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CASE STUDY: UNITED KINGDOM

The United Kingdom (UK) is a useful case study for students of AP Comparative Government and Politics for a number of reasons. The UK provides an example of a developed democratic system with a parliamentary structure and a strong welfare state. The UK is a unitary system experiencing devolution to its subnational units. These are factors that make the UK similar to many European democracies. However, the UK stands somewhat apart in that it has both an unwritten constitution and a limited monarchy.

As you study the relatively stable history of the political system in the United Kingdom, remember that the UK is less stable today. The 2010 election failed to produce a legislative majority of one political party. This is almost unprecedented in the history of the UK. The lack of decisiveness by the electorate was due to a multitude of factors, including post 9/11 challenges and a struggling economy. The current government consists of a coalition between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, which is fragile at best.

KEY TERMS

Beveridge Report

cabinet

Conservative Party

Constitutional Reform
Movement

corporatist

efficacy

euro

fusion of power

gradualism

irregular elections

Labour Party

legitimacy

Liberal Democratic Party

nationalized

parliamentary sovereignty

question hour

shadow cabinet

single-member district

two-party system

unwritten constitution

white papers

KEY CONCEPTS

- ❑ The United Kingdom is a country of four nations: England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales.
- ❑ The United Kingdom developed a democratic system gradually, in part due to its geographic isolation. Gradualism involved a relatively slow political process of removing power from the monarchy and giving power to elected officials.
- ❑ There is no written constitution in the United Kingdom.
- ❑ The United Kingdom has a two-party system, which is dominated by the Labour and Conservative parties but also has numerous seats that are held by a third party, the Liberal Democrats.
- ❑ The United Kingdom is a parliamentary system with a prime minister. The prime minister is subject to an irregular election cycle.
- ❑ The United Kingdom once had a corporatist interest group system, but it has become more pluralist.
- ❑ The United Kingdom is experiencing devolution of power to subnational governments such as Scotland and Wales.
- ❑ An ongoing Constitutional Reform Movement in the United Kingdom involves a variety of legislative proposals, some of which have been adopted.

GRADUALISM

The United Kingdom was transformed from a monarchy into a democracy through a long, gradual process. Gradualism means that democratic traditions evolved one step at a time. The United Kingdom's geographic isolation as an island provided it with natural protection from foreign invaders. Unlike countries that have fought multiple invasions, the UK emerged from this change with relative unity.

The United Kingdom has no official written constitution. Instead, a series of procedures, treatises, and acts of Parliament are considered part of the unofficial constitution. This unwritten constitution dates back to the Magna Carta of 1215, which began to take away the monarchy's powers. Later, in the Middle Ages, Parliament (an elected body) began to assume some power over taxation. The monarchs eventually reduced the role of the church in state affairs, establishing a bill of rights, and eventually parliamentary rule and universal suffrage.

COLLECTIVISM

The United Kingdom emerged from World War II with a broad consensus for the government to provide a welfare state. In 1942, a commission headed by William Beveridge issued a proposal to overhaul the nation's social services. The Beveridge Report was a

proposal to change the nation's social services and was adopted shortly after the Allies' victory in World War II. Sometimes known as a *welfare state*, the United Kingdom's government services encompass education, unemployment insurance, and health care. The National Health Service (NHS) provides British citizens with universal health care paid by the government. In addition, many industries were nationalized (government ownership), including the railroads.

POLITICAL CULTURE

For most of its history, the UK government has enjoyed high levels of legitimacy (citizens' belief that their government has the right to rule). Citizens have high levels of efficacy (the belief that individuals can make a difference in public policy).

The UK population is relatively homogeneous, with a minority population of approximately 5 percent. The biggest cleavage in British society is class.

The 1970s was a period of turmoil in the UK. Violence in Northern Ireland, loss of British power abroad, race riots in parts of the country, and poor economic conditions caused unrest. Trade unions launched major strikes, and riots broke out in big cities. The Labour Party had won many elections since World War II, but this unrest eventually ushered in a conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher.

POLITICAL PARTY SYSTEM

The United Kingdom is considered to have a two-party system, because for more than 80 years only two parties (Labour and Conservative) have led the government. The Labour Party represents the interests of the working class, while the Conservative Party represents the interest of the upper socioeconomic elite. The Liberal Democratic Party consistently wins 30 or more of the 659 seats in the House of Commons, and several regional parties such as the Scottish National Party in Scotland or the Plaid Cymru Party in Wales win seats to represent their respective regions.

The two-party system in Great Britain is largely a result of the first-past-the-post, single-member district system, which is similar to the U.S. party system. "First past the post" means that the person who gets the most votes (not necessarily more than half of the votes) wins the seat. Single-member district means that each member of Parliament represents a contained geographic district. These two rules work to the disadvantage of third parties that are not regionally based. In other words, if a third party has support that is spread out rather evenly, it is not rewarded with seats. The party must win a district to win a seat. With the exception of the Liberal Democrats, only the regionally based parties have been able to do that.

Some in the United Kingdom have called for proportional representation in selecting members of Parliament. The proportional representation system awards seats on a nationwide, at-large basis. Votes are cast for parties rather than for individual candidates. Seats are awarded in proportion to the votes cast for a party. Such a system, popular in many European neighbor countries, encourages third

parties to form and better enables them to win seats, providing a more accurate representation of the views of the population. Not surprisingly, the Liberal Democratic Party has the most to gain in this system and therefore advocates it. In order for such a change to take place, the UK would most likely hold a referendum in which the citizens would vote their preference. Parliament would then take this advice and propose an act of Parliament to change the system. Holding a referendum on proportional representation has been discussed in the House of Commons.

PARLIAMENTARY RULE

Parliament is the legislature, and it selects the prime minister and writes the laws. The United Kingdom has a bicameral system: the House of Commons holds most of the power, and the House of Lords is the unelected upper house with limited power.

At least once every five years, citizens in the United Kingdom select a member of Parliament to represent them. The party with the most seats is responsible for selecting the prime minister. The prime minister is thus a member of the majority party, or majority coalition, and represents a district as well as leads the executive branch. The UK has fusion of power between the executive and legislative branches. This means the prime minister is a member of both the executive and legislative branches, and the cabinet members vote as members of Parliament and serve as heads of executive departments.

The UK operates under the principle of parliamentary sovereignty. Because it has no written constitution, Parliament has ultimate power. While all bills must officially pass both houses of Parliament, the House of Lords generally serves as an advisory body. The House of Lords debates and must sign off on proposed legislation for it to become law, but, at most, the House of Lords can serve only to delay legislation. National referenda can be held in the UK; however, due to parliamentary sovereignty, they are only advisory in nature.

Parliamentary rule differs from presidential rule because there is no chance of a divided government in parliamentary rule. The majority party, or coalition, selects the prime minister, and the prime minister is a member of the majority party. This means that it is relatively easy to pass legislation. However, the government's actions can still be challenged. One key aspect of parliamentary rule is the weekly question hour that takes place in public. The question hour is a lively debate in which members of Parliament can question the government's proposed policies and previous actions. Because the prime minister must respond in public, this is a time for the minority party to make the prime minister insecure and force political change. If the government loses a key vote, called a vote of no confidence, legislative elections are held, and a new government may be selected. Since parliamentary rule involves fusion of power, one major check on the majority party in Parliament is the threat of an election. An election must occur within five years, but can occur whenever the prime minister decides. These are known as irregular elections and are different from the regularly scheduled elections one finds in a presidential system.

Members of the cabinet are the most likely members of Parliament to propose major pieces of legislation that relate to the department they oversee. Each cabinet head oversees a ministry that deals with a particular policy area. There is also a shadow cabinet, or a cabinet made up of the minority party members who will hold the cabinet positions in the case that their party comes to power.

INTEREST GROUPS

For many years, Great Britain's interest group system was corporatist. This means that the government would rely on a handful of key peak associations to draft white papers (proposed legislation) that could later become law. Specifically, Labour Unions wrote legislation for workers. When Margaret Thatcher became prime minister, she dismantled the relationship between the Labour Unions and the government, and the interest group system became more pluralistic.

PUBLIC POLICIES

Britain has maintained its commitment to a strong welfare state, as exemplified by the National Health Service (NHS). But as the result of the unrest of the 1970s and Thatcher's rise to power, a new era of British politics began that involved *privatization*. Privatization involves the selling of government-owned industries into private hands. Under Margaret Thatcher, the railroads as well as other nationally owned industries were privatized.

In the United Kingdom, a Constitutional Reform Movement is underway. This seems ironic considering that Britain does not have a written constitution. However, it does have a series of laws and procedures that are considered untouchable, and these laws are part of the "constitution."

AP Tip

When studying the unwritten constitution of the United Kingdom, it is important that students not be confused and think that the UK does not have a constitution at all—in fact, it does. There are a series of acts of Parliament that make up the UK's "unwritten constitution," which is called this because it is easy to change and because the laws that are supposedly part of the constitution are debatable.

A recently released free-response question on an AP Exam asked students to describe three proposed changes to UK's constitution. This may throw students off if they are not familiar with the unique nature of the constitution and the Constitutional Reform Movement, important topics to study.

Britain has a *unitary system*. This means that the subnational governments, such as that of Scotland, are not sovereign powers but only have the power that the central government gives to them. One change to the unwritten constitution of the UK was *devolution*, or the giving away of power from the central government to the regional governments. Regional assemblies have been created in Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales. Scotland now has an elected government of its own with taxation powers. London now has a directly elected mayor with increased powers. Another aspect of constitutional reform in the UK is that the number of members of the House of Lords has been reduced. Some powers of House of Lords members have been taken away. Two proposed measures that have not yet been enacted include a referendum on proportional representation and a referendum to move the United Kingdom toward adopting the euro, the currency of the European Union. While the UK has not adopted the euro, it is a member of the European Union and has ceded some sovereignty to this organization.

The government in the United Kingdom is going through a time of great challenge. Prime Minister Tony Blair enjoyed wide popularity for many years, only to lose much of that popularity largely due to supporting the United States in the war in Iraq and in the ongoing involvement in Afghanistan. Rather than call for an election, Blair ceded power to Gordon Brown, whose popularity is fragile. Like the United States, the UK is challenged with the fight against terrorism and with criticisms for taking away civil liberties in the process. Recently, the Muslim population in the UK launched protests against the government. The protests, alleging discrimination, have been difficult to contain.

AP Tip

The nature of the United Kingdom's unitary structure is a good topic to review for the AP Exam. The UK is unitary; however, recent public policies have devolved power to Scotland and Wales, given these regions legislatures with policy-making authority. Contrast this system to the Russian political system, which is federal, but recent public policies have centralized political power.