parliament to some degree abdicated their decision-making powers to the people in a plebiscite. Although these referendums were not legally binding, the major parties declared they would consider them to be binding. Referendums represent a major departure from the traditional means of decision making in British government and have potential importance for major policy decisions.

Policy Implementation

Perhaps the most difficult portion of the process of changing society through government action occurs after a bill is passed by Parliament. The implementation process involves taking the bare bones of parliamentary legislation and putting some meat on them by formulating both substantive policy declarations and the organizational structure to carry out the intent of Parliament, or, at times, to thwart that intent.

Public policies may be implemented in several ways. Probably the most common is through departments of the central government. Most legislation coming from Parliament contains a broad mandate of power, but Parliament leaves it up to the relevant ministry to make the regulations and engage in the activities needed for the intent of the legislation to come into being. A principal means by which the departments do this is through statutory instruments developed pursuant to acts of Parliament. Statutory instruments, which contain more detailed regulations than do acts, allow the executive to have a major impact on the nature of the policy actually implemented. Parliament exercises scrutiny over these instruments, but it cannot hope to master completely the volume or technical content of all such regulations. Even when the issuance of a statutory instrument is not required, the departments are heavily involved in shaping the

meaning of policy and in making it work. Yet the departments also can serve as barriers to effective implementation, especially when the policy enacted by Parliament appears to run counter to their usual practices. In like manner, schools, hospitals, and local job centers exhibit varying patterns of implementation and, at times, great variations from the original intentions of Parliament in some parts of the country.



One feature of the British government's exercise of political power is its indirect management of a complex mixed economy.

Foreign and Commonwealth Office, <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/1/>

Policies of the central government are also implemented through local authorities. Unlike in a federal system, local authorities are creatures of the central government in Great Britain. The result is less differentiation between national and local policy than in the United States.¹³ Although the major policy decisions in areas such as education, health, social services, and law enforcement are made by the central government, these services are actually delivered by local authorities, or by local units of national organizations such as the NHS. But these public services are not delivered uniformly; local authorities provide different quantities and qualities of service, albeit within centrally determined parameters and subject to inspection and control by the central government. This relationship between central policymaking and local administration does not, however, work without friction, especially when local and central governments are controlled by different parties. Central governments, no matter the party in control, regularly place great pressure on local authorities to improve the quality of service provision, thereby producing some conflicts even with local councils that are controlled by the Government's party.¹⁴

In the devolved administrations, there has been much more evidence of policy divergence. In particular, there are quite fundamental differences in approach to the major issues of health and education. For instance, while policies for the NHS and schools in England have emphasized the importance of choice and competition, in Scotland and Wales there has been a greater emphasis on partnership and an aversion to what is perceived as the “privatization” of public services. In this context, it is no longer sensible to talk about a “British” Secretary of State for Education. Instead, at Westminster, there is an English Education Secretary who has no control over education policy in Scotland and only to a very limited extent in Wales or Northern Ireland.

In return for the administration of national policies, the local (English) authorities receive around half of their revenues from the central government.¹⁵ Some of the grants to local authorities are tied to the provision of specific services such as law enforcement, but the largest single grant—the revenue support grant—is a general grant. If a local authority wishes to provide services not funded directly by the revenue support grant or the categorical grants from central government, it must be willing to raise funds from local revenues, generally through the council tax system and taxes on local businesses.

Finally, policies may be implemented by private organizations. Although interest groups are often regarded as barriers to effective implementation, such groups may be important to effective implementation. At a minimum, an interest group can function as a watchdog on the implementation of a policy, replacing the army of public inspectors that might otherwise be required. Environmental groups have been particularly active in this monitoring role. In addition, a group may actually implement a policy for government, such as in agriculture when the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) applies general policies in enforcing animal welfare legislation. These activities would otherwise require huge amounts of time and public money and might not be performed as well. Finally, at times the government subsidizes an organization to provide a service that government supports as a matter of policy and that would have to be provided at public expense if the private organization were not willing to provide it. One example of such a service is the legal assistance the Law Society provides to the indigent.

Policy Evaluation

The last stage of policymaking—formal policy evaluation—occurs some time after the policy has been adopted or even implemented (informal evaluation begins almost at the time of passage). Policy evaluation is also closely related to policy continuation, the next major topic, because the annual decisions made during the budgetary process to continue policies and programs to some degree involve evaluation of the effectiveness and efficiency of those policies.

Parliament is assumed to conduct ongoing oversight of government policies, and some instruments for policy evaluation are housed within the government itself. The select committees of the House of Commons are active in evaluating existing programs, and the few committees in the House of Lords are engaged in limited oversight. In particular, the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee has gained a fearsome reputation for grilling public servants on

matters of public spending and accountability. A growing staff in the Prime Minister's Office also monitors policies on behalf of the executive, especially major programs such as health and education. Through the parliamentary commissioner, or ombudsman, Parliament maintains additional evaluative control over policy administration. This official can, if only at the request of an MP, investigate alleged malfeasance of public administration. Finally, the auditor general and the National Audit Office have become important watchdogs. Like auditing organizations in other industrialized nations, these offices have added policy evaluation to their former duties as financial auditors. They monitor policy developments in both the central government and the local authorities.

Some mechanisms for policy evaluation exist outside the government. One such device is the appointment of parliamentary or royal commissions to investigate particular fundamental policy concerns that merit outside advice. These commissions and their reports often constitute milestones in the evolution of policy and program management, though the last royal commission was established in 1999 under the Blair government. Since then, various public inquiries have been held on specific policy questions, some with substantial policy and political relevance such as the 2010 Saville Inquiry Report on violence in Northern Ireland, the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire inquiry, and the Hallett inquiry examining the United Kingdom's response to the coronavirus pandemic.

In addition are the less official mechanisms for generating policy evaluation. One such mechanism is the news media, which exercise a considerable degree of self-censorship in their assessments of policy. The restrictions imposed by the Official Secrets Act and the public's lack of access to important information limit the capacity of public involvement in policy assessment. Passage of Great Britain's Freedom of Information Act in 2000 opened up government to some degree, even though the law is more limited than similar acts in most other democracies. The number of policy think tanks also continues to increase, some of them representing clearly defined ideological positions, while others strive toward greater objectivity, and they use the information generated to help shape policy through their contacts with parties and through the media. Finally, research units of political parties and pressure groups also evaluate existing policies. Overall, then, a great deal of official and unofficial policy evaluation occurs, but tight government control of the parliamentary agenda ensures that many policy changes will likely not be scrutinized, unless it suits the purposes of the incumbent government.

Although policy evaluation ends one cycle of policymaking, it often begins the next.¹⁶ Governments rarely make perfect policies the first time they try, but often they know so little about the dynamics of the problem area into which they intervene that trial-and-error learning may be the only means available for improving conditions. Therefore, governments often have to modify existing policies based on their experience with those policies—that is, experience frequently reflected in the evaluation process. The social and economic conditions that are the objects of a particular policy may change as well, and government will have to modify its programs to meet those changing conditions. Although policymaking is depicted here as a delimited process, the end of the process may be just the start of another cycle.

POLICY CONTINUATION: BUDGETING

Most policymaking is not about making new policies; rather, it is about reaffirming old policies or making marginal adjustments in those policies. In many ways, this form of policymaking is politically more sensitive than making new policies, because existing programs have existing employees, clients, and organizations, whereas new policies have no inertia pushing existing commitments forward. Although there may be some modifications or even threatened terminations, in most years the most important decisions for continuing policies are made in the budgetary process. That process involves financing the huge number of existing policy commitments, with their relative priorities determined in pounds and pence. (Here the reference to the budgetary process is in the U.S. sense; in Great Britain, the term *budget* usually refers to the government's revenue, not expenditure, proposals.)

Historically, control of the public purse has been central to the powers of the British Parliament, but the existence of usually disciplined partisan majorities, and the general uncertainty about economic growth, has transformed substantially the locus of effective budgetary powers. Even now, however, the British government appears to spend more time trying to get the machinery of financial allocation “right,” when compared with most other parliamentary systems, and it has developed elaborate machinery for budget and financial management. Budgeting is best thought of as taking place in two stages. The first is an executive stage during which the spending ministries negotiate with the Treasury and with their colleagues in the cabinet over expenditure commitments. The second is the parliamentary stage during which these decisions are legitimated and only occasionally changed.

The Executive Stage

The Treasury is the central actor at the executive stage of budgeting. It is charged not only with making recommendations on macroeconomic policy but also with formulating detailed expenditure plans that fall within those economic constraints. Traditionally, the Treasury has been the most prestigious appointment for a civil servant, and those in the Treasury have adopted the “Treasury view” about the proper amount of public spending and who should spend the money. Since at least the days of William Gladstone, holders of that view have been skeptical about expenditures and concerned with saving “candle ends” as well as billions of pounds. This view does not always prevail, but it must always be considered.

The first round of bargaining over expenditures is typically at the level of civil servants—those from spending departments and those from the Treasury. This bargaining takes place with the knowledge of the relevant ministers, but it can be conducted more easily by officials who know both one another and the facts of the programs. Interpersonal trust and respect are important components of the success of any bargainer, especially when the spending departments must have their requests reviewed annually.¹⁷ Because the same Treasury civil servants may see the same departmental civil servants year after year, any attempts to manipulate or deceive may gain in the short run but will surely lose in the long run. Also, civil servants tend to understand the technical aspects of their programs better than ministers do. In addition to bargaining annually (or at times more frequently) for expenditures, departments must bargain for

deviations from expenditure plans during the year, thereby giving the Treasury several opportunities to monitor and intervene in departmental policies.

The second stage of executive bargaining occurs among the spending ministers, the Treasury, and the cabinet as a whole. Budget decisions are manifestly political, and, if nothing else, they reflect the relative political powers and skills of the ministers involved. The task of the spending ministers is to fight for their programs and to try to get as much money as they can. The Treasury ministers (the chancellor of the exchequer and the chief secretary of the Treasury) are the guardians of the public purse and play the role of skeptic. They perform an important function in budgetary politics and are responsible for much of the nitty-gritty in day-to-day allocations and oversight. The prime minister must moderate any conflicts that arise but knows that he or she can rarely go against the Treasury ministers if the government is to function smoothly.

The fight over the budget occurs on a one-to-one basis between spending ministers and the Treasury ministers in cabinet committees and finally in full cabinet meetings. Under the Thatcher government, a special cabinet committee referred to as PEX, for “public expenditure” (but popularly called the “Star Chamber”), was formed to review disputes between the Treasury and spending departments, and it usually sided with the Treasury. Faced with an immense public debt, Conservative chancellor George Osborne reinstated this procedure, using it in 2010 and 2013 to help persuade ministers to agree to budget cuts.

The position of Treasury was enhanced after 1992, with the chancellor of the exchequer heading the cabinet committee reviewing expenditures. The Treasury is in a powerful position politically and enjoys the right of making the first presentation of expenditure figures in cabinet meetings, but after that the spending ministers tend to gang up against the Treasury. Because this process is political, a coalition can usually be formed to increase expenditures that enable all spending ministers to make their constituents happy and make them look good in the eyes of their departments. It takes a very strong chancellor, backed by an equally strong prime minister, to oppose that type of coalition.

The Parliamentary Phase

After the civil servants and the cabinet prepare their expenditure plans (estimates), the plans are presented to Parliament for adoption. Although the emphasis on control has significantly modernized the budgeting process, much of the terminology and procedure used by Parliament when considering public expenditures dates from earlier periods in which the monarch and Parliament were engaged in more intense conflicts over power. The major debates on expenditures occur during the 26 “supply days” each session, although the topics selected by the opposition for debate on these days range far beyond expenditures. Because of the difficulties in forecasting expenditures, especially in uncertain economic circumstances, the government may also introduce supplemental estimates at other times in the year.

The budget is an important locus for parliamentary control over the executive. By standing order, Parliament cannot increase expenditures on its own; any increases must be recommended by a minister. Parliament can, however, recommend decreases. One means of expressing displeasure with the management of a ministry is to move for the reduction of the salary of the minister, frequently by a trivial amount such as £100. This gesture signals a debate not so much

about the £100 as about the policies of the department in question. MPs may move for less trivial changes in expenditure plans as well, but all these are likely to be defeated by the majority party, lest it be seen to be losing confidence in the Commons.

Even if it is not able to alter expenditure plans directly, Parliament has become more effective at monitoring the spending decisions of government. Parliament as a whole is perhaps too large and disorganized to scrutinize expenditure programs effectively, and so it has developed a pair of committees to more closely examine the government estimates. The first is the Treasury Select Committee, a rather small committee composed of members of the House of Commons who are well versed in issues of public spending. Despite its expertise, this committee cannot cover the total range of the budget each year (it has limited professional staff support), so it concentrates on particularly important spending issues. This committee has influenced the development of policy in Great Britain and aired important issues, sometimes to the discomfort of the government.

Another important parliamentary committee for controlling public expenditures is the Public Accounts Committee (PAC). PAC is always chaired by a member of the opposition; it has the task of monitoring public expenditures after they have been made and after they have been audited by the National Audit Office. Out of the mass of public expenditures, PAC selects certain topics for consideration each year and has the power to call civil servants before it to account for their actions. Other than calling attention to mismanagement or outright deception, however, PAC has few powers to improve the expenditure of funds.

In addition to the two principal committees examining expenditures, the select committees created during the late 1970s for monitoring activities of the executive departments may be a useful device for parliamentary control of expenditures. Indeed, it appears that some of these committees have been quite successful in exercising oversight. They have attracted the interest of many MPs and have demonstrated their ability to keep track of the huge volume of documents and decisions produced by the ministries. These committees primarily publicize any failures in the executive to the public and to Parliament, and that publicity can function as a useful restraint on the power of ministers and civil servants.¹⁸

To this point, this section has focused on the expenditure side of budgeting. On the revenue side, there is the same balance of power in favor of the cabinet and the Treasury. If anything, the balance of power resides even more in the hands of the executive, because Parliament has yet to develop a committee structure for monitoring revenue proposals. A small subcommittee of the Treasury and Civil Service Select Committee does examine revenue issues, but this is a minor role compared with the scrutiny of public expenditures. And within the executive, the balance appears to favor executive officials, because ministers do not push for increased taxation, only for increased expenditures. This is not to say that there are no political influences on taxation, and part of the debate on how to deal with the deficit that increased under the coronavirus pandemic involves discussion of tax options.

Revenue recommendations are introduced each year around the first of April in the chancellor's budget message. Commons rapidly passes the necessary budget resolutions, allowing for the immediate collection of some or all of the proposed taxes. This immediate action is taken to prevent the legal avoidance of taxes by purchasing large quantities of alcoholic beverages, selling assets, paying off debts, and so on, under the preexisting tax laws. That action is followed by a period of debate leading to the formal introduction of the Finance Bill.

One of the common criticisms of the British budgetary process is similar to one leveled at the budgetary processes in many other nations: that there is little or no integration of revenue and expenditure decisions. Citizens and politicians alike tend to like expenditures and loathe taxation, which commonly results in the government's failure to collect enough revenues to meet expenditures, thereby creating a deficit budget. Changes to coordinate taxation with expenditures would require changing many historic procedures, but it might well improve the management of public sector finances.

POLICYMAKING IN GREAT BRITAIN

Policymaking in Great Britain involves the interaction of cabinet, Parliament, and the civil service, to mention only the primary actors. In this interaction, the formal location of power and the actual location of decision making may be markedly different. The formal powers of decision making reside in Parliament, but the effect of strong party discipline has, in practice, made the cabinet the primary decision-making institution. Backed by a government majority, once the cabinet decides on a policy, the dutiful members of the party will almost certainly ratify it on the floor of the House of Commons. In those few instances in which the backbenchers overtly or covertly oppose government policy, the cabinet rarely tries to run roughshod over its own party members. Conservative prime minister Liz Truss' pursuit of substantial tax cuts that were opposed by a large number of her Conservative MPs shows that prime ministers must pay some attention to their own party to govern successfully (and, indeed, retain the keys to No. 10 Downing Street). In most policy areas, however, if it is willing to push, the cabinet does have the ability to get most of what it wants passed into law without much real internal party opposition.

The powers of the cabinet are, however, restrained in other ways. First, ministers must contend with skillful and permanent civil servants. Especially within the budgetary process, the Treasury and its "mandarins" dominate decision making. Even in nonfinancial decisions, the expert knowledge of civil servants, when compared with the relative dearth of expertise held by their nominal political masters, places the permanent civil service in a powerful position to influence outcomes. The reforms of the structure of British government to separate executive agencies from policy advisers in the departments are designed to improve political control over implementation, but the civil service still holds some power at the formulation stage.

Finally, some interests and organizations other than the cabinet, Parliament, and the civil service influence policy decisions. Interest groups not only attempt to influence policy as it is being formulated but also may directly implement policies for the government. The increased use in Great Britain of quangos and private sector organizations for policy formulation and implementation also reduces the degree of direct control over policy implementation by government. Because local governments administer and implement a significant share of the central government programs, the central government must attempt to co-opt and encourage local governments to implement the policy as it was intended. Local governments also are effective lobbyists for their interests and may help to shape as well as merely implement public policy. The coalition government faced massive protests from interest groups about its radical health reforms and was forced to compromise on a number of issues during the passage of the legislation.

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WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF UK POLITICS?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Examine the implications of Brexit on the United Kingdom's economic model and its pace of economic growth.
- Review primary factors that will influence the growth and/or reduction of the Public Sector.
- Explain the key interests positioned to drive British policymaking.
- Identify the government institutions likely to yield the greatest power and influence in UK government?
- Review the most likely scenarios for devolved or centralized control in the United Kingdom.

EVERY GOVERNMENT MUST REGULARLY DEAL WITH CRISES AND make difficult decisions—even those with the most prosperous and well-managed political systems. Despite significant advancements in its economy and society, Great Britain has been neither the most prosperous nor the best managed country on earth, and it must sustain itself in the face of a significant number of challenges to its political and economic systems. Many of these challenges arise from the international economic and political environment within which the United Kingdom operates, but others originate internally, from its institutional, economic, and cultural structures.

This chapter examines the variety of challenges that continue to confront the government of the United Kingdom. Some are economic and social, and some are more clearly in the public sector itself, but all will require effective responses from the British government.

THE ECONOMY AND BREXIT

The process of implementing the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union in 2016 remains a significant dividing line in British politics. The consequences of Brexit do not quite dominate the news agenda to the extent they did in 2019 but will nevertheless continue to

ripple through the United Kingdom's parties, institutions, and broader politics. The decision to leave the European Union and reshape British law outside the European policy ecosystem (whilst maintaining some degree of policy alignment with the European Union, Britain's largest trading partner) posed fundamental questions about the United Kingdom's constitution, economy, and place in the world.

As Ailsa Henderson and others have argued, Brexit was a policy that was “made in England.”¹ However, it had to be implemented across the United Kingdom. The process caused major friction between the UK government and the devolved governments in Scotland and Wales. The UK government decided to overrule the objections of the Scottish and Welsh Parliaments to its Brexit plan. In Northern Ireland, the nature of post-Brexit trading arrangements has been a major point of contention, contributing to the failure of the Northern Irish parties to form a new government in Belfast. The Windsor Agreement between the United Kingdom and the European Union on trading arrangements in Northern Ireland has helped to smooth relations with Brussels and Washington but did not guarantee a return to power-sharing because of the continued objections of the Democratic Unionist Party.

The immediate heat of the constitutional debate has now cooled, and the United Kingdom has left the European Union. However, the UK government will find itself coming back to the territorial implications of Brexit in the coming years, especially as it negotiates the process of making new regulations and preserving the unity of a single market within the United Kingdom. There are potential flashpoints ahead. As post-Brexit trading arrangements settle down, there will be further debate about how closely the United Kingdom wants to align itself with EU rules.

Brexit has also raised deeper questions about the United Kingdom's economic model. Although the economy had proved a serious problem for both Conservative and Labour governments throughout much of the postwar period, the British economy outperformed those of most of its European neighbors during the early years of the twenty-first century. Britain's annual growth rate, which had averaged 2.5 percent from 1985 to 1995, grew from 3.3 percent in 1997 to 3.9 percent in 2000—compared to an annual average of 2.7 percent among the euro area countries during the same five-year period.² Just as previous governments had taken the blame for poor economic performance, Labour under Tony Blair sought to take credit for the improved economy on its watch. In particular, by adopting some aspects of Thatcherite economic policy (such as deregulation, privatization, and somewhat lower tax rates) and adding some features of its own (such as granting greater autonomy to the Bank of England to set monetary policy), the Labour Party indeed helped orchestrate a short period of rapid growth. Fortuna then intervened to conspire against Labour's record. Annual economic growth began a slow decline during the early years of the decade—and abruptly plummeted to 0.6 percent with the onset of the international economic and financial crisis in 2008. By the next year the growth rate had fallen still further to an abysmal -4.7 percent. By March 2010, the nation's budget deficit reached a peacetime high of 11 percent of GDP.³ This negative trajectory severely eroded the authority of the newly appointed prime minister, Gordon Brown, and contributed in no small measure to Labour's debilitating electoral defeat in May 2010.

The United Kingdom's recent economic underperformance therefore predates Brexit. The Labour Party argues that the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Government's (2010–2015)

program of austerity fundamentally weakened the United Kingdom's capacity to grow and hollowed out its public services. Others argue that the problems are deeper: the UK economy has never really recovered from the 2008 financial crisis and has suffered from decades of low investment. Brexit has reawakened older debates about whether the United Kingdom should continue to pursue a "Thatcherite" economic prescription of low taxes and regulation or try to adopt a more European model of higher taxes and investment.⁴ There is also a debate about the economic impact of Brexit. Comparisons are difficult at the best of times but there is also the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic to consider. Whilst some supporters of Brexit argue that the economic benefits will take years to build up and assess, some economists think that the hit to GDP has been between 2 and 5 percent.⁵

The most dramatic recent manifestation of this debate about the United Kingdom's economic future was Liz Truss's mini-budget in October 2022. Truss believed that the UK state was taxing too much and that it was holding back economic growth and the opportunities of Brexit. She proposed a program of deficit-funded tax cuts. Financial markets disagreed and the government was forced to scrap all but one of the main tax measures in the budget. The crisis resulted in Truss's resignation as prime minister. This episode hints at much wider tensions in the Conservative Party and in UK economic policy making. Many Conservatives believe in lower taxes but are reluctant to have a serious discussion about lower spending. The incident also served as a warning to a potential future Labour Government that the United Kingdom's capacity to borrow is not infinite and relies on financial markets' belief that the Government has a credible fiscal plan. Ironically, Truss's diagnosis of the problems of the British economy has become a consensus position: both Labour and Conservatives agree that the United Kingdom needs to quicken its economic growth if it is to maintain spending on public services and help its citizens become more prosperous. However, beyond that diagnosis, there are big disagreements about how to fix it. The UK tax burden as a percentage of GDP is set to reach a post-war high.⁶ Should the priority be to lower taxes, or should the priority be to invest in the sorts of things (infrastructure, education) that might generate higher growth in future?

The debate in the Conservative Party has not been settled by Truss's resignation either. Many Conservatives still argue that Truss's tax-cutting approach was the right one but that she went about it in an incompetent manner. Others argue (including Chancellor Jeremy Hunt) that if Conservatives want tax cuts, then they will need to generate the growth or cut spending to make them affordable and credible. Although as Chancellor he presided over massive increases in public spending to deal with the pandemic, Rishi Sunak is considered to have Thatcherite instincts and to take a conservative attitude to fiscal policy in normal times. The Conservative Party also struggles on the issue of planning (in the United States, referred to as "zoning") reform. Economists have long criticized the UK planning system for choking economic growth as local objections and over-zealous environmental rules prevent houses being built where they are most needed. This is especially the case in and around London, the United Kingdom's economic powerhouse. However, Conservatives appear reluctant to annoy homeowners, many of whom are Conservative voters, who want to preserve the local character of their area. At the same time, some Conservatives worry that the failure to build houses (and the resulting increase in prices) could cost them dearly with younger voters who already appear to show less inclination to vote Conservative.⁷

For the Labour Party, the question is how radical they should be. Having been badly burned by the perception that the party's 2019 manifesto promised too much and therefore was not credible, Sir Keir Starmer, the party leader, has taken a cautious approach, insisting that all policies must be fully costed. He has hinted that a Labour Government would be more radical than the Conservatives when it comes to planning reform. However, he has not indicated any big moves in the direction of a substantially closer economic relationship with the European Union. Nor has he promised tax rises on the scale proposed by his more left-wing predecessor, Jeremy Corbyn.

In the early 2000s, it seemed like the United Kingdom had alighted upon an optimal economic policy mix that allowed it to grow quickly and invest in public services that voters perceived needed the money after being kept on a tight leash by the Conservatives in the 1980s and 1990s. However, since at least 2008, the United Kingdom's economy has not performed as well. Debate continues about the impact of austerity on its economic performance, especially as public sector workers have argued their salaries have not kept pace with cost of living rises over the last several decades, leading to large-scale labor strikes throughout 2022 and 2023. Brexit (and further poor economic performance) has added fresh urgency to these questions. Economic debates will therefore continue to dominate British politics, as politicians try to make the old (essentially Thatcherite) economic model work better or think about how to implement a new one without causing a financial panic.

THE PUBLIC SECTOR

The nature of the British public sector is linked with economic changes in Great Britain. Despite the efforts of the Thatcher and Major governments to reduce the size of government, public expenditures as a percentage of the gross national product (GNP) were little reduced by the end of the more than 18 years of Conservative government.⁸ After historically high increases in public expenditure under the Labour Governments (1997–2010), the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government presided over a much more constrained public sector during a period of spending austerity. The Conservative governments that followed maintained a degree of spending restraint, only to find that substantial government investment was needed in the public sector (and the economy more broadly) to shore up the economy during the pandemic. Yet following the COVID-19 pandemic period, the UK economy has been one of the slowest in Europe to rebound, raising questions not only about the Conservative government's economic strategy but, significantly, about the degree of investment in the public sector and public services.

Looking back, by the time Prime Minister John Major left office in 1997, there was relatively little industry left to privatize, but the nature of the state continued to change significantly. Instead of shedding activities to the market, Labour's reforms tended to impose market-type mechanisms within government. The subsequent Conservative-led governments have continued on this path through choice for NHS patients and greater diversity of types of school in England. However, other aspects of the Thatcherite settlement in public sector have come under more pressure in recent years. Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party was highly critical of privatized

industries in 2019 and proposed to renationalize mail, water, and energy distribution. The performance of the private energy companies has reached the top of the political agenda due to rising prices. Similarly, the privatized water companies have come under increasing pressure to do more about leaks and about sewage polluting rivers in England. This heightened scrutiny will continue, especially at a time of wider questions about economic performance and the role of the private sector.

The quality of service provided by the NHS continues to be a major political issue in Great Britain. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and greater demand have resulted in an increase in waiting times for treatment. Public support for the NHS remains high, so this will continue to be a major battleground between the two main parties as voters across the United Kingdom try to weigh the parties' positions when they head to the ballot box. Beyond putting pressure on the health service, the United Kingdom's aging population represents a major challenge to both the public sector and economy, especially given the commitments of the public sector to providing pensions and personal care for this segment of the population. Will there be enough workers to support the growing elderly population without large increases in taxes or significant reductions in the value of pensions? Because pensions in the United Kingdom are among the least generous in Europe, there are limited opportunities to reduce benefits, so the taxing and spending question is even more salient.

More broadly, the coalition government (2010–2015), in part to cut expenditures and reduce the size of the government debt and in part to pursue the Conservative Party's ideological commitment to smaller government, implemented a strategy aimed at reducing the size of the civil service and quangos. However, under the pressure of implementing Brexit, the number of civil servants in Whitehall has once again increased. As inflation and years of restrained pay rises have taken their toll, the Conservative government faced a series of major strikes by public sector workers in 2022 and 2023. With greater pressure on budgets and increased demand for services, the UK government faces tough choices on maintaining public services.

WHO RULES GREAT BRITAIN?

One of the major outcomes of successive long-serving Conservative and Labour governments has been a reassertion of the primacy of cabinet, if not always parliamentary, government in Great Britain. This may sound like an odd statement given that the existence of democracy has not been challenged in the United Kingdom in the same way that it has been in other countries, even in other European countries. Yet, given the degree of influence that cabinet now exerts over policy making, in the United Kingdom, there is significant jostling between economic interests to influence government ministers and officials. There therefore remains a central question about the extent of influence exerted by both trade unions and business interests in the policy process.

The power of the trade unions was broken during the Thatcher government. The miners attempted several times to exert their control over government policy with mixed results, and in the summer of 1989, the railway workers tried their hand. Somewhat later, the public sector unions challenged the capacity of the Thatcher government to rule when the government

proposed reducing the size of the public sector and eliminating the recognition of unions at the Government Communications Headquarters, a major intelligence installation. In the end, the unions lost all these battles against a determined Conservative government. Later, “New Labour” moved to reduce the power of the unions within its ranks, and certainly the Labour government succeeded in being less beholden to the labor movement than were previous governments from that party. However, the “cost of living crisis” experienced across the United Kingdom in the wake of the country’s lackluster post-pandemic economic performance spurred a resurgence of labor unions and national strike action, resulting in the Conservative government being forced to accept some pay rises across the public sector.⁹



Unions on strike in disputes over pay.

Mark Kerrison/In Pictures via Getty Images

The influence of business interests in policymaking has received a good deal of attention following the “cash for questions” scandals in the House of Lords and, more recently, over the (questionable) contracts awarded to private firms connected to government-supporting members of the House of Lords to supply (at times, unusable) medical PPE during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁰ Although it has long been recognized that sitting parliamentarians may represent different interests, the closeness of these relationships causes some unease in the public and among media watchdogs. Additionally, various party funding scandals, from Labour’s “cash for honors” scandal to Conservative’s problems associated with Lord Ashcroft’s (the major financier of the party’s 2010 election campaign) nonresident tax status, have raised concerns about connections between the parties and large financial interests.

It is not the parties' ties to outside interests that has dampened public support for the Conservatives and Labour (and boosted the national parties and the smaller parties); rather, it is also concerns that the two main parties have converged too closely on the ideological middle. To win the 1997 election and retain control of parliament, New Labour migrated away from traditional leftist policies to the ideological center. And whilst Jeremy Corbyn, as Labour leader between 2015–2020, tried to pull the party back toward the left, his successor Sir Keir Starmer has firmly brought Labour's policies back to a centrist position. Likewise, David Cameron's Conservatives shifted to the center on environmental and social issues. Following Brexit, the Conservatives shifted to the right on some policies such as immigration and “culture war” issues, but at the same time espouse more centrist policies on social investment to try to hold onto support in the North of England. Although some may see the parties' ideological convergence as a signal of agreement that could be reflected in more consensual politics, many in the “chattering classes” take the view that the public is actually being denied policy choices and alternatives. Additionally, the ideological gap may have somewhat narrowed between the main parties, but both the Conservatives and Labour still actively engage in what in the United Kingdom is called “Punch and Judy-style politics,” with members taking political shots at each other, rather than focusing on substantive policy.

WHO RULES IN GOVERNMENT?

Usually in the United Kingdom there is no question about which party is generating policy and which parties are in opposition. At the center of the UK strong party system is the belief that parties put forward competing manifestos during election campaigns and that through the electoral process the public selects which slate of policies the majority would like to see adopted. However, when there are changes in the majority party's leadership and even the government of the day between elections, the party's mandate to govern can become clouded and the extent to which governments formed between elections are bound to their party's electoral manifesto may be called into question. Traditionally the backbench members of the majority party work to hold their government and its ministers to the party's manifesto pledges. Yet, when, as in the case of the Conservative majority following 2019 general election, the majority party's leader, and therefore the country's prime minister, changes multiple times (i.e., Boris Johnson, 2019–2022; Liz Truss, 2022; Rishi Sunak, 2022–) and there is a rapid and regular changeover in ministerial posts (e.g., between the 2019 general election and mid-2023 there were five different Ministers of State for Health and Social Care; between 2010 and 2020 there were seven different Justice Secretaries) governments may diverge from the manifesto pledges their parties committed to in the previous general election. Thus, an important metric that the public uses to assess its government—i.e., the extent to which that government fulfilled its manifesto promises made at the last election—becomes far less accurate and useful. As Britain draws closer to the next general election, it is likely that questions will be raised about the extent to which the Conservative party has stuck to its commitments over the course of the previous parliament—and can be trusted to abide by its future manifesto pledges.



Liz Truss makes her first speech as prime minister outside Number 10 Downing Street, the official residence.

Carl Court/Getty Images

In addition to the questions about how effectively and efficiently the fluid Conservative governments have been able to respond to events while keeping to their manifesto promises in the context of a looming election, it would be helpful to know which institutions are most influential in policymaking. The problem here is also one of democratic governance. Voters in the United Kingdom go to the polls every few years and make choices about the party they wish to govern them for a period of roughly five years. And Parliament, to which the members of that victorious party are elected (along with the opposition parties), nominally has the power to govern. Rather than the members of Parliament (MPs), however, the cabinet and the prime minister within the partisan institutions of government and the civil service within government as a whole have become more important in policymaking, and the voting choices of millions of citizens may be negated or ignored in the policymaking process. This sense of exclusion, whether justified or not, is a serious problem for all democratic political systems, because citizens may start to believe that their government institutions are no longer responsive to their wishes and are overly bureaucratic and technocratic rather than democratic.¹¹ In the 1980s, the Conservative government addressed at least one component of the problem of democratic governance. Rightly or wrongly, that government did not consider many members of the civil service sufficiently committed to the party program to implement it faithfully. Therefore, the Conservatives, and perhaps especially Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, sought to reduce the influence of the civil service over policy by using more personal policy advisers in government and ignoring advice from senior civil servants. Several structural reforms were also undertaken to make the civil service more managerial and less a source of policy advice. In short, the

structure of government was changed to provide the party in power with even greater control over policy. Such changes may make the system more “democratic” but perhaps at the price of reducing the overall quality of policymaking by government. Once in office, the Blair government extended the influence of partisan members of government over the civil service and over the noncareer officials now appointed as heads of executive agencies, and it institutionalized the role of special advisers to ministers. Yet, despite the Thatcher and Blair era reforms, following the pandemic period senior members of the Conservative party (and government) have again raised the concerns that the civil service has too much control in policymaking and implementation. Arguing that the pandemic revealed that the civil service continues to exert what the Conservative parliamentarians see as excessive influence, there is another call for the civil service’s scope to be reduced. What shape these reforms may take is still an open topic of debate and may well be so for some time.



Britain’s foreseeable future hinges on the outcome of negotiations with officials in Brussels governing terms of Britain’s exit from the European Union.

Drazen_/iStockPhoto

Another question about who rules in government is whether Great Britain is a cabinet government (or perhaps a parliamentary government) or whether it is becoming more a government dominated by the prime minister. This issue was raised about Thatcher, but it was at least as applicable to Tony Blair. The Blair government strengthened the policy machinery in the Prime Minister’s Office and, along with the party leaders who are very loyal to the prime minister, attempted to exert rather close control over what Labour MPs could say and do in their public life. Party discipline is a part of political life in a parliamentary regime, but it has faced

significant challenges since the 2016 Brexit Referendum. The Conservative party, traditionally a fairly unified party, has wrestled with an internal split between those who supported the break with the European Union (“Leavers”) and those who wished to stay in the European Union (“Remainers”). This division has caused serious challenges for successive Conservative governments and even contributed to forcing the resignation of prime ministers. The Labour party has not been immune from the divisions over the European Union, however, and the party continues to struggle to find a clear message on the degree of connection it wishes to pursue with the European Union. Both parties have attempted to firm up internal discipline in the post-pandemic period with an eye to assuring the voting public that they are more unified than their opposition.

It also could be argued that the most important problem for government in the United Kingdom is its ability to make and implement unpopular policies with little effective restraint, thereby reducing the legitimacy of government with the population. The clearest manifestation of this possibility was the poll tax debacle at the end of the Thatcher government. The continuing failures to increase funding for the NHS had much the same impact, as did some elements of the Conservative’s policies in dealing with the pandemic. The adversarial and majoritarian nature of British politics enables the party in government to push through policies that ultimately will undermine government—raising yet more problems for a splintering governing party that has had difficulties responding to attacks in a unified way. Another institution with an unclear future is the House of Lords. In 1999, the Blair government abolished the right of all but 92 hereditary peers to sit in the House of Lords and established an appointments committee to grant peerages. Controversies remain, however, over further reforms. The Labour government did not deliver substantial House of Lords reform because Blair did not like the idea of an elected second chamber. It is true that an elected Lords would greatly complicate the legislative process in the United Kingdom because the House of Commons is presently the only chamber that can claim a popular mandate for its actions. Yet reform of the House of Lords maintains a persistent place in the United Kingdom’s political agenda, in part sparked by the regular controversies in appointments to the chamber, such as that which followed the announcement of peerages granted by Boris Johnson when he stepped down as prime minister. As the Lords’ chamber continues to grow there is an increasing sense that future governments will need to act to reduce the number of members of the House as well as reform the appointments and vetting processes.¹²

CONTINUED DEVOLUTION, BREAKUP, OR WHAT?

Will there continue to be a United Kingdom? Indications are strong that this question can be answered in the affirmative, at least for the time being, although devolutionary pressures certainly put the long-term situation in greater doubt. By the time of the referendums in September 1997, a large majority of Scots and a smaller proportion of Welsh voters favored devolution and the establishment of (sub)national parliaments. The success of these two referendums resulted in new governments being established in Edinburgh and Cardiff and, especially for the Scottish government, a transfer of substantial powers to those new loci of governing. However, while the establishment of the Scottish Parliament was, in part, an attempt by the then-Labour

government to placate Scottish Nationalists and kill the nationalists' call for Scottish independence "stone dead," in many ways it seemed to only fan the flames of support amongst nationalists. In 2014, the Scottish Independence Referendum failed on a 55-45 popular vote. And by 2023, most analysts see support for independence and support for remaining in the United Kingdom split almost 50-50. With 2024 marking 25 years since the establishment of the Scottish Parliament, the future of Scotland in the United Kingdom remains unclear. Devolution to the Scottish Parliament, while relatively successful, has been placed under pressure with the Westminster Conservative government creating schemes to directly invest in Scotland, rather than channel all Scottish funding through the Scottish Parliament. And independence supporters continue to call for another Scottish Independence Referendum, arguing that Scotland was unwillingly pulled out of the European Union. For the foreseeable future, it is difficult to imagine that Conservative governments will allow the Scottish Government to hold another referendum, but it is difficult to predict what circumstances and political pressures future UK governments—whether Conservative or Labour—might face.

In England, which by far and away contains the largest share of the population of any of the United Kingdom's constituent nations, there appears to be relatively little interest in devolution or other substantial changes from the current constitutional arrangements. As for local government in England, the Conservative governments in the 1980s and into the 1990s centralized control over policy and local government finances. If anything, the Labour government that followed them extended and tightened that control and used its regulatory and inspection organizations to attempt to make the local authorities conform to the wishes of the central government. And while voters in the North of England rejected the idea of a regional assembly in 2004, successive governments have attempted to consolidate and devolve some local control in some areas across England. Since 2009, ten English combined authorities have been created, consolidating existing council areas and, as of 2023, nine of those ten combined council areas have elected regional mayors (known as "metro mayors"), with the range of authority and responsibility devolved to those mayors (and combined authorities) varying across the combined authorities.¹³

Nonetheless, despite some changes in local governance, pressure has continued to build across the United Kingdom for more localized, devolved control and (substantially) more investment in the areas of England and Wales that have traditionally been less well off, especially the North of England. The Conservative party responded to these pressures with a promise in their 2019 election manifesto to "level up" funding across the country to reduce regional disparities in public funding. Not surprisingly, the Levelling Up program resulted in controversy over the regional distribution of funding and the decision process by which funding decisions were taken. Further, it remains unclear whether the Levelling Up funds made up for cuts to local council budgets made during previous Conservative governments' austerity cuts.¹⁴ Local councils also complain that the government's direct distribution of funding undercuts local governance decisions and backtracks on promises of devolving power.

British policy makers are much like other policy makers, although they have their own particular processes, problems, and potential. The conduct of contemporary democratic government requires the British government to balance traditional norms and procedures that

legitimate decisions against the more modern techniques for analysis and control. Today's more technically sophisticated and professionally qualified officials are challenging the older institutions for control over policymaking. And the underlying social divisions in society refuse to be homogenized, despite the pressures of the mass media, industrialization, and urbanization. Whether in the United Kingdom or elsewhere, modern government is a balancing act between the new and the old—those things that unite and those that divide.

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