

The UK is basically similar to the US: it is a society based on the rule of law, and the public elects legislative representatives. But in detail, there are many differences.

Source of power

The UK government is a **constitutional monarchy**. *Monarchy* means the royal family is accepted as the ultimate ruling authority, as opposed to the People as a whole, as in a constitutional *republic*. His/Her Majesty (abbreviated HM or HRM—Her Royal Majesty) *chooses* to grant power to government individuals and *chooses* to enact into laws the bills passed by the legislative bodies (though today, this is more a formality than anything else). HM has become politically neutral (for the last several hundred years).

There is no *unified* written constitution. The “constitution”, or set of founding laws, is actually comprised of various written laws, rulings, and historical conventions. For example, the office of Prime Minister is not established in any law, only by historical convention.

Structure

The UK uses a **parliamentary system**, which generally means that the executive functions are carried out by individuals (predominantly, the **Prime Minister**, aka PM) elected by the members of parliament. In contrast, in a presidential system, the executive functions are carried out by individuals elected by the people.

In UK's Parliament, there are two separate bodies: the **House of Commons** (HC) and the **House of Lords** (HL). Members of the House of Commons are known as “MPs” (**Members of Parliament**). Members of the House of Lords are technically members of Parliament, but are instead referred to either as “**peers**” or “Lords of Parliament”.

The House of Commons has 650 seats (1 per 96,370 residents; whereas in the US, we have 1 member of Congress per 550,000 residents). Over the centuries, the house of Commons has gained much more power than the House of Lords. The House of Lords is comprised of 760 “peers”, having much less power. It used to consist of clergy (Church of England) and hereditary nobility. Since 1999, more of the seats are lifetime appointees “by crown” (HM appoints them, based on the advisement of the PM), similar to how Supreme Court Justices serve. There are no political parties in the House of Lords. They serve as a “soft” check on the House of Commons, the PM, and the public, because they can question the government (like Congressional hearings) and delay bills from passage for up to a year (typically abortion bills). They also assumed ultimate judicial responsibility (like Supreme Court Justices in the US) until 2009, when a separate Supreme Court system was established. There is concern and debate over the future role of the House of Lords.

The PM is chosen through a “**vote of confidence**” by House of Commons. When a PM is elected by Parliament, s/he presents himself to HM, who then *asks* him to form a government. HM's approval is what technically gives the government any authority. S/He then chooses various **Ministers** (like Secretaries in the US) to comprise the **Cabinet** (the Cabinet with the Prime Minister comprise the **Ministry**). These Ministers must be MPs. The PM and the Cabinet (and the ministries and agencies they oversee) are collectively known as “Her Majesty's government”. HM also empowers the Ministers, although it is the PM who chooses them. The PM lives and works out of **10 Downing Street**, like the US' White House.

Because the executive and legislative are “fused”, there is less friction, fewer checks and balances, and it's easier to enact laws. (This may be offset by the difficulty in forming a government in the first place, described below.) It's interesting to note that the PM is considered an equal with the other ministers when it comes to decision making (s/he's often expressed as “first among equals”); in the US, the President is chief and without equal. Hence his title: among the Ministers in the government, s/he is the *Prime* Minister. The PM is however the “face” of the government, and so gives addresses both foreign and domestic on its behalf.

Elections and Parties

Citizens 18 years and older can vote. National elections are held about every 5 years, though Parliament can hold them sooner if they choose.

To elect a PM, a vote of confidence in someone must be passed with at least 50% approval in the House of Commons. This can be difficult to attain if no single party has control of 50% of the seats, in which case small parties can play a huge role. Like the US, the UK Parliamentary elections use a “first past the post” voting system (whichever candidate for a seat has the most votes is the winner, even if they didn't get 50% of the votes; other countries use “instant run-off”, where you rank the candidates; and other countries use proportional representation, in which people just vote for a party, and seats are then awarded to parties in proportion to their percentage of the votes; the latter two promote smaller political parties). Also like the US, the UK tends to have two dominant parties: the Conservative Party, and the Labour Party.

Unlike the US, the general population isn't split 50/50 between “conservative” and “liberal”. Instead, it leans more liberal, especially since the late 80s. The 2010 election was basically 33% “conservative”, 66% “liberal”. Unfortunately, having such a majority doesn't lead to liberals dominating government. Rather, two major political parties represent liberal ideology, and they compete with each other!

Conservative Party. Center-right ideology (free-market, eurosceptic, isolationist, tends anti-Islam, less culturally tolerant. Similar to US Republicans). Historically, the Tory Party (they are still referred to unofficially as Tories). In 2010, they had 36% of the popular vote, and won 47% seats. (This basically means that they won seats where they had a lot of competition that split the vote of their opposition.)

Labour Party. Center-left ideology (traditionally socialist, working class, unions, multi-cultural, pro social services, but in the last 30 years have adopted free-market, fiscally conservative economic ideas. Similar to US Democrats, with a streak of corporate Libertarianism.) They won 29% popular votes, and 40% of seats.

Liberal Democratic Party. AKA “Lib-Dems”, and the “third party”. Very left ideology. They formed from the merger of the Liberal Party (which succeeded the Whigs), but had a long period of weakness, from the 30s to the 80s. They're much like the US Green party with lots of youth support (anti-corporate, progressive tax, environmental, human rights, civil rights/equality, pro-euro, military passivist, welfare/social services). 23% popular vote, 9% of seats

There are other parties that are mostly regional in nature for each of the four major constituent areas (see below) of the UK.

Back to the difficulty in passing a vote of confidence. Whichever party has the most seats, is given the first chance by HM at “forming a government” (i.e. to nominate someone for a vote of confidence as PM). The party breakdown of House of Commons in the last election, in 2010, left no single party with 50% or more of the seats. That means the largest party, the Conservatives, couldn't just push through their preferred candidate for PM. Instead, they had to find a partner party to help them. This, brings a lot of negotiation into the mix; smaller parties wield tremendous power because of this. Ultimately, the Conservatives formed a coalition with the Lib-Dems! (The Lib-Dems won concessions from the Conservatives in exchange for their support, and on bills/resolutions where the Lib-Dems disagree with the Conservatives, they simply to abstain from voting.) With the support of the Lib-Dems, the Conservatives were able to pass a vote of confidence in David Cameron.

This left the Labour Party as the largest non-coalition party. They play an official role in government as the **Official Opposition**. They will also typically form a Shadow Ministry, of individuals that are provide a counter-perspective to the official Ministers. Members of the Official Opposition is entitled to ask 6 questions every week, on Wednesday at noon (“**Question Time**”). In actuality, these are feeble, and politics are very tightly controlled by parties.

HM's government (the PM and his/her Cabinet) may at any time be vacated from office if they lose the confidence of 50% of the House of Commons. This rarely happens, but occasionally the junior members of the party may threaten to rebel and vote for no confidence. In this way, junior members (known as **backbenchers**, cause they sit in the back rows of the House of Commons chamber) have some power, though this is rarely practiced.

Conceptually, the support from the House of Commons for HM's government represents the support of the public for the government. If a vote of no confidence passes, it can be viewed as the public, acting through their elected representatives, demanding a new set of people in charge.

Internal Geopolitics

The full name of the (internationally-recognized) sovereign state of the United Kingdom is the "United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland". It has four main (internally-recognized) "constituent countries":

- On the **Island of Great Britain** is **England** (by far the biggest), **Wales** (west of England) unified in 1536, and **Scotland** (north of England) unified in 1707.
- On the **Island of Ireland** is **Northern Ireland**. Ireland was fully unified in 1799 (the country name became "the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland"). In 1921, all but Northern Ireland asserted independence, after political gains by the Sinn Fein party and successful guerilla warfare by the Irish Republican Army, which was fueled by religious and racial/cultural differences (Irish = Catholic and Celtic, British = Protestant and Anglo-Saxon).

As of 1998, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland have "**devolved governments**", which are regional governments granted authority to govern by the central government. This means their power can be revoked by the central government. This differs from US, where the Constitution both limits the authority of the *federal* government with respect to state governments (Congress can only make laws within certain categories, such as interstate commerce) as well as limits state power (e.g. the first ten amendments and other civil rights protections). Interestingly, the country of England doesn't have a devolved government (it's governed directly by the national government).

Religion

Nominally, the official religion of England is the Christian denomination of the **Church of England** (C of E). It's the historical basis of Anglican Christianity, to which Episcopalians basically adhere in the US, and which is generally categorized as Protestant but many practitioners consider a middle-ground between Protestant and Catholic (like Catholics, they organize around apostolic bishops who they believe have a line of consecration that traces back to the apostles; unlike Catholics, they reject the supremacy of the Pope, i.e. the "Bishop of Rome", instead positioning the ruling monarch as the leader/defender of the church). The only practical governmental power of the C of E is through the church's representation in the House of Lords, where they typically act against abortion and assisted suicide.

There are also officially established churches of Scotland and Ireland; the Church in Wales was disestablished in 1920. All are Anglican except the Church of Scotland, which is Presbyterian and is lead by a congregation of elders rather than apostolic bishops.

There is no "constitutional" self-evident right/protection of religious freedom, but various civil rights laws protect it.

European Union

As a member of the EU, the public also elects representatives to EU Parliament. UK, like Latvia and Hungary, tend to be "**eurosceptic**," or in opposition to European currency, economic and/or cultural integration. This is broadly based on the belief that integration weakens the UK economy and culture, and that the EU is overly bureaucratic and inefficient. One political party, the **UK Independence Party** (UKIP), is founded primarily on withdrawal from the EU. They have the second strongest showing in the UK's EU Parliament delegation, after the Conservative Party, which is also eurosceptic. Some feel UKIP is driven by racism/xenophobia.

PM David Cameron suggested, in January 2013, a public referendum in the next five years to determine if the UK should withdraw from the EU. It might be a bargaining ploy to renegotiate with the EU better economic terms for UK's continued membership.

(The opposite of a "eurosceptic" is termed a "europhile". Most people's views lie in the middle of the spectrum.)

–Michael McGranahan, 2014-01-03.