

# The political system



The United Kingdom is a **parliamentary democracy** and a **constitutional monarchy**. The Prime Minister is the Head of the Government, controlled by a Parliament elected by the people. The Prime Minister forms the Government and appoints the Cabinet, a committee of ministers who are responsible for government policy. The UK does not have a real Constitution, but is governed by a set of statute laws, or Acts of Parliament, case laws (sentences made by judges), international treaties, and unwritten sources such as parliamentary conventions and royal prerogatives.

The political system is organised in three branches: the legislative, executive and judiciary powers.

The **legislative branch** is represented by a bicameral Parliament which consists of the House of Commons and the House of Lords, both at Westminster. The main functions of Parliament are to pass laws, scrutinise government policy and administration, and discuss major issues affecting the country.

The House of Commons has 646 MPs (Members of Parliament) who are elected in a general election every five years. The House of Lords has no fixed number of representatives, who are not elected. The majority of them are now appointed by the Queen on recommendation of the Prime Minister.

Financial Bills and new taxes are prerogatives of the House of Commons. The House of Lords debate bills and suggest amendments; they are allowed to delay a bill for a maximum of two years, then, if approved by the Commons, it becomes law, regardless of their objections.

Since 1999 the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly, and since 2007, the Northern Ireland Assembly, have had devolved powers for education, culture.

The **executive branch**, or government, includes the Prime Minister and the other Ministers. The Prime Minister is responsible for government policies, overseas operations and government agencies.

The **judiciary branch** consists of law courts, both civil and criminal.



The United States are a **constitutional, federal and presidential republic**.

The President is the Head of State. The Constitution is the supreme law of the country. It came into force in 1789 and consists of three parts:

- the Preamble (i.e. a statement of purpose)
- the Articles (concerning the organisation of the State)
- the 27 Amendments (the first 10 are called the Bill of Rights and guarantee individual liberties).

In the articles, the Constitution defines the separate branches of the government – legislative, executive and judicial –, their powers, and a system of checks and balances, so that no branch can dominate the others.

The **legislative power** is in the hands of the Congress, which is made up of two parts with similar functions: the House of Representatives, with 435 members elected every two years – the number for each state depending on the population –, and the Senate, with 100 members – two for each state – elected every six years.

Legislation must be approved by both houses before it is signed into law by the President.

Only the House of Representatives can impeach, i.e. officially accuse, the President and propose bills to raise revenues. Only the Senate confirms appointments for the Supreme Court, approves or rejects international treaties and conducts the trial in case of impeachment.

The **executive branch** consists of the President, Vice-President, 15 government departments and various agencies such as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), which collects information on foreign governments, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), which investigates national and international crimes. The Secretary of State is the President's main advisor on foreign affairs.

The **judicial branch** is composed of the Supreme Court and other lower courts. The Supreme Court has final authority in interpreting the Constitution.

All of the above form the federal government, but each state has its own government and the power to collect taxes and make laws. The executive power is in the hand of a Governor. Each state has its own police force.



**1** Read the text and underline the right option.

**BBC News: A brief history of the UK Parliament**

Parliament started as a King's Council. The king asked their advice, but did what he wanted. These meetings led to formal arrangements which eventually became the House of Lords. By the 13<sup>th</sup> Century, a parliament was when kings met up with English barons to raise cash for fighting wars. Thanks to the Magna Carta of 1215, kings were obliged to ask before taking anyone's money. Simon de Montfort's parliament in 1265 was the first to involve knights, not only the aristocracy. Elections were held for the first time and this was the origin of the House of Commons.

With the Act of Union (1536-43), Wales passed under British rule and could send representatives to Parliament. By 1603, England and Scotland had the same king but different parliaments. King James tried to persuade the English Parliament to bring the Scottish Parliament into the fold, but English MPs refused to let any Scots into Westminster. The Commons got into their stride in the 1620s. Eventually, Charles I dissolved Parliament for 11 years and brought it back when he needed money for war. Later, the king was put on trial and executed. The Commons voted to abolish the monarchy.

After the civil war, Cromwell annexed Scotland and Ireland into a full union with a single parliament at Westminster. The 1654 parliament was the first one in which the whole of Britain was represented, but Cromwell dissolved it pretty quickly.

The 1707 Act of Union brought England and Scotland together – with one king and no more Scottish Parliament. Scottish MPs and Lords made their way down to Westminster. With the Act of Union with Ireland in 1800, a hundred Irish MPs turned up at Westminster. However, in 1920 Northern Ireland was given back its own parliament, which was suspended again in 1972. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century there were big changes to Parliament, with more men being given the vote and people being allowed to vote in secret. Women finally got the vote in 1918 after the campaign by the Suffragettes.

Parliament had its first major jolt to the system in a long while when Labour came into government in 1997. Tony Blair decided to complete some unfinished business. Along came a Parliament for Scotland with devolved powers, and the Northern Ireland and Welsh assemblies.

*Adapted from: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-29252332>*

1. The House of Commons was created *before/after/at the same time* as the House of Lords.
2. By 1603 there were only *British/British and Scottish/British and Welsh* representatives in Parliament.
3. The first parliament in which all of Britain was represented was in *1654/1707/1800*.
4. The Scottish Parliament was *abolished/created/suspended* in 1654.
5. The first elections were held in *1265/1620/1918*.
6. A secret vote was introduced *after the civil war/in 1707/in the 19<sup>th</sup> century*.



**2** Watch this video on the American Constitution and answer these questions.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OSWl5ldEv6w>

1. When and where did the framers meet for the Constitutional Convention?
2. Quote three famous Constitutional framers.
3. How many states sent delegates to the Convention?
4. How was the disagreement resolved?
5. How many states ratified the first constitution?
6. What did the first version of the constitution lack? Why?
7. What is an amendment?
8. When was the Bill of Rights added?
9. What does it mean that the constitution is 'the highest law'?



**3** Discuss in pairs the meaning of the 6 principles in the Preamble of the American Constitution. Then, discuss what a State needs to do to secure these principles.

**We the People** of the United States, in order to **1.** form a more perfect Union, **2.** establish Justice, **3.** insure domestic Tranquility, **4.** provide for the common defence, **5.** promote the general Welfare, and **6.** secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.