



British supporters of the United Kingdom's exit, or "Brexit," from the European Union celebrate their surprise victory in the June 2016 referendum.

UNITED KINGDOM

Why Study This Case?

For many reasons, most introductory works about comparative politics begin with a study of the United Kingdom. As the primogenitor of modern democracy, the UK political system is at once strikingly unique and a model for many other liberal democracies. The United Kingdom is the world's oldest democracy. Its transition to democracy was gradual, beginning with thirteenth-century limitations on absolute monarchs and continuing incrementally to the establishment of the rule of law in the seventeenth century and the extension of suffrage to women in the twentieth century. This democratization process persists today with reforms of the anachronistic upper house of the legislature, decentralization of power, and two recent popular referenda on Scottish independence in 2014 and British exit (**Brexit**) from the European Union (EU) in 2016. Unlike many other democracies, the United Kingdom cannot attach a specific date or event to the advent of its democracy. It is also unusual in that the main political rules of the game in that country have not been seriously interrupted or radically altered since the mid-seventeenth century.

The United Kingdom is one of only a handful of democracies without a written constitution. The longevity and stability of its democracy have thus depended largely on both traditional legitimacy and a unique political culture of accommodation and moderation. Although its constitution is unwritten, many aspects of its "Westminster system" of democracy have been adopted by a number of the world's other democracies, especially in areas of the globe that were once part of the far-flung British Empire.

Finally, the United Kingdom deserves careful study because it is the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution, which fueled British economic and political dominance during the nineteenth century. Some have attributed the United Kingdom's early industrialization to the emergence of its liberal political ideology. The United Kingdom was also the

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first major industrialized country to experience an extended economic decline after World War II, for reasons that have been much debated.

The United Kingdom remains a fascinating case. In 1979, **Margaret Thatcher** of the Conservative Party was the first leader of an industrial democracy to experiment with **neoliberal** economic policies in an attempt to stem economic decline. The policies were very controversial within the United Kingdom but widely emulated in other democracies, including the United States. Even with Thatcher's resignation in 1990, the **Conservatives (Tories)** remained in power until the 1997 election, when they were ousted by the **Labour Party**. Under the leadership of **Tony Blair** and his successor, Gordon Brown, the Labour Party sought to soften some of the harder edges of Thatcher's neoliberalism while still embracing many of the policies executed by her and her Conservative successors. These policies became known as the **Third Way**, a political compromise between the right and the left that also informed the improbable coalition that governed Britain from 2010 to 2015. **David Cameron** and the Conservatives won an outright majority in the 2015 election and pursued a more neoliberal platform, policies that Cameron's successor and current Conservative Prime Minister **Theresa May** has once again tempered. However, the capacity of May's government to carry out domestic reforms as well as its ability to negotiate Britain's departure from the European Union have been severely weakened by the Conservative Party's losses in a 2017 election that deprived the government of its majority in parliament.

Major Geographic and Demographic Features

Since 1801, the **United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland** has been the formal name of the United Kingdom. Separated from France by the English Channel, Great Britain itself consists of three nations (England, Scotland, and Wales). These three nations plus the northeastern part of the island of Ireland constitute the United Kingdom. The remainder of Ireland is called the Republic of Ireland. Although it is confusing, citizens of the United Kingdom are often referred to as British or Britons even if they live in Northern Ireland. Most Welsh, Scots, and Northern Irish consider themselves British, but it would be unwise (and inaccurate) to call a resident of Edinburgh (in Scotland) or Cardiff (in Wales) English.

The United Kingdom is roughly the size of Oregon in the United States and about two-thirds the size of Japan. It has approximately 64 million residents, about half the population of Japan. With five of six Britons living in England, the

country's population is not equally distributed among its constituent members. The United Kingdom can be considered a multiethnic state because it contains Scottish, Welsh, and English citizens, who have distinct cultures and languages. Racially, however, it is relatively homogeneous; its nonwhite population, composed mainly of immigrants from the United Kingdom's former colonies, makes up about 13 percent of the total. Roughly a third of those immigrants come from the Indian subcontinent and another fourth from the Caribbean.

The United Kingdom's physical separation from the European mainland ended in 1994 with the inauguration of the Channel Tunnel, which links Britain and France. For much of British history, the country's isolation provided some protection from the conflicts and turmoil that afflicted the rest of Europe. A diminished fear of invasion may help explain the historically small size and minimal political importance of the United Kingdom's standing army (and the relative importance and strength of its navy). In addition, it may help explain its late adherence to the European Union, its unwillingness to replace the British pound with the euro (the single European currency), and its decision in 2016 to leave the European Union.

Historical Development of the State

British citizens owe their allegiance to the Crown, the enduring symbol of the United Kingdom's state, rather than to a written constitution. The Crown symbolizes far more than just the monarchy or even Her Majesty's government. It represents the ceremonial and symbolic trappings of the British state. In addition, it represents the rules governing British political life (the regime) and the unhindered capacity (the sovereignty) to enforce and administer these rules and to secure the country's borders.

The evolutionary changes of the state over the past eight centuries have been thoroughgoing and not without violence. But in comparison with political change elsewhere in the world, the development of the modern British state has been gradual, piecemeal, and peaceful.

Early Development

Although we commonly think of the United Kingdom as a stable and unified nation-state, the country experienced repeated invasions over a period of about 1,500 years. Celts, Romans, Angles, Saxons, Danes, and finally Normans invaded

TIMELINE OF POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

YEAR	EVENT
1215	King John I forced to sign Magna Carta, thereby agreeing to a statement of the rights of English barons.
1295	Model Parliament of Edward I is convened, the first representative parliament.
1529	Reformation Parliament is summoned by Henry VIII, beginning process of cutting ties to the Roman Catholic Church.
1628	Charles I is forced to accept Petition of Right, Parliament's statement of civil rights, in return for funds.
1642–51	English Civil War is fought between Royalists and Parliamentarians.
1649	Charles I is tried and executed.
1689	Bill of Rights is issued by Parliament, establishing a constitutional monarchy in Britain.
1707	Act of Union is put into effect, uniting kingdoms of England and Scotland.
1721	Sir Robert Walpole is effectively made Britain's first prime minister.
1832, 1867	Reform Acts are passed, extending right to vote to virtually all urban males and some in the countryside.
1916–22	Anglo-Irish War is fought, culminating in establishment of independent Republic of Ireland; Northern Ireland remains part of the United Kingdom.
1973	United Kingdom is made a member of the European Economic Community (now the European Union).
1979–90	Margaret Thatcher serves as Conservative prime minister.
1982	Falklands War is fought with Argentina.
1997–2007	Tony Blair serves as Labour prime minister.
2007–10	Gordon Brown serves as Labour prime minister.
2010–16	David Cameron serves as Conservative prime minister.
2016	Referendum calling for Britain to leave the EU passes, and Theresa May replaces Cameron as Conservative prime minister.
2017	Theresa May's Conservatives suffer losses in a "snap" election, forcing the party to form a minority government.

the British Isles, each leaving important legacies. For example, the Germanic Angles and Saxons left their language—except in Wales, Scotland, and other areas they could not conquer. Local languages remained dominant there until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Today, we still refer to those areas on Britain's northern and western perimeter as the United Kingdom's **Celtic fringe**.

As part of the United Kingdom's political development, another important legacy was the emergence of **common law**, a system based on local customs and precedent rather than formal legal codes. That system forms the basis of the contemporary legal systems of the United Kingdom (with the exception of Scotland), the United States, and many former British colonies.¹

The last wave of invasions, by the Normans, occurred in 1066. The Normans were Danish Vikings who occupied northern France. In Britain, they replaced the Germanic ruling class and imposed central rule. Politically, their most important legacy was the institution of feudalism, which they brought from the European continent. Under feudalism, lords provided vassals with military protection and economic support in exchange for labor and military service. Though hardly a democratic institution, feudalism did create a system of mutual obligation between lord and peasant on one level, and between monarch and lord on another level. Indeed, some scholars have seen in these obligations the foundation for the eventual limits on royal power. The most important initial document in this regard is the **Magna Carta**, which British nobles obliged King John to sign in 1215. The Magna Carta became a royal promise to uphold feudal customs and the rights of England's barons. It set an important precedent by limiting the power of British monarchs and subjecting them to the rule of law. As a result, the United Kingdom never experienced the type of royal absolutism that was common in other countries (for example, in Russia), and this in turn helped pave the way for public control over government and the state.

The United Kingdom was fortunate to resolve relatively early in its historical development certain conflicts that other states would experience later in the modern era. A prime example is the religious divide. During the reign of Henry VIII (1509–47), a major dispute between the British monarch and the Vatican (the center of the Roman Catholic Church) had unintended consequences. When the Catholic Church failed to grant Henry a divorce, he used **Parliament** to pass laws that effectively took England out of the Catholic Church and replaced Catholicism with a Protestant Church that could be controlled by the English state instead of by Rome.

The creation of a state-controlled Anglican Church led to a religious institution that was weaker and less autonomous than its counterparts in other European countries. Supporters of Catholicism fought unsuccessfully to regain power, and

religion never plagued the United Kingdom as a polarizing force the way it did in so many other countries. Northern Ireland, where the split between Protestants and Catholics continues to create political division, is the bloody exception to the rule. A second unintended consequence of creating the Anglican Church was that Henry VIII's reliance on Parliament to sanction the changes strengthened and legitimized Parliament's power. As with the Magna Carta, piecemeal institutional changes helped pave the way for democratic control—even if that result was not foreseen at the time.

Emergence of the Modern British State

Compared with its European neighbors, the United Kingdom had a more constrained monarchy. This is not to say that British rulers were weak, but in addition to the early checks on monarchic rule, three major developments in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries decisively undermined the power of British sovereigns and are crucial for our understanding of why the United Kingdom was one of the first nations to develop democratic control.

First, the crowning of James I (a Scot) in 1603 united Scotland and England but created a political crisis. James was an absolutist at heart and resisted limits on his power imposed by Parliament. He sought to raise taxes without first asking Parliament, and his son Charles I, whose reign began in 1625, continued this flaunting of royal power, eventually precipitating civil war. The **English Civil War** (1642–51) pitted the defenders of Charles against the supporters of Parliament, who won the bitter struggle and executed Charles I in 1649.

For eleven years (1649–60), England had no monarch. It functioned as a republic led by Oliver Cromwell, whose rule soon became a military dictatorship. Parliament restored the monarchy in 1660 with the ascension of Charles II, but its power was forever weakened.

Second, when James II, a brother of Charles II, inherited the throne in 1685, the monarchy and Parliament again faced off. James was openly Catholic, and Parliament feared a return to Catholicism and absolute rule. In 1688, it removed James II and sent him into exile. In his place, it installed James's Protestant daughter Mary and her Dutch husband, William. A year later, Parliament enacted the Bill of Rights, institutionalizing its political supremacy. Since that time, monarchs have owed their position to Parliament. This so-called Glorious Revolution was a key turning point in the creation of the constitutional monarchy.

Third, in 1714, Parliament installed the current dynastic family by crowning George I (of German royalty). The monarch, who spoke little English, was forced

to rely heavily on his **cabinet** (his top advisers, or ministers) and, specifically, his **prime minister**, who coordinated the work of the other ministers. From 1721 to 1742, Sir Robert Walpole fashioned the position of prime minister into much of what the office is today. By the late eighteenth century, largely in reaction to the loss of the colonies in America, prime ministers and their cabinets were no longer selected by monarchs but were instead appointed by Parliament. Monarchs never again had the power to select members of the government.²

The British Empire

The United Kingdom began its overseas expansion in the sixteenth century, and by the early nineteenth century it had vanquished its main European rivals to become the world's dominant military, commercial, and cultural power. Its navy helped open new overseas markets for its burgeoning domestic industry, and by the empire's zenith in 1870 the United Kingdom controlled about a quarter of all world trade and probably had the globe's wealthiest economy. The dimensions of the British Empire were truly exceptional. In the nineteenth century, it governed one-quarter of the world's population, directly ruled almost 50 countries, and dominated many more with its commercial muscle.

Paralleling the gradual process of democratization in the United Kingdom, the erosion of the British Empire was also slow and incremental. It began with the loss of the American colonies in the late eighteenth century, though subsequently the empire continued to expand in Asia and Africa. By the early twentieth century, however, it had begun to shrink. Following World War I, the United Kingdom granted independence to a few of its former colonies, including Egypt and most of Ireland. With the conclusion of World War II, the tide turned even more strongly against the empire. Local resistance in many colonies, international sentiment favoring self-determination for subject peoples, the cumulative costs of two World Wars, and the burden of maintaining far-flung colonies helped spell the end of the British Empire. Independence was willingly granted to most of the remaining colonial possessions throughout Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean.

The United Kingdom managed to retain control of a few small colonies, and in 1982 it fought a brief war with Argentina to retain possession of the remote Falkland Islands. One of the United Kingdom's last colonial possessions, Hong Kong, was returned to China in 1997. Today, the **Commonwealth** includes the United Kingdom and 54 of its former colonies and serves to maintain at least some of the economic and cultural ties established during its long imperial rule.

The Industrial Revolution

The United Kingdom lays claim to being the first industrial nation, and industrialization helped support the expansion of its empire. The country's early industrialization, which began in the late eighteenth century and developed slowly, was based on its dominance in textiles, machinery, and iron production. By the mid-nineteenth century, most of the United Kingdom's workforce had moved away from the countryside to live in urban areas. While industrialization dramatically changed British politics and society, the process did not create the kind of political upheaval and instability that was seen in many late-developing nations, where it occurred more rapidly. Because the British were the first to industrialize, the United Kingdom faced little initial competition and therefore amassed tremendous wealth. Moreover, the rise of a prosperous and propertied middle class demanding a stronger political voice also facilitated the country's first steps toward democracy.³

But the benefits of early industrialization may also have been factors in its economic decline. As a world leader, the United Kingdom spent lavishly on its empire and led the Allied forces in World Wars I and II. Although the Allies won both wars, the United Kingdom was drained economically. The end of World War II also signaled the end of colonial rule, and the United Kingdom began to relinquish its empire. Finally, as the first industrialized country, it would also be one of the first nations to experience economic challenges inherent in "first-mover" industrialization. When British industries faced new competition and the obsolescence of some of their technologies after World War II, the country found it increasingly difficult to reform its economy, which began to decline.

Gradual Democratization

We have seen how Parliament weakened the power of the British monarchs, but at the same time we should note that Parliament itself originally represented the interests of the British elite: only the wealthy could vote. The United Kingdom had an "upper" **House of Lords**, which represented the aristocracy, and a "lower" **House of Commons**, which represented the interests of the lower nobility and the merchant class. In addition, by the time Parliament was established, British monarchs were no longer absolute rulers, although they continued to wield considerable political power. Two factors gradually democratized Parliament and further weakened monarchical power.

The first was the rise of political parties, which emerged in the eighteenth century as cliques of nobles but eventually reached out to broader sectors of society for support. The two largest cliques became the United Kingdom's first parties: the Conservatives (Tories) supported the monarch, and the **Liberals (Whigs)** opposed the policies of the monarch. The Whigs were the first to cultivate support among members of the United Kingdom's burgeoning commercial class, many of whom were still excluded from the political system.

The second factor was the expansion of suffrage. In 1832, the Whigs were able to push through a Reform Act that doubled the size of the British electorate, though it still excluded more than 90 percent of British adults. Over the next century, both parties gradually supported measures to expand suffrage, hoping in part to gain a political windfall. This process continued in 1928, when women over the age of 21 were granted the right to vote, and culminated in 1969 when the voting age was reduced to 18.

The gradual expansion of the vote to include all adult citizens forced the political parties to respond to demands for additional services. The new voters wanted the expansion of such public goods as improved working conditions, health care, education, and housing, and they looked to the state to provide them. The Labour Party, formed in 1900 as an outgrowth of the trade union movement, had become by the end of World War I the main representative of the working class and the primary beneficiary of expanded suffrage. By the 1920s, Labour became the United Kingdom's largest center-left party and pushed for policies that would develop basic social services for all citizens, or what we commonly call the welfare state. The British workers who defended the United Kingdom so heroically during World War II returned from that conflict with a new sense of entitlement, electing Labour to power in 1945. Armed with a parliamentary majority, the Labour government quickly moved to implement a welfare state. This was accompanied by the nationalization of a number of sectors of industry, such as coal, utilities, rail, and health care.

Postwar Politics and Debates on National Identity and State Sovereignty

The Labour Party initiated the welfare state, but British Conservatives generally supported it during much of the postwar period in what has been called the postwar **collectivist consensus**. By the 1970s, however, the British economy was in crisis, and a new breed of Tories (dubbed *neoliberals* due to their embrace of classical liberal values of limited state intervention) began to blame the United Kingdom's economic decline on the excesses of the welfare state. When Margaret

Thatcher became prime minister in 1979, she broke with traditional Tory support for what she derided as the United Kingdom's "nanny" state and pledged to diminish government's role in the economy. She lowered taxes and cut state spending on costly social services, and she replaced some state services (in areas as diverse as housing and mass transit) with private enterprise. Her government thus marked the end of the postwar collectivist consensus.

Yet in some ways, a new consensus emerged around Thatcher's reforms.⁴ Although the Labour Party's landslide victory over the Tories in 1997 can be seen as a rejection of some aspects of Thatcher's rollback of the state, the Labour Party returned to office that year under the banner of "New Labour." By adopting this new name, Prime Minister Tony Blair sought to rebrand the party and distinguish his government's "Third Way" centrist program from both Thatcher's hard-edged laissez-faire policies and Labour's more traditional platform as staunch defender of an elaborate welfare state. New Labour held government for 13 years, balancing popular progressive social reforms with policies of devolution and continued limits on social expenditures. The 2010 parliamentary election resulted in a **hung parliament** in which no party obtained a majority of seats. In what can be seen as a nod to both Thatcher and Blair, Prime Minister David Cameron and the Conservatives formed a coalition government with the center-left Liberal Democrats, calling for "fairness," but also "freedom" and "responsibility."

In the 2015 election, voters rewarded the Tories with an outright majority, signaling a conservative shift in the electorate on policies from government spending to immigration. Although his party won the election handily, Cameron struggled with controversial issues involving national identity and state sovereignty both at home and abroad. In 2014, Scotland held a referendum calling for independence from Britain, with Cameron leading the successful effort to reject independence and retain Scotland as a part of Great Britain. Two years later, the entire United Kingdom held a referendum on Britain's membership in the European Union, with Cameron once again leading the campaign for Britain to remain in the Union. In this case, those favoring an exit from the EU and greater sovereignty for Britain prevailed, leading to Cameron's resignation and triggering the process of Britain's departure from the Union after more than four decades of participation in the European project. Cameron was replaced by Theresa May in 2016 as leader of



Theresa May replaced David Cameron in 2016 as leader of the Conservative Party and prime minister.

the Conservatives and as Britain's second female prime minister. In a failed effort to strengthen her government's Brexit bargaining position, May called an early "snap" election in 2017, in which her Conservatives ultimately lost seats. This returned the United Kingdom to a hung parliament and left the Conservatives with a minority government.

Political Regime

The political regime of the United Kingdom is notable among the world's democracies because of its highly **majoritarian** features. Under the rules of British politics, the majority in Parliament has virtually unchecked power. Unlike political parties in other democracies, even parliamentary democracies, the majority party in the United Kingdom can enact policies with few checks from other branches of government. Also unlike other democracies, in the United Kingdom there are no formal constitutional limits on the central government, few judicial restraints, and no constitutionally sanctioned local authorities to dilute the power of the government in London. Only the historical traditions of democratic political culture and, while retaining membership in the European Union, restrictions imposed by that body have checked the possibility of the British government abusing its power.

Political Institutions

THE CONSTITUTION

The United Kingdom has no single document that defines the rules of politics, but the constitution is generally understood to include a number of written documents and unwritten rules that most British citizens view as inviolable.⁵ In 1215, the Magna Carta set a precedent for limits on monarchical power. Other documents include the 1689 Bill of Rights and the 1707 Act of Union, which united Scotland and England. What makes the United Kingdom's constitution particularly unusual is that it also consists of various acts of Parliament, judicial decisions, customs, and traditions. Since Parliament is viewed as sovereign, the democratically elected lower house of the legislature can amend any aspect of the constitution by a simple majority vote. This power extends to the very existence of the monarchy, the powers of regions or local governments, and the powers of the houses of Parliament. Therefore, unlike most other democratic regimes, the

ESSENTIAL POLITICAL FEATURES

- **Legislative-executive system:** Parliamentary
- **Legislature:** Parliament
 - **Lower house:** House of Commons
 - **Upper house:** House of Lords
- **Unitary or federal division of power:** Unitary
- **Main geographic subunits:** England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland
- **Electoral system for lower house:** Single-member district with plurality
- **Chief judicial body:** Supreme Court

United Kingdom has no constitutional court, because any law passed by Parliament is by definition constitutional.

The absence of written constitutional guarantees has consistently alarmed human rights advocates and has given rise to demands for a more formal constitution or, at the very least, *written* constitutional protections of basic rights. Since 1973, when the United Kingdom became a member of the European Union, British citizens have increasingly appealed to European laws to protect their rights. In response to such concerns, in 1998 the government incorporated into law the European Convention on Human Rights, a document that now serves as a basic set of constitutional liberties. In 2007, signatories to the European Union's Lisbon Treaty agreed, among other things, to make this bill of rights legally binding. As with other aspects of its EU membership, however, Britain negotiated the ability to choose which judicial matters would be ceded to the authority of the European Union's constitutional court and those over which it would retain national sovereignty. This stance has led to debate between political conservatives who have largely favored the current accumulation of conventions and statutes and liberals who have argued for the value of a written, codified constitution.⁶ It is uncertain what long-run consequences the voters' decision in 2016 to end British membership in the EU will have on constitutional liberties and other judicial matters.

Although it is a source of concern to some political analysts, others have lauded the United Kingdom's unwritten constitution for its unparalleled flexibility and responsiveness to the majority. Changing the constitution in most democracies is a cumbersome and often politically charged process. In the United Kingdom, however, changes can be implemented more quickly and without lengthy political battles. Blair's Labour government (1997–2007) carried out piecemeal constitutional reforms that have proven so significant in their effects that they have been compared to the Great Reform Act of 1832.⁷ Likewise, concessions offered by Parliament

to persuade Scottish voters to reject independence in 2014 and the government's efforts to unwind Britain from the EU have also required significant constitutional reforms. Admirers of the British constitution argue that it has delivered both political stability and flexibility since the late seventeenth century; in their view, a formal document does not necessarily make for a more democratic government.

THE CROWN

We can think of the **Crown**, the legislature, the prime minister, the cabinet, and the judiciary as the main branches of government in the United Kingdom. In most respects, we can think of the British Crown as the head of state. The Crown, embodied by the monarch, is the symbolic representative of the continuity of the British state. The monarch (currently Queen Elizabeth II) thus acts as a purely ceremonial figure; and on matters of importance, she can act only at the behest of the cabinet even though the cabinet is referred to collectively as Her Majesty's government. The British monarchy is a continual source of popular fascination, in part because the institution and all its pomp and circumstance appear to be a relic in the twenty-first century. The reality, however, is less glamorous. The British monarch today is essentially a paid civil servant: the government allocates a budget to cover the royal family's expenses, and the queen spends much of her time signing papers, dedicating public works, and performing diplomatic functions.

The UK monarchy has survived for centuries precisely because it has agreed to act constitutionally. Since the nineteenth century, this has meant that it must always follow the orders of elected representatives. For example, although the monarch always selects the head of government, the choice must always be the leader of the majority party in the lower house of Parliament. Only in the unlikely event that the legislature found itself deadlocked and unable to form a government could a monarch have any real influence on politics, and even in that case her choice would be severely constrained. Likewise, the monarch is officially the commander of the British armed forces, but it is the prime minister who has the power to declare wars and sign treaties.

The British monarchy is a hereditary institution that until recently followed the rule of primogeniture—the oldest son (or oldest daughter if there were no sons) inherited the throne. In an effort to modernize this most traditional of institutions, however, the Cameron government secured passage of a bill in 2011 abolishing male precedence in royal succession. Approved by the 16 other countries in the British Commonwealth that recognize the British monarch as their

head of state, this reform means that the eldest born of each generation, regardless of gender, is entitled to inherit the throne. However, the cardinal constitutional principle of parliamentary supremacy means that Parliament itself may actually choose the monarch. In 1701, for example, Parliament imposed a new dynastic family (the Hanovers) to replace the reigning Stuarts. Since that time, only Protestants have been allowed to succeed to the throne. For more than six decades, since 1952, Elizabeth II has been queen, succeeding her father, George VI.

Despite the series of high-profile scandals that have rocked the monarchy during her reign, polls consistently show that the institution remains highly popular, as evidenced by the public celebrations of the queen's diamond jubilee (60 years on the throne) in 2012 and the great national interest in the 2011 wedding of Prince William (the queen's eldest grandson) and Catherine Middleton and the birth of their son and daughter, George and Charlotte, respectively (third and fourth in line after their grandfather and father). There have been occasional movements in the United Kingdom to eliminate the monarchy, but these have failed to garner much support. Despite scandals and the costs of royalty, public support for the institution remains strong. A 2016 poll, for example, placed confidence in the monarchy at an all-time high: three-fourths of Britons were in favor of retaining the monarchy, and only 17 percent preferred its elimination.⁸

The Branches of Government

THE PRIME MINISTER

Parliament is supreme in the United Kingdom's political system, but real power is concentrated in the prime minister and the cabinet, which together constitute the government. The prime minister is the head of government and, as in all parliamentary systems, must be an elected member of the legislature. She or he is the head of the largest party in the lower house, the House of Commons (selection as party leader is handled in a party convention held before a general election). Once named prime minister by the monarch (a mere formality), this individual selects the cabinet.

British prime ministers are probably the most powerful heads of government of any contemporary democracy. Because they can expect their parliamentary majority to approve all legislation, because party discipline in the United Kingdom is very strong, and because there are few checks on the power of the central government, prime ministers usually get their way. They wield less power, though,

when their parties hold a slim majority (as was the case with John Major from 1990 to 1997) or when they are forced to depend on a coalition of parties (as was the case with the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition from 2010 to 2015). As with any other **Member of Parliament (MP)**, prime ministers in the United Kingdom are elected to a maximum term of five years. Before the passage of the 2011 Fixed-term Parliaments Act, the prime minister could choose to call elections at any time before that term had expired and would commonly do so to take advantage of favorable political conditions. The 2011 act fixed the date of subsequent elections for every five years beginning in 2015. The Conservative government's decision to call an early election in 2017 required a two-thirds parliamentary "supermajority" in order to override the Fixed-term Parliaments Act.

Of course, prime ministers are still subject to a legislative **vote of no confidence**, which can occur when the chamber rejects a measure deemed of high importance to the government. In such situations, either the entire cabinet must resign (and be replaced by a new one) or new elections must be called. Although such a check on the government exists, it is rarely used; over the past century, only two governments have been toppled by a legislative vote of no confidence. In fact, the prime minister can use the threat of a no-confidence vote as a way to rally support. In 2003, Tony Blair submitted a motion to the House of Commons to support the use of force against Iraq even though a prime minister may take the country to war without parliamentary approval. Yet he chose to submit his decision to the House of Commons, threatening to resign if he failed to win support. The tactic worked: despite widespread opposition to the war among his Labour Party backbenchers (MPs holding no government office), a large majority in Parliament supported the war.

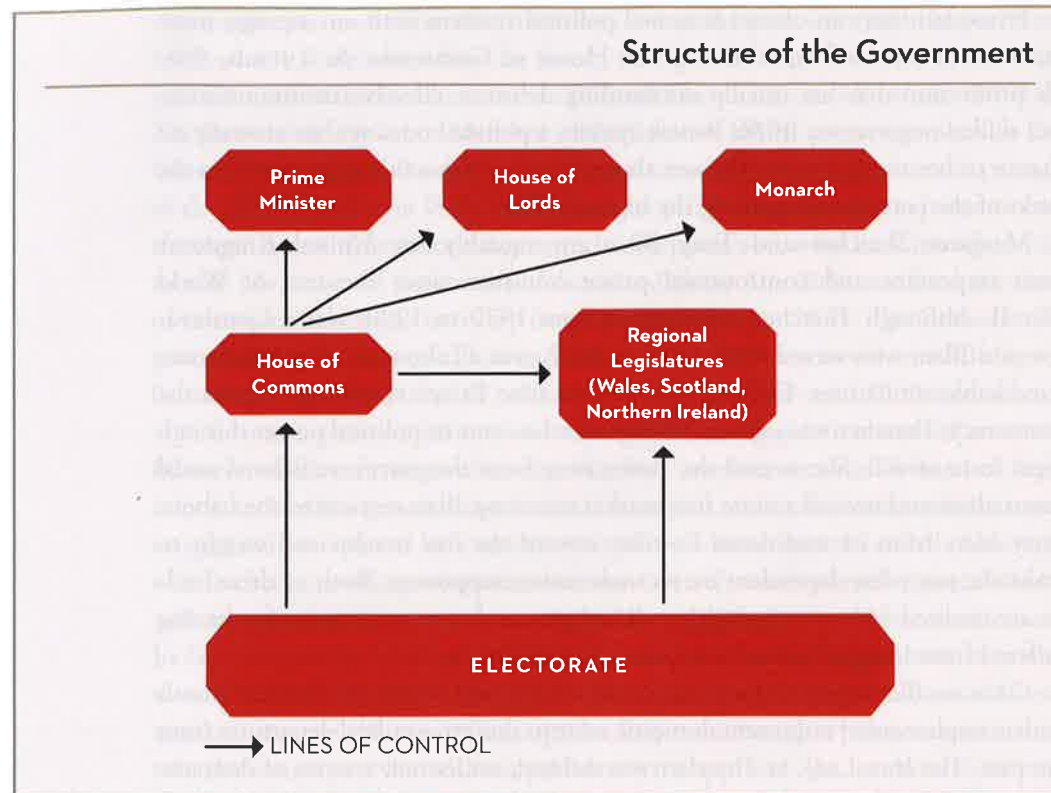
Prime ministers play a number of roles. As leaders of their party, they must maintain the support of their fellow MPs, a condition that has plagued every prime minister since Thatcher. They must appear in the legislature weekly for a televised question period, during which they must defend government policies and answer questions from MPs—and in so doing, display strong oratorical skills.⁹ As head of government, the prime minister must direct the activity of the cabinet and smooth over differences among cabinet members. As a politician, she is expected to guide her party to victory in general elections and, in some cases, manage to hold together a fractious coalition. Even though the monarch is head of state and the nation, the prime minister is expected to provide national leadership. British prime ministers are also diplomats and world leaders, roles that Tony Blair, for example, especially relished—despite the objections of many of his own party members, particularly regarding the war in Iraq.

Prime ministers are always seasoned political veterans with, on average, more than two decades of experience in the House of Commons. As a result, British prime ministers are usually outstanding debaters, effective communicators, and skilled negotiators. In the British system, a political outsider has virtually no chance of becoming prime minister; those aspiring to this title must move up the ranks of the party before gaining the highest office.

Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair are arguably the United Kingdom's most important and controversial prime ministers since the end of World War II. Although Thatcher, who served from 1979 to 1990, was a Conservative and Blair, who served from 1997 to 2007, was a Labourite, they share some remarkable similarities. Defying the Conservative Party's traditional ties to the aristocracy, Thatcher was a grocer's daughter who came to political power through sheer force of will. She steered the Tories away from the party's traditional social paternalism and toward a more free-market economy. Blair reoriented the Labour Party away from its traditional hostility toward the free market and sought to make the party less dependent on its trade union supporters. Both of these leaders are credited with reinvigorating political parties that were in crisis after having suffered from long periods of being out of government.

Once in office and armed with large majorities in the House of Commons, both leaders implemented important domestic reforms that were radical departures from the past. The Iron Lady, as Thatcher was dubbed, undertook a series of dramatic steps to reverse Britain's economic stagnation and to repeal the social-democratic policies that had been created under the collectivist consensus. Her government privatized many state-owned businesses and allowed numerous ailing firms to go bankrupt. Thatcher also confronted and eventually defeated powerful trade unions during widespread strikes by unions opposed to her policies. One particularly controversial but popular policy was her decision to sell millions of public housing units to their occupants in order to create more private homeowners in the United Kingdom. Her boldest policy was the ill-advised introduction of the so-called poll tax, designed to move local governments' tax burden from property owners to all citizens. This legislation generated widespread resentment and even rioting.

Blair's domestic reforms were no less dramatic, although they were less controversial. Although he continued most of Thatcher's economic policies, he implemented an ambitious set of constitutional reforms. He devolved power to regional and local governments (some of which had lost power under Thatcher), creating new legislatures in Scotland and Wales. He began to reform the archaic House of Lords, established a Supreme Court, and made the central bank (the Bank of Britain) independent of the government.



In their foreign policies, both leaders favored an extremely close relationship with the United States, often at the expense of relations with the United Kingdom's European allies. Thatcher and Blair also took the country into controversial wars. Thatcher launched a costly war against Argentina in 1982 to retake the distant Falkland Islands, and the United Kingdom's victory in that war temporarily buoyed her political success. In 2003, Blair joined the United States in the Iraq War—a move bitterly opposed by many within his own party and by a large majority of the UK public. As the war bogged down, Blair's popularity plummeted.

Thatcher and Blair were exceptional communicators whose charismatic personalities charmed the public. Thatcher was known for her tough, often blunt public statements and her fierce debating skills. Blair had wit and charm that captivated Britons for over a decade. However, both were unpopular by the end of their time in office. Many people viewed Thatcher as insensitive and out of touch, and Blair increasingly as a spinmaster who often skirted the truth. Both of them stubbornly refused to budge from policies that the British public bitterly opposed (such as Thatcher's poll tax and Blair's stance on the Iraq War).

After over a decade in power, Thatcher and Blair each resigned their positions without ever having lost an election. Thatcher quit when she faced growing opposition and a challenge to her leadership within the Conservative Party. After Labour won its third consecutive majority in the Commons, the increasingly beleaguered Blair agreed to step down and hand power to his longtime chancellor of the exchequer, Gordon Brown. One final similarity is worth noting: Thatcher and Blair both handed power to competent but less charismatic party leaders who proved less controversial and less successful.¹⁰

THE CABINET

Cabinets evolved out of the group of experts who originally advised Britain's monarchs. Contemporary British cabinets have about 20 members (called *ministers*), all of whom must be MPs. They are usually from the lower house but occasionally are members of the upper house, the House of Lords. The prime minister generally appoints leading party officials to the top cabinet positions. Although the prime minister and the cabinet emerge from the Parliament, they stand apart from the legislature as a separate executive branch and have few checks on their powers.

As in most democracies, cabinet ministers in the United Kingdom preside over their individual government departments and are responsible for answering to Parliament (during question time) about actions of the bureaucracies they oversee. The most important ministries are the Foreign Office (which conducts foreign policy), the Home Office (which oversees the judiciary), and the Exchequer (whose minister, called the chancellor, oversees financial policy).

One unwritten rule of cabinet behavior in the United Kingdom is **collective responsibility**—even when individual cabinet ministers oppose a given policy, the entire cabinet must appear unified and take responsibility for the policy. Cabinet ministers who cannot support a decision must resign and return to the legislature. For example, three members of Blair's cabinet resigned in 2003 over opposition to the war in Iraq, and a member of Cameron's cabinet resigned in 2016 in protest over government cuts to disability benefits.

THE LEGISLATURE

The British legislature, called Parliament, is perhaps the most powerful legislature on earth, due largely to the lack of constitutional constraints, which we have just discussed. The concentration of power is even more impressive when it is

considered that of the two chambers of the legislature, the House of Commons and the House of Lords, only the former has any real power.

The House of Commons currently consists of 650 members representing individual districts in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Members are elected for a maximum term of five years, though new elections may be called before the expiration of the term in the event of a successful vote of no confidence or vote to override the Fixed-term Parliaments Act. Government and opposition parties face each other in a tiny rectangular chamber, where members of the government and leaders of the opposition sit in the front rows. The other MPs, called backbenchers, sit behind their leaders. A politically neutral Speaker of the House presides.

Despite the enormous power of the House of Commons, individual legislators are far less powerful than their counterparts in the United States. They receive relatively paltry salaries and have very small staffs and few resources. In parliamentary systems in general, the largest party elects the prime minister as head of government; as a result, political parties, not individual members, are what matter. Thus British legislators follow the lead of their party and, for fear of weakening party cohesion, do not undertake the type of individual initiative common to representatives in the United States. Moreover, parties designate certain members to serve as whips, who are charged with enforcing the party line. Nevertheless, MPs are typically more accessible than American legislators and offer frequent “clinics,” or face-to-face meetings, with individual constituents to hear their concerns.

Even with these limitations, MPs do perform important tasks. They actively debate issues, participate in legislative committees (though these are less powerful than their U.S. counterparts), vote on legislation proposed by the government, and have the power to remove the prime minister through a vote of no confidence. Finally, although the government initiates the vast majority of legislation, individual members propose measures from time to time.

Thus, despite the doctrine of parliamentary supremacy, the legislature in the United Kingdom mostly deliberates, ratifies, and scrutinizes policies that are proposed by the executive. The government is usually able to impose its will on its majority in the House of Commons. MPs have traditionally voted with their parties more than 90 percent of the time, though both the coalition government (2010–15) and the current Conservative minority government have been predictably less disciplined. Weaker governments can embolden backbenchers in their own parties to defy party whips and vote against their own governments. Nevertheless, even governments with large majorities occasionally lose the vote in the lower house, which suggests that MPs sometimes act independently.

The House of Lords is another uniquely British institution. It was considered the *upper* house not only because it represented the top aristocracy but also because it was at the time considered the more powerful of the two chambers. As the United Kingdom underwent democratization, however, it made sense for a chamber of appointed members of the aristocracy to lose most of its power, and today the House of Lords has gradually become nearly powerless. True to the British desire to accommodate tradition, it remains as yet another reminder of the United Kingdom’s predemocratic past.

The House of Lords is composed of over 800 members, or peers, who have traditionally been appointed in several ways. **Life peers** are distinguished citizens appointed for life by the Crown upon the recommendation of the prime minister. About a dozen top officials of the Church of England are also members of the House of Lords. Another dozen, known as *law lords*, are top legal experts, appointed for life, who played an important role in legal appeals until recent reforms transferred their judicial responsibilities out of the upper chamber. The most controversial component of the House of Lords is composed of **hereditary peers**, members of the aristocracy (dukes, earls, barons, and so on), who until recently had been able to bequeath their seats to their offspring. In 1999, the Labour government eliminated all but 92 of the hereditary peerages as part of a reform of the upper chamber.

The House of Lords has no actual veto power over legislation, but it can delay some legislation for up to one year and occasionally persuades governments to amend legislation. Historically, the most important role of the lords was their service as the United Kingdom’s court of last appeal, and the legal expertise of some members of the lords is often called upon to improve legislation. However, Parliament passed legislation in 2009 creating an independent Supreme Court, depriving the lords of most of their judicial influence.

Currently, there is considerable debate in the House of Commons and among the broader British citizenry about the future of the upper house and whether it should be directly elected and given greater powers. Over the past decade, various commissions and cross-party parliamentary groups have recommended reforms designed, alternatively, to either weaken the ability of the current body to slow legislation or substantially restructure the chamber to increase its authority and relevance. Advisory votes held in the House of Commons have been inconclusive, but clearly seem to favor a directly elected upper house, perhaps with fixed terms of 12 to 15 years. Not surprisingly, the House of Lords has rejected any such reform, voting instead for a fully appointed chamber. Equally unsurprising may be the hesitation of the House of Commons to enact any actual reforms that would strengthen the legislative power of a second chamber at the expense of its own.¹¹

THE JUDICIARY

Compared with the United States and even with other parliamentary democracies, the judiciary in the United Kingdom plays a relatively minor role. Until recently, there was no tradition of judicial review (the right of courts to strike down legislation that contradicts the constitution), because the British parliament was always supreme: any law passed by the legislature was, by definition, constitutional. Thus, the role of the courts in the United Kingdom has been mainly to ensure that parliamentary statutes have been followed.

Formerly the responsibility of law lords in the House of Lords, since 2009 a separate Supreme Court of the United Kingdom has served as the highest court of appeal on most legal matters. Reflecting their former jurisdiction, all current Supreme Court justices are also law lords from the House of Lords, selected from among distinguished jurists by the Lord Chancellor (the minister who heads the judiciary) and serving until retirement. Their replacements, however, will no longer be members of the House of Lords, but will be appointed by a commission.

Though politically weak, over the past couple of decades a slow move toward greater political involvement of the courts has occurred. In part, this is because British governments have sought legal interpretations that would support their actions. A second factor in this development has been the embrace of international laws, such as the adoption of the European Convention on Human Rights in 1998, which codified for the first time in the United Kingdom a set of basic civil rights. These laws have given the courts new authority to strike down legislation as unconstitutional, though these powers have so far been used sparingly and may be further weakened with Brexit. Still, the days when we could speak of the United Kingdom as lacking judicial review may be slowly coming to an end.

The broader legal system, based on common law and developed in the twelfth century, contrasts starkly with the stricter code law practiced in the rest of Europe, which is less focused on precedent and interpretation. Like most democracies, the United Kingdom has an elaborate hierarchy of civil and criminal courts as well as a complex system of appeals.

The Electoral System

Like the United States, the United Kingdom uses the single-member district (SMD) system based on plurality voting, or what is often known as “first past the post.” Each of the 650 constituencies elects one MP, and that member needs to win only a plurality of votes (more than any other candidate), not a majority.

Electoral constituencies are based mostly on population, and they average about 68,000 voters. Constituencies are revised every five to seven years by a government commission.

The implications of the plurality SMD system are fairly clear. First, as shown in the table “Consequences of the British Electoral System, 2010–2017,” p. 59, the system favors and helps maintain the dominance of the two main political parties, Labour and Conservative. Second, and related, the system consistently penalizes smaller parties. The Liberal Democrats, whose support is spread relatively evenly across the country, regularly garner between one-fifth and one-quarter of votes in many districts, but they can rarely muster enough votes to edge out the larger parties. In fact, in 2015, support for the Liberal Democrats fell precipitously, matched by big vote gains for both the **United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP)** and the **Scottish National Party (SNP)**. Like the Liberal Democrats, UKIP’s nearly 13 percent of the popular vote was widely dispersed, yielding only one parliamentary seat. On the other hand, in the wake of the failed 2014 Scottish independence referendum, the regionally concentrated SNP swept 56 of Scotland’s 59 seats in Parliament on less than 5 percent of the vote. In the 2017 election, however, the SMD system in turn punished both UKIP and the SNP, with the former party losing nearly all of its support and its single seat and the latter losing over a third of its seats.

Third, with the 2010 and 2017 elections as significant exceptions, the British electoral system has generally produced clear majorities in the House of Commons, even when there was no clear majority in the electorate. Indeed, in the elections of 1951 and 1974, the party with the smaller percentage of the vote won the most seats thanks to the nature of the electoral system. Even in 1997, Labour won a huge (179-seat) majority in the Commons with only 43 percent of the vote. These distortions occur when more than two parties contest a seat, so that a majority of votes are wasted—that is, the votes are not counted toward the winning party. Since World War II, more than 60 percent of all seats have been won with a minority of votes.

In a system that gives virtually unchecked power to the party with the majority of seats, an electoral process artificially producing majorities could be considered a serious distortion of democratic rule. It is no wonder that the parties most hurt by the electoral system, especially the Liberal Democrats, have long called for electoral reform. The Labour government elected in 1997 appointed an independent commission to consider a more proportional electoral system, but as the party in government and the chief beneficiary of the current system, Labour had little incentive to act on the recommendations.

The 2010 election, which departed from the single-party-majority outcome predicted by political scientists and confirmed by most UK general elections,

afforded the Liberal Democrats the opportunity to press their demand for electoral reform. For the first time since 1974, no party managed to obtain a majority of seats in the election, resulting in a hung parliament. Among other consequences (examined later in this chapter), the successful effort by the Conservatives to draw the Liberal Democrats into a majority coalition included the promise to hold a referendum on electoral reform. In 2011, the referendum was held, allowing voters to choose between retaining the existing plurality SMD system and instituting a majority SMD system known as *alternative vote* (AV). Whereas in the current arrangement the candidate with a plurality of votes is elected, the proposed AV system would have allowed voters to rank candidates by preference. If no candidate obtained an outright majority based on first preferences, then the candidate with the fewest first-choice votes would be eliminated and the second-choice candidate on those ballots received those votes. This process of elimination and reallocation would be repeated until a top candidate obtained a majority of votes.

Ultimately, the 2011 referendum failed resoundingly—over two-thirds of voters rejected the AV system. Despite agreeing to bring the referendum forward, the Conservatives were clear in their preferences to retain the existing plurality system. Labour took no position on the referendum, and even the Liberal Democrats would not have been fully satisfied with a yes vote. They far preferred a more radical reform: the adoption of a proportional representation (PR) system in which each party is allotted seats in the legislature in direct proportion to its percentage of the popular vote.

Devolution has permitted greater electoral experimentation in regional legislatures. Scotland and Wales have adopted a mixed PR-SMD electoral system, and Northern Ireland uses a system known as *single-transferable vote*, similar to the AV system just discussed. Ironically, the governing Labour Party that authorized these regional parliaments in the 1990s—and benefited greatly from plurality SMD—favored a mixed system for the regional legislatures because it feared that plurality SMD would produce large majorities for the local nationalist parties.

Local Government

Unlike the United States with its federal form of government and despite the devolution of some authority to regional bodies, the United Kingdom may be considered a unitary state in which no formal powers are constitutionally reserved for regional or local government. Indeed, during the Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher, the autonomy of municipal governments was sharply

Consequences of the British Electoral System, 2010–2017

ELECTION YEAR	% OF VOTES	% OF SEATS	SEATS WON
Labour			
2010	29	40	258
2015	30	36	232
2017	40	40	262
Conservative			
2010	36	47	306
2015	37	51	331
2017	42	49	318
Liberal Democrat			
2010	23	9	57
2015	8	1	8
2017	7	2	12
Others			
2010	10	4	29
2015	25	12	79
2017	10	9	58

Note: Due to rounding, percentages do not always equal 100.

curtailed. The Labour government elected in 1997 took bold steps to restore some political power to the distinct nations that compose the United Kingdom as well as to local governments, and Conservative governments since 2010 have continued to grant more authority to local governments and communities. However, Parliament remains fully sovereign and can enact laws at any time to limit or even eliminate this devolved authority. In addition, unlike other federal systems, Britain's upper chamber is unelected and therefore not accountable to states or other regional bodies.

Although there has never been a constitutional provision for local autonomy, British localities have enjoyed a long tradition of powerful local government. Concerned that local governments (or "councils" as they are known in the United Kingdom), especially left-leaning ones in large urban areas, were taxing

and spending beyond their means, Thatcher's Conservative government passed a law sharply limiting the ability of these councils to raise revenue. The struggle between the central government and the councils came to a head in 1986 when, in a move deeply resented by urban British citizens, Thatcher abolished the Labour-dominated Greater London Council and several other urban governments. London was left with councils in each of its 32 boroughs, but it had no single city government or mayor. In 1989, Thatcher further threatened local governments by replacing the local property tax with a poll tax—that is, a flat tax levied on every urban citizen. The new policy shifted the tax burden from business and property owners to individuals (rich and poor alike) and was among the most unpopular policies of Thatcher's 11 years in power. In response, rioting broke out in London.

After 1997, Tony Blair restored considerable autonomy to municipal government, enacting reforms that allowed Londoners to directly elect a mayor with significant powers and to choose representatives to a Greater London Assembly. Since restoring the office of mayor, Londoners have elected strong and colorful leaders, including Ken Livingstone (nicknamed “Red Ken” because of his identification with the radical left of the Labour Party) and Boris Johnson, an equally controversial and flamboyant Conservative. London's current leader, Sadiq Khan, is the city's first nonwhite mayor and the first Muslim mayor of any major Western capital.

More recently, under the promise of creating a “big society,” Conservative governments have sought to continue this process of devolution, requiring greater transparency in local government and giving local citizens more decision-making power regarding local taxation and public services. Since 2012, 16 additional major municipalities have been granted authority to hold mayoral elections.

Representation at the regional level has historically been very limited. Of the four nations that constitute the United Kingdom (England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland), only Northern Ireland had its own legislature, until political violence there caused the central government to disband it in 1972. Each of the four nations has a cabinet minister in the central government, called a secretary of state, who is responsible for setting policies in each region.

As it did with local government, the Labour Party promoted devolution, or the decentralization of power, to the United Kingdom's regions. In 1997, Scotland and Wales voted in referenda to create their own legislatures to address local issues, though their powers are not uniform: Scotland's Parliament is substantially more powerful and autonomous than Wales's Assembly, a reflection of the much stronger nationalist tendencies in Scotland as manifested in the 2014 vote for Scottish independence (see “Scotland's Bid for Independence,” p. 81). Meanwhile, the 1998 **Good Friday Agreement** between Catholics and Protestants in

Northern Ireland has allowed for the reestablishment of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Some observers view the development of these bodies as the first step toward a federal United Kingdom.¹² Ironically, England, which is the seat of British national government, is the only part of the United Kingdom without its own regional government.

Despite devolution measures and talk of a decentralized “big society,” the United Kingdom remains a centralized, unitary state. Regional and local authorities clearly enjoy greater legitimacy and far more powers than in the past—a trend that is likely to continue—but the central government still controls defense policy, most taxation power, and national economic policy, among other aspects of government. The central government also retains the power to limit (or even eliminate) local government if and when it so chooses.

Political Conflict and Competition

The Party System

In the United Kingdom's majoritarian parliamentary system, political parties are extremely important. The majority party controls government and can generally implement its policy goals, which are spelled out in the party manifesto.

From the end of World War II to 1970, the United Kingdom had a two-party system. The Conservative Party and the Labour Party together garnered more than 90 percent of the popular vote. The two large parties were equally successful during that period—each won four elections. After 1974, a multiparty system emerged, which included the birth of a stronger centrist **Liberal Democratic Party** and more recently the UK Independence party as well as a surge of support for nationalist parties in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. But since the Conservatives and Labour continue to prevail, the current system is often called a *two-and-a-half-party system*, in which the Liberal Democratic Party trails far behind the other two parties.

The United Kingdom's party system differs regionally, even for national elections. In England, the three major parties (Labour, Conservative, and Liberal Democrat) compete with one another. In Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, important regional parties compete with the three national political parties. Before turning to party politics today, let's look more closely at each of the United Kingdom's major parties.

THE LABOUR PARTY

We have discussed the democratization of the United Kingdom as a gradual process that incorporated previously excluded groups into the political system. A clear example of this is the Labour Party, which was formed in 1900 as an outgrowth of the trade union movement. Initially, it sought to give the British working class a voice in Parliament. Only after the mobilizing effect of World War I and the expansion of suffrage in 1918 was the Labour Party able to make significant progress at the polls. By 1918, it had garnered almost one-quarter of the vote. Labour's turning point and its emergence as one of the United Kingdom's two dominant parties came with its landslide victory in 1945, just after the end of World War II.

Like virtually all working-class parties of the world, the British Labour Party considered socialism its dominant ideological characteristic. British socialists, however, were influenced by Fabianism, a moderate ideology that advocated working within the parliamentary order to bring about social-democratic change. While Labour championed a strong welfare state and some state ownership of industry, the party's moderate politics never threatened to replace capitalism.

For most of its history, the Labour Party depended heavily on working-class votes, winning the support of about two-thirds of the United Kingdom's manual laborers. Starting in the 1970s, however, the composition of the class structure began to change as fewer Britons engaged in blue-collar jobs. At that point, the solid identification of workers with Labour began to erode, creating a serious challenge for the party.

By the mid-1970s, the Labour Party was badly divided between radical socialists who wanted the party to move to the left to shore up its working-class credentials and moderates who wanted it to move toward the political center. These divisions involved the party's relationship with the trade unions and its stand on economic and foreign policy. This internal division caused the party's more conservative elements to bolt in 1981. Most serious, the internal bickering led to the defeat of Labour in every election from 1979 to 1997.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the Labour Party began a process of ideological and organizational moderation. The party's constitution was rewritten to weaken severely the ability of trade unions to control party policy. Labour also abandoned its commitment to socialism and advocated a cross-class appeal. Tony Blair, who became party leader in 1994, consolidated these changes and advocated moderate free-market policies with ambitious constitutional reform, policies that were eventually known as the Third Way.¹³ Blair's landslide victory in the 1997

elections marked the beginning of a period of party unity and electoral success that has been termed *New Labour*, and the election results of 2001 and 2005 confirmed this success.

Labour's victory in the 2005 elections marked the first time in history that the party had been elected to office three consecutive times. However, those elections reduced Labour's majority by 47 seats, and two years later Blair handed power over to his chancellor of the exchequer, Gordon Brown. Brown's Labour government fared even worse in the 2010 elections, dropping 91 additional seats and losing its majority in Parliament. Brown stepped down as prime minister and resigned as leader of his party, replaced by Ed Miliband, who became leader of the party and leader of the opposition in Parliament for the next five years. Miliband took the blame for Labour's defeat in the 2015 election and was replaced by the left-leaning **Jeremy Corbyn**, a divisive figure initially well-loved by many of the party's rank and file, but highly unpopular among Labour's more moderate leadership. Despite qualms among party leaders who feared he was taking Labour outside of the political mainstream, Corbyn led the party to a strong finish in the 2017 election, denying Conservatives the majority they had anticipated.

THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY

If the Labour Party was never as leftist as some of its counterparts on the continent, the Conservatives (Tories) similarly have made for a rather moderate right. The Conservatives emerged in the late eighteenth century and have come to be identified not only with the democratization of the United Kingdom but also with the origins of the British welfare state through the post-World War II collectivist consensus. Because the Tories have usually been pragmatic conservatives, and because they have always embraced democratic rule, the party has garnered widespread respect and even electoral support among a wide range of voters. In 1997, about one-third of the British working-class vote went to the Conservatives.

Just as the Labour Party developed severe internal ideological divisions beginning in the 1970s, at about the same time, the Tories became divided among advocates of traditional conservative pragmatism, of a limited welfare state, and of radical or neoliberal free-market reforms. The rise to power of Margaret Thatcher in the late 1970s marked the dominance of the neoliberal faction and the Tories' abandonment of support for the collectivist consensus. The party further split over policy regarding the European Union, with so-called Euroskeptics facing off against supporters of integration with Europe.¹⁴

The Tories struggled in opposition after their defeat in the 1997 elections. A series of ineffective leaders attempted unsuccessfully to lead the Conservative Party back to power. Following the 2005 elections, the Tories chose the young and charismatic David Cameron as party leader. Under Cameron's energetic leadership, and much like Labour under Blair, the Tories forged a more coherent and more centrist ideological position, captured in Cameron's call for a "big society" and more socially liberal policies regarding abortion and gay rights. In the 2010 elections, Conservatives obtained a solid plurality of seats in the House of Commons, but not the majority of seats necessary to govern alone. The Conservatives entered into a coalition government with the Liberal Democrats, forming an unlikely alliance that required ideological and political compromises from both parties.

The party fared better in the 2015 election, winning an outright majority of seats, which allowed the Tories to form a single-party government with Cameron continuing as prime minister.

Despite these gains, the Conservative Party continues to be plagued by fault lines that have persisted within the party since the 1970s. In the wake of the 2008–2009 financial crisis, Cameron's push for austerity measures and a call for leaner government cheered some but angered others. Even more divisive has been the issue of the European Union. Faced with growing disenchantment and fears inside his own party and among the broader British public about increased immigration and threats to British sovereignty, Cameron renegotiated some terms of Britain's EU membership and brought this new arrangement to the British people in 2016 in an "in" or "out" referendum. Although Cameron and EU advocates



British workers and students protest austerity measures imposed by the Conservative-Liberal Democratic coalition.

within the party hoped these efforts would both restore party unity and salvage Britain's membership in the Union, the measure failed on both counts. A number of Conservative MPs, including some party leaders, openly campaigned in favor of Brexit, and several members even defected to the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP; see upcoming discussion). Likewise, British voters chose to exit the EU, leading Cameron to take responsibility for the vote and step down as prime minister. Cameron's successor Theresa May sought, like Cameron before her, to restore party unity and obtain a strong mandate to negotiate a favorable Brexit deal by calling a snap election in 2017. But like Cameron's Brexit referendum gamble, her effort backfired. Instead of gaining seats as polls had anticipated, the Tories lost seats and lost their parliamentary majority, forcing a weakened and divided Conservative party to lead a minority government.

THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATS

A third-party refuge for voters embracing a range of values and political positions, the Liberal Democratic Party was formed in 1988 through the merger of the Liberal Party and defectors from the Labour Party. Despite its left-of-center origins, the party's 2010 alliance with the Conservatives was not as unlikely as it may have seemed. And while the "Tory-LibDem" coalition proved less harmonious than its architects hoped, it nonetheless held together for a full five-year term, indicating at least a degree of pragmatic cooperation if not a great deal of ideological common ground.

The Liberal Democratic Party's ideology is a mixture of classical liberalism's emphasis on both individual freedom and a weak state and social democracy's emphasis on collective equality. The Liberals (Whigs) were displaced by the rise of the Labour Party in the early twentieth century, and the current Liberal Democratic Party has been unable to recover the power and influence of the early Whigs. The Liberal Democrats have been consistent supporters of European integration and were staunch opponents of the war in Iraq. Though viewed as a centrist party, the Liberal Democrats have often attacked New Labour's policies as too timid and have frequently called for increased taxation and social spending. Though generally viewed as closer to Labour than to the Conservatives, as early as 2004 the party adopted a policy of strict neutrality vis-à-vis the two major parties, indicating its willingness to consider forming a coalition with either party in the event of a hung parliament. In 2007, Nick Clegg was elected Liberal Democratic leader and became the United Kingdom's youngest party leader.

In the 2010 elections, Clegg and the Liberal Democrats obtained the party's highest-ever share of the popular vote (23 percent), but they were still unable to break through the barriers imposed by the SMD electoral system and actually lost seats in Parliament. The Liberal Democrats have consistently called for electoral reform that would give Britain a system rewarding parties with seats in proportion to their votes. Finding themselves for the first time in the position of deal-maker in Britain's 2010 hung parliament, they were able to demand a 2011 referendum on electoral reform. But because both major parties feared they would not be able to win an outright majority in a proportional representation (PR) system, the Liberal Democrats were able to persuade their Tory coalition partner to agree only to a much more modest proposal which predictably failed. Similarly, Liberal Democrats also secured a promise from Conservatives that the coalition government would put forward a bill reforming the House of Lords. Although the bill was proposed in 2012, Conservative backbenchers derailed it before it ever came to a vote, thus indicating the limitations of coalition cooperation.

The greatest victim of these coalition conflicts turned out to be the Liberal Democrats, whose supporters felt that the party (and particularly its leader and Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg) conceded too much ground to the Conservatives in an effort to keep the coalition together. What appeared in 2010 as a great opportunity for this third party to break the Labour/Conservative lock on government ultimately proved to be the party's weakening. In 2015 the party obtained less than 8 percent of the vote and captured only 8 seats in the House of Commons. Although the LibDems picked up four seats in the 2017 election, its percentage of the popular vote declined. Clegg stepped down as party leader after the 2015 election and his successor did the same following the 2017 poll.

OTHER PARTIES

The apparent weakening of the Liberal Democrats as a third contender in British politics does not mean that smaller parties play no role in British politics. However, while a variety of small parties vie for seats in British elections, few of them are successful. The main impediment to the success of small parties remains the structure of the electoral system, since plurality SMD systems tend to work against small parties that fail to win a plurality of votes. Other than the Liberal Democratic Party and the Green Party (which elected its first MP in 2010 after decades of political activity), historically regionally based parties—such as the Scottish National Party (SNP), the Welsh Plaid Cymru, and several Northern Irish parties (for example,

Sinn Féin)—have been most successful in concentrating enough votes in some districts to win seats in the legislature. As noted earlier, the SNP fared particularly well in the 2015 election, securing all but 3 of the 59 seats representing Scotland in Parliament while winning less than 5 percent of the overall vote.

Finally, though it obtained only one seat in the 2015 election and lost that seat in the 2017 election, in recent years the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) garnered significant support for its anti-EU, anti-immigration platform. Such support was particularly pronounced in local elections and, ironically, in elections to the European Parliament (even though the party firmly opposes the European Union). In fact, in the 2014 European Parliamentary elections, UKIP received more votes and seated more members than any other party—the first time in over a century that a political party other than the Conservatives or Labour had won a national election.

How do we account for this success? The party has capitalized on growing “Europhobia” in Britain and rising unease with immigration in general. In addition, the party's outspoken populist leader (and member of the European Parliament), **Nigel Farage**, brought a great deal of publicity and popular support to the party. Finally, British Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) are elected using a proportional representation system, which rewarded UKIP as the top vote-getter. This final point highlights the significance of electoral systems. Although UKIP garnered nearly 13 percent of the popular vote in the 2015 House of Commons election, voters had little reason to remain loyal to this single-issue party following the successful Brexit referendum in 2016. UKIP obtained less than 2 percent of the popular vote in the 2017 election and lost its only MP.

PARTY POLITICS TODAY

In the 2015 elections, although voters ended the hung parliament by awarding a majority of seats to the Conservatives, the two leading parties together won only two-thirds of the vote, with the remaining third divided among a variety of parties. In total, 12 parties won seats in the House of Commons, up from 10 in 2010.¹⁵ But just two years later, voters returned to the major parties, which together secured over 90 percent of the vote. However, no party obtained either a majority of votes or seats, giving Britain its second hung parliament in three elections.

These two near-consecutive hung parliaments point to the challenges facing the two leading parties just as the precipitous drop in support for the Liberal

Democrats demonstrates the difficulties facing a third party seeking significant influence in this majoritarian parliamentary system. If British politics are supposed to be about staid traditions and predictable continuity, trends in the past three elections and disputes and divisions in all three major parties seem to be challenging these conventions. Until 2010, every government since 1945 was run by either the Conservatives or Labour, and only once (1974–79) did either party fail to have a majority in the House of Commons. Until 2010, it had been nearly 70 years since the United Kingdom was governed by a peacetime coalition. (Britain was led during both world wars by coalition governments.) And following the 2017 election, the Conservatives have been forced to form a minority government with promised support on key votes from Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party.

In 2015, support for regional and single-issue parties surged at the expense of the larger parties. Moreover, since the 2015 election all three major parties have swapped out their party leaders: Labour is led by Jeremy Corbyn, a left-wing socialist loved by party loyalists but unsupported by many MPs from his own party. Theresa May now leads a Conservative Party deeply divided by the issue of the UK's exit from the EU and as prime minister must now negotiate Britain's exit from the EU even though she campaigned for her country to remain a part of the body. Meanwhile, the Liberal Democrats, who also favored the losing side of the 2016 Brexit referendum, are licking their wounds from losses in the past two elections. Certainly party politics—and democracy—remain alive and well in contemporary Britain.

Elections

British voters select all 650 members of the House of Commons during a general election. With the passage of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act in 2011, the date for these elections was set on a five-year term beginning with the 2015 election (barring a vote of no confidence, a supermajority override—as happened to allow the 2017 election—or a change in this law). Usually about 60 to 70 percent of the electorate votes in British general elections, below the European average but far above the U.S. turnout.

British campaigns are short affairs, usually lasting less than a month. The voter has a relatively simple choice: which party should govern? British parties are for the most part well disciplined and have clear, published policy manifestos. Compared with voters in the United States, voters in the United Kingdom are far more

Seats in the House of Commons, 2017

PARTY	SEATS
Conservative	318
Labour	262
Scottish National Party	35
Liberal Democrat	12
Democratic Unionist Party	10
Sinn Féin	7
Plaid Cymru	4
Green Party	1
Independent Unionist Party	1
Total Seats	650

Source: www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/mps/current-state-of-the-parties (accessed 6/23/17).

likely to know what each party stands for and how the parties differ. UK voters tend to focus on differences between parties rather than on differences between candidates. Candidates may not even reside in the district where they run for office. The notion of a candidate serving local (rather than party) interests first—that is, concentrating on bringing benefits (or pork) to local constituents to secure reelection—is of much less concern than it is in the United States.

Civil Society

As in virtually all democracies, the United Kingdom houses various groups articulating special interests (interests that benefit specific segments of the population

instead of the nation as a whole). British interest groups influence public policy and public opinion, but interest-group lobbying of MPs is far less prevalent than such lobbying is in the U.S. Congress, because British parties are more highly disciplined. Interest groups must focus their attention on the party leadership (since parties, not individual MPs, make key policy decisions) and on the government bureaucracies, which often interpret and apply policies.

Perhaps the greatest influence of British interest groups comes through their participation in **quangos** (quasi-autonomous nongovernmental organizations). Quangos are policy advisory boards or other entities appointed or approved by the government that bring government officials and affected interest groups together to help develop policy. First established in the 1960s and 1970s, quangos represent a move toward a neocorporatist model of public policy making, in which government and interest groups work together to develop policy. Although Conservative governments have attacked the quangos (seeing them as costly, empowering special interests and weakening government) and have trimmed the number of quangos as a means of shrinking the size of the public sector and reducing public debt, more than a thousand of these organizations remain, working in different policy areas.

In sheer numbers, the **Trades Union Congress (TUC)**, a confederation of the United Kingdom's largest trade unions, is the most important British interest group. For much of the postwar period, the TUC dominated the Labour Party and was thus extremely influential during periods of Labour government. Yet a variety of factors have weakened the TUC over the past two decades. First, as is the case in all industrial democracies, the number of blue-collar workers is shrinking quickly, and the TUC has seen its membership plummet. Only 20 years ago, about one-half of British workers belonged to trade unions; today, only about one-quarter of workers are union members. Second, the Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher sharply reduced the political power of the TUC by passing laws designed to restrict union activity. Third, reforms within the Labour Party since the 1990s severely eroded the TUC's control of that party. The TUC is still an important source of funding and electoral support, but the TUC-Labour link has been seriously weakened. The TUC can no longer dominate the selection of the Labour Party leader and no longer dominates the formation of Labour policy.

The most important business organization in the United Kingdom, and the main counterweight to the TUC, is the **Confederation of British Industry (CBI)**. Unlike the TUC, which has formal links to the Labour Party, the CBI has no direct link to the Tories. The main industrial and financial interests in the

United Kingdom usually favor Conservative policy, however, and top business leaders have exercised considerable influence in past Conservative governments. In recent decades, the Labour Party has also been careful to cultivate good relations with the CBI.

Society

The United Kingdom's social makeup is divided in many significant ways. The British state is both multinational and multiethnic; British society reveals class, religious, and even linguistic divisions. But while these divisions may appear rather sharp when viewed from the outside, compared with the social divisiveness in most other states, they have been relatively benign. Over the centuries, the United Kingdom has demonstrated remarkable national unity and enviable social and political stability.

Class Identity

Class identity remains perhaps the most salient of all social divisions in the United Kingdom and the one most noticed by outside observers. Historically, political parties and many key policy debates have reflected class differences, not differences of ethnicity, region, or religion, as is often the case in other states. Certainly the social reforms of the twentieth century did much to ease the huge income disparities and rigid occupation-based class lines of nineteenth-century England that preoccupied both Karl Marx and Charles Dickens. But increased social mobility has not yet erased the perception of a two-tier society divided between an upper class and a working class.

Chief among the legacies of the class system has been the education system, which has long channeled a minority of the British elite into so-called public schools (which are, in fact, private schools originally designed to train British boys for public service). Graduates of these elite schools go on to Oxford or Cambridge University before pursuing white-collar careers in government or industry, careers enhanced by elitist old-boy networks. For example, former prime minister David Cameron graduated from the public school Eton and then Oxford. Likewise, current prime minister Theresa May is also a product of Oxford. Class differences are also perpetuated by continued self-identification with either the upper class or the working class, as manifested in preferred tastes and leisure activities—sherry versus

warm beer, cricket versus football, opera versus pub—and variations in speech and accent. Some argue that under the neoliberal reforms of recent decades, class differences have finally begun to break down. However, with a more prosperous and vibrant white-collar southern England and a struggling blue-collar north, regional disparities in income remain a source of social division.¹⁶

Ethnic and National Identity

Although we have noted that the United Kingdom is relatively homogeneous, religious, linguistic, and cultural divisions do exist and in some cases are becoming more significant, and even volatile. Observers point to the 2005 London bombings by Islamic extremists and racially charged riots across England in 2011 as evidence of continuing ethnic tensions. Nevertheless, the United Kingdom settled most of its religious differences early on, and its politics are more secular than those in the rest of Europe. Even today, however, Scots are mainly Catholic or Presbyterian, and the English mostly identify with the Church of England. Compared with the United States, however, religiously oriented social issues in the United Kingdom, such as gay rights and abortion, have generally not become politicized.¹⁷

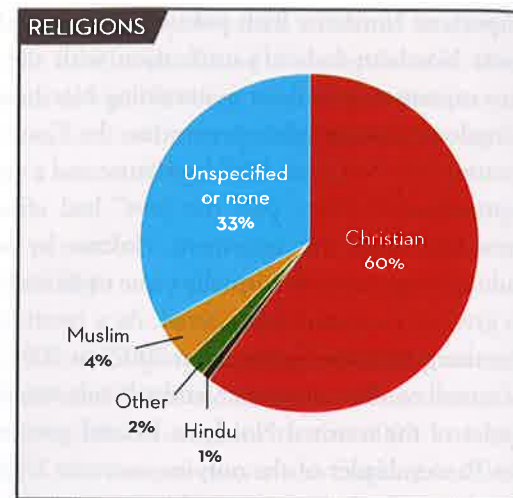
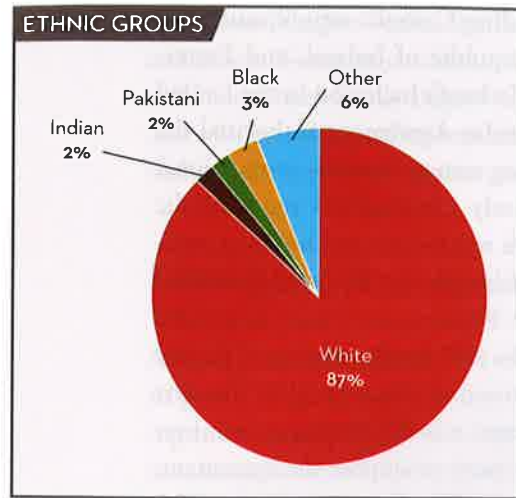
Religion remains a source of conflict in **Northern Ireland**, though, where roughly 48 percent of the citizens are Protestant (of Scottish or English origin) but some 45 percent of the population is Catholic. Northern Ireland, also known as Ulster, comprises the northeastern portion of the island of Ireland (about 17 percent of the island's territory) that remained part of the United Kingdom following the creation of an independent Republic of Ireland in 1921. This religious divide was compounded by both national and class differences, and Catholics were discriminated against in employment and education. Starting in the 1960s, members of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) turned to violence against British targets in the hope of unifying the region with the Republic of Ireland, and the British army and illegal Protestant paramilitary organizations fought back. Known as **The Troubles**, this three-decades-long period of conflict claimed nearly 4,000 casualties on both sides, many of them civilian.

In the 1990s, the British government and the IRA began talks with the aim of establishing peace. Years of negotiation resulted in the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, which bound the IRA to renounce its armed struggle in return for political reforms that would give the Catholic population greater say in local government. Both the British and the Irish governments supported the decision, as did

important Northern Irish political groups, including Catholic republicans, who favor Northern Ireland's unification with the Republic of Ireland, and Protestant unionists, who favor maintaining Northern Ireland's inclusion in the United Kingdom. Among other provisions, the Good Friday Agreement authorized the creation of a Northern Irish legislature and a voting system ensuring proportional representation ("first past the post" had effectively marginalized the Catholic minority). With this agreement, violence by both republican and unionist paramilitary organizations virtually came to an end, although the IRA initially refused to give up its formidable arsenal. As a result, the British government suspended Northern Ireland's legislature in 2002. In 2005, the IRA finally renounced the use of armed conflict altogether, and self-rule was restored to Ulster in 2007. The first leader of the restored Northern Ireland government was the Protestant minister Ian Paisley, leader of the only mainstream Ulster party to oppose the agreement. His deputy leader was Martin McGuinness, leader of Sinn Féin and a former IRA militant.¹⁸ Since 1998, the region has been relatively peaceful for the first time in decades, although occasional acts of political violence, including several killings in 2009, are a reminder that the region's political future remains uncertain.

Elsewhere, however, new divisions are emerging. Since the 1960s, former colonial subjects (primarily from Africa, the West Indies, India, and Pakistan) have immigrated to the United Kingdom in increasing numbers, giving British society a degree of racial diversity. For the most part, British society has not coped particularly well with this influx. Racial tension between the overwhelming majority of whites and the non-European minorities (totaling some 13 percent of the population) has sparked conflict and anti-immigrant sentiment, both of which nonetheless remain moderate by American and continental standards. Lacking proportional representation, the British electoral system has limited the impact of both the nonwhite and the far-right vote in most elections. Parliament has also sought to limit the nonwhite population by imposing quotas that restrict the entrance of nonwhite dependents of persons already residing in the United Kingdom. Even so, the country continues to face growing rates of immigration. Some predict that another 2 million immigrants will enter the United Kingdom over the next decade. This has already changed the social dynamics and increased xenophobic sentiment, strengthening parties such as the UKIP and bolstering the successful Brexit vote. Also, the integration (or lack thereof) of the United Kingdom's Muslim population has been a growing concern since the 2005 terrorist attacks on London's transit system.

In addition to ethnic groups, the United Kingdom also comprises a number of national groups, a fact outsiders tend to overlook. The United Kingdom of Britain



and Northern Ireland is made up of four nations—England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland—with substantial cultural and political differences among them. Most UK citizens first identify themselves not as British but as belonging to one of these four nationalities.¹⁹ (The U.S. equivalent to this would be a resident of Los Angeles identifying herself first as a Californian, not as an American.)

Long-standing yearning for greater national autonomy has gained increasing political significance since the 1960s. Local nationalist parties including the Scottish National Party and the Welsh Plaid Cymru, with Labour Party support, successfully advocated for devolution: turning over some central-governmental powers to the regions. Tony Blair's Labour government delivered on its campaign promise of devolution in 1999 with the establishment of local legislatures for Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. Some feared that rather than pacify nationalist tendencies, devolution would contribute to the eventual breakup of the country, most notably with an independent Scotland (see the discussion "Scotland's Bid for Independence," p. 81).

While persistent regional loyalties and the localization of government have challenged the British national identity, so, too, have the United Kingdom's growing economic and cultural integration with Europe over the past few decades and, at the same time, its growing ambivalence about this dependence and decision to weaken those ties by exiting the EU. Although nearly half of British voters called for retaining membership in the Union, it is safe to say that virtually all Britons remain generally very loyal to the Crown and to the notion of a sovereign British people (see "Brexit," p. 84).

Ideology and Political Culture

Regarding the goals of politics, British political values have been strongly influenced by the development of classical liberalism and the conviction that government's influence over individuals ought to be limited. However, the postwar goals of an expanded franchise, full employment, and the creation of a welfare state led to a new consensus as many Britons embraced the social-democratic values of increased state intervention and less individual freedom in exchange for increased social equality. Economic decline during the 1970s swung the pendulum back toward personal freedom, which spurned consensus politics, rejected socialist redistributive policies, and advocated privatization.

The electoral success of the Labour Party in 1997 came on the heels of its new policy to reconcile social-democratic and liberal ideologies—the so-called Third Way. While this may indicate that British voters did not fully embrace the stark individualism of the Thatcher revolution, much of Labour's subsequent success came from embracing a kinder, gentler version of her neoliberal program. Calls by subsequent Conservative governments for a "big society" can also be seen in this light—a shift of governance and stewardship from national to local, public to private. Still, most British—like their continental neighbors—tend to be more socially and morally liberal than citizens of the United States. The United Kingdom outlawed capital punishment and legalized abortion and homosexuality, all in the mid-1960s. Handguns were banned outright in 1998 and same-sex marriage has been legal in England since 2013 and Scotland since 2014 (though not yet in Northern Ireland). Also, there is far less emphasis on religion and traditional family values.

British political culture is typically described as pragmatic and tolerant. Compared with other societies, British society is thought to be less concerned with adhering to overarching ideological principles and more willing to tinker gradually with a particular political problem. Scholars often account for this pragmatism by pointing to the incremental and ad hoc historical development of British political institutions, noting that there was no defining political moment in British history when founders or revolutionaries sat down and envisioned or established a political system or a set of rules based on abstract ideals or theoretical principles. Political radicalism, on either the left or the right, is rare in the United Kingdom. Virtually all political actors embrace the willingness to seek evolutionary, not revolutionary, change. This pragmatism is bolstered by a classical liberal tolerance for opposing viewpoints, a strong sense of fair play, and a generally high level of consensus on the political rules of the game.

Although such general characterizations have some utility in accounting for British politics, British political culture in reality comprises multiple subcultures,

as is the case in any complex modern or postmodern society. It is certainly still possible to see evidence of an aristocratic culture among the political elite, who share a sense of superiority and noblesse oblige toward those they deem less able to rule, as well as a mass or working-class culture of deference to those in authority. But in addition, policies of devolution, immigration, and multiculturalism, combined with the blurring of class lines, have challenged and complicated these dominant subcultures. And with economic recession, growing social inequality, and increased immigration over the past decade, simmering tensions within some of these groups have boiled over. Several days of violent and destructive riots in the summer of 2011 in London and other cities across England pitted angry inner-city youth against the police and served as a sober reminder that elements among these subcultures were fully prepared to reject deference toward authority. In that same year, labor unions and university students launched widespread anti-austerity demonstrations against deep public-sector spending cuts, protests that also spoke to significant divisions within the political culture.

Political Economy

The United Kingdom is noteworthy for its contribution to the liberal economic model. Indeed, most political analysts would trace classical liberalism itself to the United Kingdom, where philosophers such as John Locke spoke of the inalienable rights of “life, liberty and estate,” setting the stage for such political innovations as the U.S. Declaration of Independence.²⁰ Yet liberalism in the United Kingdom has undergone a number of shifts over the past decades, from the greater emphasis on social-democratic values after World War II to the neoliberalism under Margaret Thatcher, which has been softened but largely continued in subsequent governments.

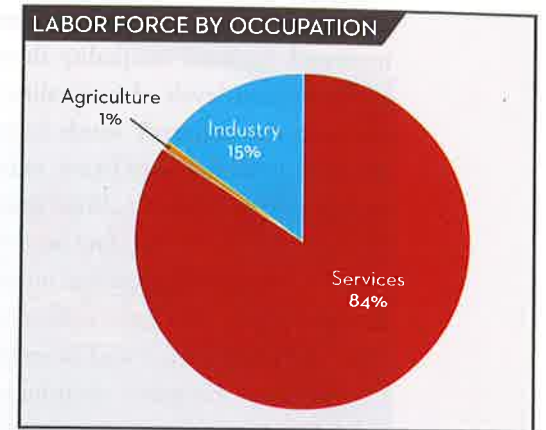
If there is a common theme in the UK economy in the decades following the end of World War II, it is decline. As we recall, during the Industrial Revolution, the United Kingdom was “the workshop to the world,” and the British Empire was led by the richest country on the planet. Yet over time, this position of dominance deteriorated. As of 2016, the country’s per capita GDP at purchasing power parity (PPP) ranked 38th in the world, behind once far-poorer colonies such as Ireland and Australia (though the UK economy remains one of the 10 largest in the world).

Why the decline? There is no single explanation, but one of the basic causes is the downside of early industrialization, which made the country the world’s first industrial power but later allowed it to be the first country to face the obsolescence

of its technology and the difficulty of shifting to a new economic environment (a challenge Japan currently faces). A second factor is the burden of empire. Although industrialization helped fuel imperialism (and vice versa), the British Empire soon became a financial drain on the country rather than a benefit to it. Related to this is the argument that the United Kingdom’s orientation toward its empire meant that it was slow to pursue economic opportunities with the rest of Europe when the continent moved toward greater integration after World War II. Finally, many political analysts have argued that the collectivist consensus not only blocked meaningful economic reform in the United Kingdom for much of the postwar era but also focused the country on social expenditures while causing it to ignore the simultaneous need to modernize its economy.

Where does this leave the UK economy in the new century? Like other advanced democracies, the United Kingdom is a postindustrial economy. Although such industries as steel, oil, and gas still play an important role, nearly three-quarters of the country’s wealth is generated by the service sector, in particular financial services and tourism. Privatization has significantly shrunk the role of the state in the economy, including the sale of a range of assets, among them public utilities and housing, British Airways, Rolls-Royce, and Jaguar. Recent governments have sought to extend privatization to railroads, health care, and even the Underground (London’s famous subway system). The welfare state also has undergone substantial changes, moving from a system that provided direct benefits to the unemployed to one that sponsors “welfare-to-work” programs emphasizing training to find employment. Even though Labour governments have tended to spend more on social welfare than do their Tory counterparts, even Labour has ended its traditional call for a greater role for the state in the economy—nationalization of industry was enshrined in the Labour Party constitution until 1995—and has distanced itself from its formerly close ties with organized labor.

To some observers, the Thatcher revolution, and its preservation under subsequent governments, helped the United Kingdom finally turn a corner. Until the global recession hit in 2008, the country enjoyed a decade of strong economic growth. And both before the global economic downturn as well as now in a period of recovery, the UK economy has outperformed the economies of Europe and

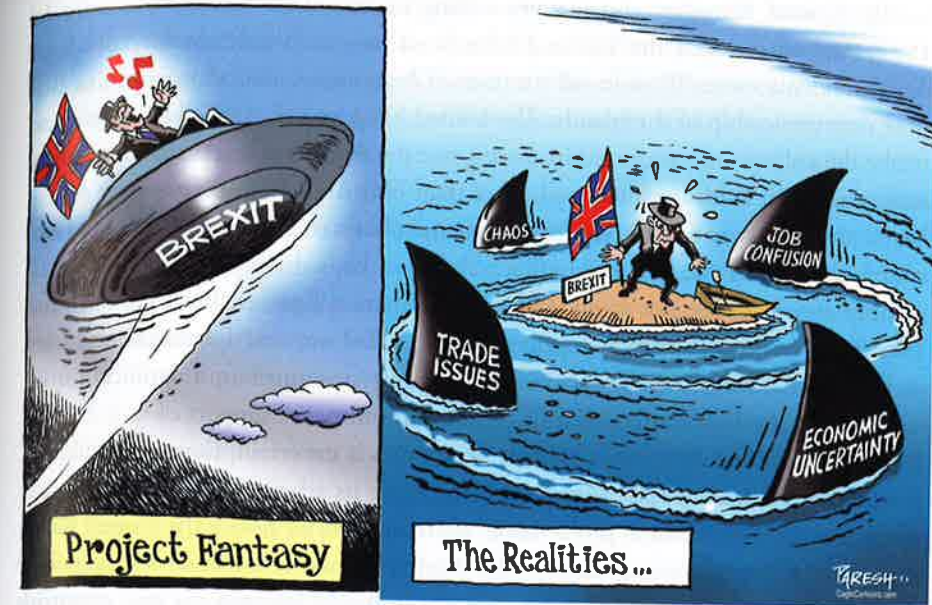


Japan. However, as in many other countries, neoliberal economic policies have increased financial inequality throughout the United Kingdom, which has one of the highest levels of inequality in Europe. This inequality also has a regional element: the country's south is growing much faster than the north, which is the traditional home of heavy industry. Recognizing this growing inequality and sounding more like a Labour than a Conservative government, Prime Minister May has called for building an economy that works for all citizens, not just the wealthy. Her government has introduced programs designed to help the poor and disadvantaged, who have suffered disproportionately during the global financial crisis of the last decade and the more recent economic downturn caused by Brexit.

Moreover, this public spending has exacerbated the United Kingdom's growing gap between government revenues and government spending, a malady that Britain shares with the United States and most other industrialized countries. Britain's budget deficit became acute following the 2008 global financial crisis and was exacerbated by an inflated housing bubble and an economy largely dependent on financial services—the industry hardest hit by the financial crisis. In response, the Labour government partially nationalized a number of private banks, increased income taxes for the wealthy, and stepped up both public borrowing and public spending in an effort to stimulate the economy. After coming to office in 2010, the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government shifted to a more liberal tack, cutting public spending and pursuing deregulation in an effort to reduce the government's growing deficit. The government faced great resistance from public-sector unions, university students, and others as it pursued these tough austerity measures, which have since been softened by the May government. The success or failure of these measures remains a subject of great debate.²¹

Finally, there is the issue of the United Kingdom's economic relationship with the outside world. Historic ties notwithstanding, over the past half century the country has become closely tied to the rest of Europe; half of its trade goes to other EU member states. However, the United Kingdom never accepted the euro, the common currency of the European Union, and in 2016 elected to end its membership in the body. While the decision pleased Euroskeptics and relieved Britain of some of the political obligations of this decades-long association, it also proved economically costly in terms of investor confidence and concerns that the UK would suffer from the loss of full membership in Europe's single market. However, disentangling Britain from the EU has proven a slow and cautious process, and the May government has done all it can to retain the benefits of European integration while freeing itself from unwanted burdens (see "Brexit," p. 84).

In the end, these issues tie into a much broader question: What is the United Kingdom's place in the contemporary international system?



Early euphoria among the majority of British voters who supported Brexit soon gave way to the sober challenges of disentangling Britain from the European Union.

Foreign Relations and the World

The United Kingdom's political future does not rest on domestic politics alone. Although the country is no longer a superpower, it retains a relatively large army, has its own nuclear weapons, and boasts one of the largest economies in the world. It remains a major player in world affairs but struggles to define its place and role in a post-imperial and post-Cold War world. The central difficulty lies in the United Kingdom's self-identity. As citizens of an island nation and a former imperial power, the British have long seen themselves as separate from continental Europe, which was slower to adopt democracy and remains much more skeptical of the liberal values that first emerged in the United Kingdom. Rather than identifying itself with the continent, the United Kingdom built its identity around its empire, orienting itself toward the Atlantic. When the empire eventually declined, the emergence of the United States gave the United Kingdom the sense that its power had in a way been resurrected in a former colony, whose citizens were imbued with the same liberal values and spoke a common language. Since the end of World War II, the United States has counted on the United Kingdom as its most dependable ally.²²

The United Kingdom also remains willing to defend its interests militarily. In 1982, Argentina seized the Falkland Islands—a remote British territory of about 2,000 residents some 300 miles off the coast of Argentina—after a long-running dispute over ownership of the islands. The United Kingdom dispatched its military to retake the colony and succeeded in driving out the Argentine forces. In the process, more than 200 British soldiers and more than 600 Argentine soldiers were killed. Many observers may find the deaths of so many soldiers over two small, sparsely populated islands illogical, but the conflict reflects the United Kingdom's post-imperial identity and its desire not to surrender its international power. Both Labour- and Tory-led governments strongly supported the U.S.-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the United Kingdom was the only other country to contribute a significant military force to the Iraq conflict. But despite the government's support of U.S. foreign policies, the United Kingdom's Atlantic orientation is uncertain. Even as the United Kingdom continues to resist European integration, its relationship with the United States remains a powerful, if problematic, alternative. As we noted, the United Kingdom shares a strong historical affinity with this former colony and current superpower across the Atlantic. Even though the disparity in power between the two countries is enormous, British supporters of the Atlantic alliance argue that limited influence over the only superpower is superior to a more equal standing in a body such as the European Union, whose international authority remains rather limited.

However, particularly in the aftermath of September 11 and the Iraq War, many Britons have come to the disappointing conclusion that the United States sees the United Kingdom not as a critical ally but rather as a junior partner duly expected to follow U.S. foreign policy and provide a veneer of multilateralism no matter what the United States wants to do. This perception has fueled British anti-Americanism much like that seen elsewhere in Europe today. A 2016 poll showed that just over 60 percent of Britons had a favorable view of the United States, down from more than 66 percent in 2014 and more than 80 percent in 2000. Nearly half of those surveyed in 2014 also believed that the United Kingdom should act more independently of the United States.²³

Despite stepping away from the European Union, the United Kingdom finds itself in greater agreement with its European partners on the question of resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict to effect lasting peace in the Middle East. This conflict between European and U.S. foreign policies has left the United Kingdom in the middle with diffuse and uneasy ties to both centers of power.

In 2011, Britain joined France in leading a military intervention in Libya that involved a coalition of 19 countries, including the United States. Although leadership of the limited intervention ultimately shifted to NATO, some observers

have pointed to this example of French and British cooperative leadership and American followership as an indication both of declining American hegemony and of growing British security collaboration with at least some of its European neighbors.²⁴ In 2013, Prime Minister Cameron sought to follow America's lead by introducing a bill to the House of Commons to intervene militarily in the Syrian civil war. A majority of MPs, including a significant number of members of Cameron's own ruling coalition, rejected the motion.

The United Kingdom, then, remains unique, as it was centuries ago. Its economic and political systems gave rise to liberalism but remain shaped by centuries-old institutions that have never been fully swept away. Its industrial strength once propelled it to empire status, though now it is overshadowed by its former colony across the Atlantic and an ever-converging Europe. In recent years, the United Kingdom has grappled with these issues, hoping to modernize old institutions yet retain its distinct identity—and hoping, too, to retain its international stature while reevaluating its relationship to the United States and the rest of Europe. Will the United Kingdom break from its past, creating a new identity to meet its domestic and international challenges? And if so, what might this identity look like? These will be critical issues in its immediate future.

CURRENT ISSUES IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

Scotland's Bid for Independence

Northern Ireland is not the only region where a sector of the population has sought to leave the United Kingdom. Scotland was an independent state until the 1707 Act of Union—passed by the Scottish legislature despite widespread popular protest—fused it with England to form Great Britain. Scotland preserved its own legal system, its own church, and many of its own traditions. The Scottish National Party (SNP), formed in the 1930s, advocated Scottish independence but was relatively unsuccessful until fairly recently. In 1974, the SNP won about a third of all votes in Scotland and sent a record 11 representatives to the House of Commons in London. Both the discovery of oil in the North Sea in the 1960s and dissatisfaction with Thatcher's neoliberal economic policies in

the 1980s led to increasingly loud calls for devolution and bolstered the independence movement.

Coming to office on a mandate of devolution in 1997, Labour responded to the calls, granting Scotland its own legislature and government as well as broad powers over regional issues. Scotland has long had its own legal system, but it increasingly differs from the rest of the United Kingdom on a variety of policies. For example, citizens of Scotland pay no tuition to attend university, unlike other UK citizens, and Scots pay less for health care and prescription drugs than do other UK citizens. Scotland's football federation rejected plans by the British Olympic Association to field all-Britain men's and women's soccer teams for the 2012 London Olympic Games, preferring, like Wales and Northern Ireland, to field its own Scottish national team (though Scotland did join "Team GB" for the 2016 Summer Olympics).²⁵

The Labour government anticipated that its policy of devolution would satisfy Scottish demands for greater autonomy and weaken, if not silence, the movement for independence. The Labour Party, in coalition with the Liberal Democrats, controlled the devolved Scottish government from 1998 until 2007, but the SNP capitalized on an economic revival in Scotland and widespread Scottish opposition to Blair's Iraq War policy to win the 2007 regional elections. Alex Salmond, the SNP leader, became first minister (leader) of an SNP minority government, pledging to hold a referendum on independence from the United Kingdom in the future. Four years later, the 2011 general elections returned an increasingly popular Salmond and the SNP to government, giving the Scottish National Party its first-ever majority government. The SNP's capturing of an absolute majority is even more remarkable because of the mixed PR-SMD electoral system in place in Scotland, established in part to prevent the dominance of a single party. With majority control of the Scottish parliament, Salmond and the SNP scheduled a referendum on "home rule" for September 18, 2014, the 700-year anniversary of the Battle of Bannockburn, in which the Scots prevailed over English forces.²⁶ After some wrangling, London (the national government) and Edinburgh (the devolved regional government) came to terms on the vote: Cameron demanded that the referendum consist of a straight up-or-down vote for independence rather than a three-option plan put forward by the SNP featuring a middle ground option of "devo max" that assured even greater devolution of authority to the Scottish parliament. Salmond conceded this point, but secured in return an expanded franchise that would include 16- and 17-year-old Scots (who strongly favored independence).

Despite a strong surge in the "Yes" campaign in the months leading up to the referendum, Scottish voters rejected the proposal by a clear margin of 56 percent

no and 44 percent yes. A majority of Scottish voters ultimately doubted whether Scotland could viably function as an independent state. Scotland lacks a military to defend its sovereignty and is integrally linked to the United Kingdom. Because countless Scots live and work in the rest of the United Kingdom and vice versa, creating distinct citizenship would have been extremely complex. Scotland would have lost its economic support from London and its military protection. It sends 59 members to the House of Commons in London; moreover, many prominent UK politicians, including former Labour prime ministers Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, are Scots. Moreover, although the "devo-max" option did not appear on the referendum ballot, apparent growing support for the "Yes" campaign in the weeks preceding the vote prompted the leaders of Britain's three largest parties to agree to hand over substantially more authority to Scotland's devolved government if voters elected to remain within the Union. Although at the time this compromise seemed to satisfy a significant majority of Scots, British voters' decision two years later to exit the European Union may turn the tables.



A majority of Scottish voters rejected the 2014 referendum calling for independence. However, two years later two-thirds of these same voters unsuccessfully opposed the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union, raising the possibility of a new referendum on Scottish independence.

While a majority of British voters elected to leave the EU, nearly two-thirds of Scots who went to the polls voted to remain. Many of these same voters, led by Scotland's devolved SNP government, subsequently called for a new referendum on independence.

Brexit

In recent years, many Scots have grumbled about their "democratic deficit" and other constraints imposed on them as Britons. During this same period, a growing number of British citizens complained that membership in the European Union threatened key aspects of British sovereignty, subjecting them to the dictates of distant Eurocrats.

The integration of Europe began in the 1950s, has progressed in fits and starts, and has involved a variety of institutional efforts. By 1993, a dozen European countries had formed the European Union, a community that now encompasses nearly 30 sovereign states that have struggled to forge ever-closer political, economic, and social ties among its members. As noted earlier, the United Kingdom was late in warming to the idea of the European Union, initially skeptical of membership and then later kept out by the French (who saw British membership as a Trojan horse through which the United States could influence Europe). Even as the United Kingdom joined the European project, it continued to be less than enthusiastic about many aspects of the Union, especially with respect to the latter's ambitions for taking on more power and responsibilities, such as effecting monetary union or promoting unified foreign policy. During the 1970s and 1980s, this attitude was less of a problem because the European Union had entered a period of relative stagnation. Beginning in the 1990s, however, many European leaders moved forward to strengthen the European Union, enabling it to ensure regional stability and act as a counterweight to the "hyperpower" of the United States.

To many Britons, the notion of participating in a stronger European Union was simply unacceptable, fearing the regional economic union would become an unwieldy superstate, undermining national sovereignty, draining the domestic budget, and imposing continental values.²⁷ The fact that half of the European Union's budget is spent on agricultural subsidies, of which the United Kingdom received relatively little, only underscored this suspicion. In 2014, only 22 percent of those surveyed in the United Kingdom felt they could trust the European Union, the lowest level of any member state (see "In Comparison: European

Union," p. 86). The United Kingdom's unwillingness to adopt the euro provided further evidence of this skepticism, which increased in the wake of the 2011 euro crisis and ongoing economic challenges facing the Continent. The European migrant crisis beginning in 2015, combined with the EU policy of free movement of people throughout the single market, only compounded this sense of Euroscepticism among British citizens who felt Polish migrants were taking local jobs and migrants from Africa and the Middle East were destabilizing British society. On the other hand, proponents of the EU pointed to the huge trade and investment benefits of membership and the fears that the United Kingdom would lose even more economic and diplomatic power and marginalize itself, becoming a peripheral player in the emergence of a single European power.

In short, Britain's position vis-à-vis Europe over the past few decades remained controversial and ambivalent. Blair and his Labour government promised a referendum on adoption of the euro, but never followed through on the pledge, and Labour also backed away from its initial commitment to the euro. Conservatives and Liberal Democrats agreed at the formation of their 2010 coalition that their government would not adopt the euro while the coalition was in effect but would remain a positive force in the European Union. But as popular British sentiment toward the European Union continued to sour and divisions on the issue within the Conservative Party and among Tory MPs began to widen, Prime Minister Cameron sought to shore up support within his own party by promising in 2013 that if the Tories were to win an outright majority in the 2015 parliamentary elections, the government would hold a national referendum on British membership in the European Union. With the Tories' clear victory in the 2015 election, voters held him to that promise.

In what came to be known as a "Brexit" vote, Cameron promised that his government would first negotiate new agreements with the European Union and then hold a simple "in-or-out" referendum on Britain's EU membership by the end of 2017. In 2016, Cameron negotiated concessions from the EU that exempted Britain from obligations for member countries to pursue greater political integration and limited welfare and employment benefits to migrants. The referendum was held in June of the same year. Those campaigning for the "Leave" side, including several leading MPs and other members of Cameron's Conservative Party, argued that leaving the union would restore British sovereignty, protect British jobs, shield Britain from unmanageable levels of immigration, and free Britain from obligations to bail out struggling European economies. They argued that Britain would then be free to establish unilateral trade agreements with the United States and other countries and could still negotiate free-trade agreements

IN COMPARISON

European Union

Do you think things are going in the right direction in the European Union?

Percentage saying yes:

COUNTRY	PERCENTAGE
Germany	33
France	21
United Kingdom	20

Do you trust the European Union? Percentage saying yes:

COUNTRY	PERCENTAGE
France	31
Germany	28
United Kingdom	22

Source: "Europeans in 2014," *Special Eurobarometer 415*, July 2014, http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_415_data_en.pdf (accessed 7/24/16).

with its European partners.²⁸ Those stumping for the "Remain" side, including Cameron, contended that the United Kingdom and its citizens were far wealthier as part of the European single market and that a seat at the European table gave Britain significant influence in Europe and beyond.²⁹ Most polls leading up to the vote gave the "Remain" side a bit of an edge, and most of these pollsters, as well as politicians and the British populace, were surprised by the outcome: nearly 52 percent of voters chose to leave while just over 48 percent elected to remain.

It is difficult to exaggerate the significance of this outcome. Within a day, Prime Minister David Cameron, who called for the referendum bargaining his country's future in an effort to shore up support within his own party, took responsibility for the loss and announced his resignation. Within a month, Theresa May, who actually campaigned for remaining in the EU, had replaced Cameron as leader of the Tories and prime minister. She quickly formed her cabinet, appointing outspoken "Leave" proponents to the posts of both foreign secretary and trade secretary. Another Euroskeptic was given the post of a newly formed ministry responsible for overseeing the complicated process of Brexit. Meanwhile, all major political parties (other than the divided Tories) had joined Cameron

in supporting the failed "Remain" campaign, most vocally the majority SNP in Scotland and Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland. Both parties called for referenda of their own that would permit continued membership in the EU; Scotland to again consider full independence and Northern Ireland to unite Northern Ireland with the Republic of Ireland. Both Labour and the Liberal Democrats also favored the "Remain" side, but in many cases kept a low profile during the campaign in recognition that a growing number of their constituents were increasingly Euroskeptic. The United Kingdom Independence Party, long the most outspoken advocate of British withdrawal from the European Union, led the successful "Leave" campaign, and having achieved its long-held goal, seems to have outlived its usefulness. The torch passed to a weak and divided Conservative minority government to negotiate Britain's withdrawal from the European Union.

NOTES

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KEY TERMS

Blair, Tony Labour prime minister from 1997 to 2007

Brexit British exit from the European Union realized in a 2016 referendum

cabinet Top members of the UK government who assist the prime minister and run the major ministries

Cameron, David Conservative prime minister from 2010 to 2016; resigned following the Brexit referendum, which he campaigned against

Celtic fringe Refers to Scotland and Wales, which were not conquered by the Angles and Saxons

collective responsibility Tradition that requires all members of the cabinet either to support government policy or to resign

collectivist consensus Postwar consensus between the United Kingdom's major parties to build and sustain a welfare state

common law Legal system based on custom and precedent rather than formal legal codes

Commonwealth Organization that includes the United Kingdom and most of its former colonies

Confederation of British Industry (CBI) The United Kingdom's most important group representing the private sector

Conservatives (Tories) One of the United Kingdom's two largest parties; in government since 2010

Corbyn, Jeremy Leader of the opposition Labour Party beginning in 2015

Crown Refers to the British monarchy and sometimes to the British state

English Civil War Seventeenth-century conflict between Parliament and the monarch that temporarily eliminated and permanently weakened the monarchy

Farage, Nigel Outspoken leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) until 2016 and member of the European parliament

Good Friday Agreement Historic 1998 accord between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland that ended decades of violence

hereditary peers Seats in the House of Lords that were granted to aristocratic families in perpetuity but were largely eliminated by recent legislation

House of Commons Lower house of the UK legislature

House of Lords Upper house of the UK legislature, whose reform is currently being debated

hung parliament An election result in which no party wins a majority of parliamentary seats, such as the 2010 and 2017 parliamentary elections

Labour Party One of the United Kingdom's two largest parties; since 2010, it has been the party in opposition

Liberal Democratic Party Centrist third party in the United Kingdom and junior member of a coalition government from 2010 to 2015

Liberals (Whigs) The United Kingdom's historic first opposition party; one of its two major political parties until the early twentieth century

life peers Distinguished members of society who are given lifetime appointments to the House of Lords

Magna Carta The 1215 document signed by King John that set the precedent for limited monarchical powers

majoritarian Term describing the virtually unchecked power of a parliamentary majority in the UK political system

May, Theresa Leader of the Conservatives; prime minister and head of government since 2016

Member of Parliament (MP) An individual legislator in the House of Commons

neoliberalism A set of policies championed by Thatcher's Conservative government in the 1980s aimed at diminishing the role of the state in the economy

Northern Ireland Northeastern portion of Ireland that is part of the United Kingdom; also known as Ulster

Parliament Name of the UK legislature

prime minister Head of government

quangos Quasi-autonomous nongovernmental organizations that assist the government in making policy

Scottish National Party (SNP) Nationalist political party promoting Scottish independence, and currently in control of the Scottish regional government

Thatcher, Margaret Conservative prime minister from 1979 to 1990

The Troubles Name given to the three decades of extreme ethnic conflict (late 1960s to late 1990s) between Northern Ireland's nationalists or republicans, who are mostly Catholic, and unionists or loyalists, who are mostly Protestant

Third Way Term describing recent policies of the Labour Party that embrace the free market

Trades Union Congress (TUC) The United Kingdom's largest trade union confederation

United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) Populist and Euroskeptic political party favoring British exit from the European Union

United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland Official name of the British state

vote of no confidence Legislative check on government whereby a government deems a measure to be of high importance; if that measure fails to pass the legislature, either the government must resign in favor of another leader or new parliamentary elections must be called

WEB LINKS

- BritainUSA, website of the British government in the United States (www.gov.uk/government/world/usa)
- British Broadcasting Corporation (www.bbc.com)
- British Politics Group (<http://britishpoliticsgroup.blogspot.com>)
- British Prime Minister (www.gov.uk/government/organisations/prime-ministers-office-10-downing-street)
- Conflict Archive on the Internet, on conflict and politics in Northern Ireland, 1968 to the present (www.cain.ulst.ac.uk)
- Foreign and Commonwealth Office (www.fco.gov.uk)
- London University, on constitutional reform (www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit)
- Parliament (www.parliament.uk)
- Scottish Parliament (www.scottish.parliament.uk)
- Welsh Assembly (www.wales.gov.uk)