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Britain

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Official Name: United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

Location: Western Europe

Capital City: London

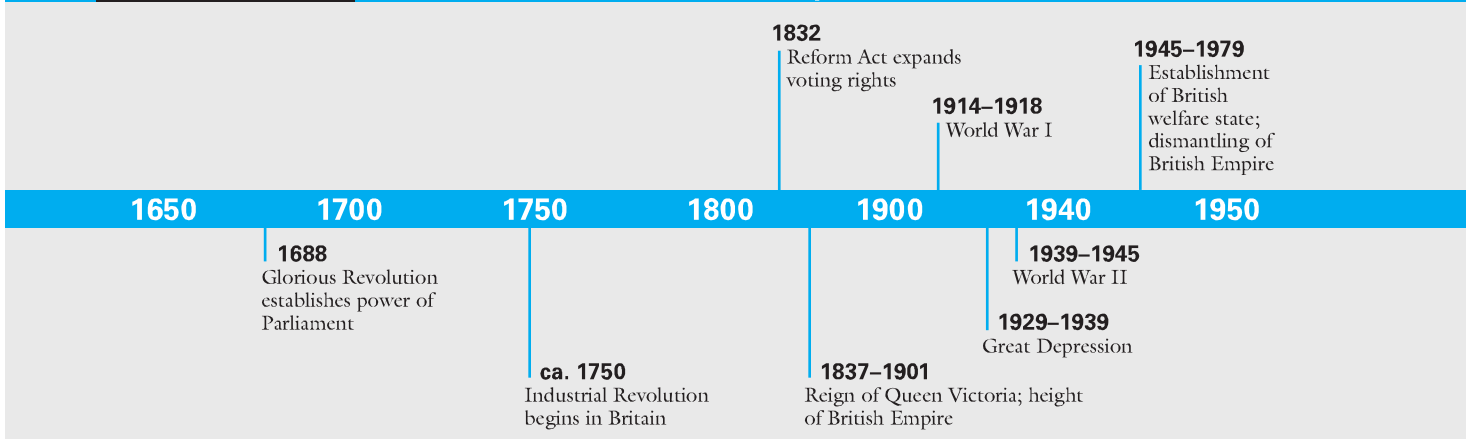
Population (2010): 60.8 million

Size: 244,820 sq. km.; slightly smaller than Oregon



CHRONOLOGY

of Modern Britain's Political Development



SECTION 1

THE MAKING OF THE MODERN BRITISH STATE

Focus Questions

Is Britain's geography still its destiny?

How does its history of empire still shape British politics today?

Why did an electoral system designed to produce a stable single-party majority result in a Conservative–Liberal coalition government in 2010?

What are the greatest challenges facing Britain today?

Politics in Action

When the financial bubble in the U.S. housing market burst in fall 2008, the global economy teetered on the brink of collapse. Since then, financial markets have stabilized, and the global economy has begun gradually to recover lost ground. But the scars of the great recession are far from healed. In October 2010, there were sustained and massive demonstrations in France involving millions of people of all ages who turned out weekly for over a month to protest a government plan to increase the age at which people could begin to collect pensions. Public sector workers and many French from every sector of the economy and every age cohort joined the effort to preserve the rights of pensioners.

Meanwhile, in the UK, pundits ridiculed the French for taking to the streets in protest over minor adjustments in pensions, while the British were faced with far more significant austerity measures—a 20 percent reduction in public spending, half a million public sector jobs cut, a three-strikes-and-you're out plan for pressuring the unemployed to accept job offers or face a cut off of benefits, the elimination of child benefits for middle-class families, which had been a mainstay of the British welfare state for generations, and sharp increases in college tuition (traditionally low by American standards and subsidized by the government).

The British had lampooned the French for their willingness to rampage at the drop of a hat and took pride in the British “stiff upper lip”—their ability to recognize that the 2008 recession had far-reaching repercussions, the government could no longer buy its way out of the slump, and they might just as well take adversity and austerity in stride. They would go about their business and give the benefit of the doubt to the Conservative–Liberal coalition government, which had taken office just six months earlier in May 2010, promising the tough medicine that the country was now being forced to swallow.

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		1979–1990 Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher promotes “enterprise culture”	1997–2007 Prime Minister Tony Blair and Chancellor Gordon Brown lead New Labour in government	2007 Gordon Brown becomes prime minister and promises to renew the party and the nation, but quickly loses support and credibility as the financial crisis deepens
1970	1990	1995	2000	2005
			2001 Under Blair’s leadership, Britain “stands shoulder to shoulder” with America in war against terror	2010 New Conservative–Liberal coalition government formed
	1973 Britain joins the European Community			



Photo by Dan Kitwood/Getty Images

Photo of riots outside parliament, while inside the vote to triple tuition fees takes place.

By November, however, the tables had turned: The French government had pressed ahead with its plan to cut pensions, despite protests, and France was no longer in turmoil. In Britain however, the cuts were beginning to bite hard; and increasingly restive and angry citizens, led by students who were angry at tuition hikes, were acting positively French.

In December, while Parliament debated a tuition fees bill, thousands protested in the streets and when the worst came to pass—Parliament tripled the tuition fees—resentment boiled over into mayhem. Protesters battled police, red paint was thrown at a statue of Winston Churchill, Conservative Party headquarters was attacked, and angry protesters assaulted a car in which Prince Charles was riding, shouting insults at the prince. And in comparison to Nick Clegg, leader of the Liberal Democrats, deputy

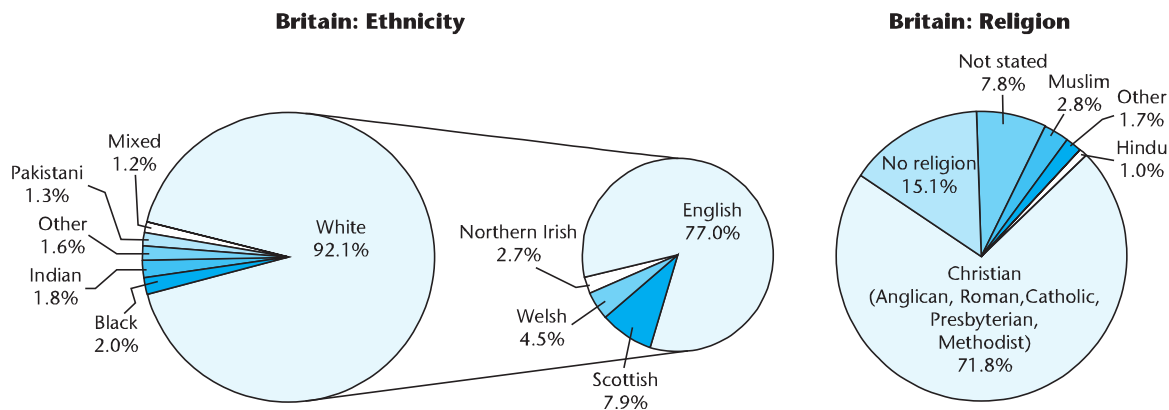
prime minister, and junior coalition partner with David Cameron, Prince Charles got off lightly. The worst vitriol was reserved for Clegg, the more progressive coalition partner who was expected to counter-balance the Conservatives on social protections and civil liberties and who had promised during the election campaign not to increase fees. This high-profile flip-flop on tuition fees severely damaged Clegg's reputation and credibility and may also have farther-reaching consequences, since it represents an important fissure in the coalition government and may fuel doubts about the strength and stability of the government in an electorate which is not used to—and uneasy about—coalition government.

Geographic Setting 5814260 2013/06/07 165.24.252.60

Britain is the largest of the British Isles, a group of islands off the northwest coast of Europe that encompasses England, Scotland, and Wales. The second-largest island includes Northern Ireland and the independent Republic of Ireland. The term *Great Britain* includes England, Wales, and Scotland, but not Northern Ireland. We use the term *Britain* as shorthand for the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Covering an area of approximately 94,000 square miles, Britain is roughly two-thirds the area of Japan, or approximately half the area of France. In 2007, the British population was 60.8 million (see Table 2.1).

As an island off the shore of Europe, Britain was for centuries less subject to invasion and conquest than its continental counterparts. This gave the country a sense of security. This separation has also made many Britons feel they are both apart from and a part of Europe. This feeling complicates relations with Britain's EU partners even today.



British Currency

Pound (£)
International Designation: GBP
Exchange Rate (2010): US\$1 = .6388 GBP
50 GBP Note Design: Queen Elizabeth II (1926–)



© Ben Molyneux/Alamy

FIGURE 2.1 The British Nation at a Glance



Critical Junctures

History greatly influences contemporary politics in very important ways. Once in place, institutions leave powerful legacies. Issues left unresolved in one period may create problems for the future.

The consolidation of the British state unified several kingdoms. After Duke William of Normandy defeated the English in the Battle of Hastings in 1066, the Norman monarchy eventually extended its authority throughout the British Isles, except for Scotland. In the sixteenth century, legislation unified England and Wales legally, politically, and administratively. In 1603, James VI of Scotland ascended the English throne as James I. Although they had the same kings, Scotland and England remained separate

Table 2.1 Political Organization	
Political System	Parliamentary democracy, constitutional monarchy.
Regime History	Long constitutional history, origins subject to interpretation, usually dated from the seventeenth century or earlier.
Administrative Structure	Unitary state with fusion of powers. UK parliament has supreme legislative, executive, and judicial authority. Limited powers have been transferred to representative bodies in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.
Executive	Prime minister (PM), answerable to House of Commons, subject to collective responsibility of the cabinet; member of Parliament who is leader of party or coalition that can control a majority in Commons (normally a single party but since 2010 as a two-party coalition (Conservative–Liberal Democrat)).
Legislature	Bicameral. House of Commons elected by single-member plurality system. Main legislative powers: to pass laws, provide for finance, scrutinize public administration and government policy. House of Lords, unelected upper house: limited powers to delay enactment of legislation and to recommend revisions; Since 2009, the judicial functions of parliament were transferred to the UK Supreme Court. Recent reforms eliminated voting rights for most hereditary peers.
Judiciary	Independent but with no power to judge the constitutionality of legislation or governmental conduct. UK Supreme Court, established in 2009, is final court of appeal for all UK civil cases and criminal cases in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland.
Party System	Two-party dominant, with regional variation. Principal parties: Labour and Conservative; a center party (Liberal Democrat); and national parties in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

kingdoms, until the Act of Union of 1707. After that, a common Parliament of Great Britain replaced the two separate parliaments of Scotland and of England and Wales.

Royal control increased after 1066, but the conduct of King John (1199–1216) fuelled opposition from feudal barons. In 1215, they forced him to consent to a series of concessions that protected feudal landowners from abuses of royal power. These restrictions were embodied in the Magna Carta, a historic statement of the rights of a political community against the monarchical state. It has served as the inspiration for constitutions around the world that contain protections for citizens and groups from the arbitrary exercise of state power. In 1236, the term *Parliament* was first used officially for the gathering of feudal barons summoned by the king whenever he required their consent to special taxes. By the fifteenth century, Parliament had gained the right to make laws.

The Seventeenth-Century Settlement

By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Britain was embroiled in a complex interplay of religious conflicts, national rivalries, and struggles between rulers and Parliament. These conflicts erupted in the civil wars of the 1640s and later forced the removal of James II in 1688. This was the last successful revolution in British history.

The UK later came to be seen as a model of domestic peace and stability, but this was hardly predictable during the violent internal conflicts of the seventeenth century.

This “Glorious Revolution” of 1688 also resolved long-standing religious conflict. The replacement of the Roman Catholic James II by the Protestant William and Mary ensured the dominance of the Church of England (or Anglican Church). To this day, the Church of England remains the established (official) church. By about 1700, a basic form of parliamentary democracy had emerged.

The Industrial Revolution and the British Empire

The Industrial Revolution from the mid-eighteenth century onward involved rapid expansion of manufacturing production and technological innovation. It also led to vast social and economic changes and created pressures to make the country more democratic. Britain’s competitive edge also dominated the international order. The **Industrial Revolution** transformed the British state and changed forever the British way of life.

Despite a gradually improving standard of living throughout the English population in general, industrialization often disrupted lives and shattered old ways of life. Many field laborers lost their jobs, and many small landholders were squeezed off the land. Industrial machinery undermined the status of skilled craft workers, made them poor, and placed them on the margins of society.

The British Empire Britain relied on imported raw materials, and by 1800, it sold the vast majority of finished goods overseas. Growth depended on foreign markets—not domestic consumption. This export orientation made economic growth much faster than an exclusively domestic orientation would have allowed.

Because Britain needed overseas trade, its leaders worked aggressively to secure markets and expand the empire. Backed by the British navy, international trade made England the dominant military and economic world power. Britain led the alliance that toppled Napoleon in the early nineteenth century, thus enabling the country to maintain its dominant position in the world of states.

By 1870, British trade represented nearly one-quarter of the world total (see Table 2.2). By 1900 Queen Victoria (1837–1901) ruled an empire that included 25 percent of the world’s population. Britain exercised direct colonial rule over 50 countries, including India and Nigeria. Britain also dominated an extensive economic empire—a worldwide network of independent states, including China, Iran, and Brazil. Britain ruled as a **hegemonic power**, controlling alliances and the international economic order and shaping domestic political developments in countries throughout the world.

Britain’s global power spurred industrial growth at home, and because domestic industry depended on world markets, the government projected British interests overseas as forcefully as possible.

Industrial Change and the Struggle for Voting Rights The Industrial Revolution shifted economic power from landowners to

Industrial Revolution

A period of rapid and destabilizing social, economic, and political changes caused by the introduction of large-scale factory production, originating in England in the middle of the eighteenth century.

hegemonic power

A state that can control the pattern of alliances and terms of the international order and often shapes domestic political developments in countries throughout the world.

Table 2.2 World Trade and Relative Labor Productivity		
	Proportion of World Trade (%)	Relative Labor Productivity* (%)
1870	24.0	1.63
1890	18.5	1.45
1913	14.1	1.15
1938	14.0	0.92

*As compared with the average rate of productivity in other members of the world economy.

Source: KEOHANE, ROBERT O.; AFTER HEGEMONY. © 1984 Princeton University Press. Reprinted by permission of Princeton University Press.

businessmen and industrialists. The first important step toward democratization began in the late 1820s, when the propertied classes and increasing popular agitation pressed Parliament to expand the right to vote. With Parliament under considerable pressure, the Reform Act of 1832 extended the vote to a section of the (male) middle class.

The reform was narrow. Before 1832, less than 5 percent of the adult population could vote—afterward, only about 7 percent. The reform showed the strict property basis for political participation. It inflamed class-based tensions.

The Representation of the People Act of 1867 increased the electorate to 16 percent but left cities significantly underrepresented. The Franchise Act of 1884 nearly doubled the electorate. The Representation of the People Act of 1918 finally included nearly all adult men and women over age thirty. How slow a process was it? The struggle to extend the vote took place mostly without violence, but it lasted for centuries.

World Wars, Industrial Strife, and the Depression (1914–1945)

The development of the state was just beginning as it expanded its direct responsibility for the economy and social welfare.

State involvement in the economy increased significantly during World War I (1914–1918). The state took control of numerous industries, including railways, mining, and shipping. It set prices, restricted the flow of capital abroad, and channelled resources into war production. After World War I, the state remained active in managing industry, but in a different way. Amid tremendous industrial disputes, the state fragmented the trade union movement and resisted demands for workers' control over production. This government manipulation of the economy openly contradicted the policy of *laissez-faire* (minimal government interference in the operation of economic markets).

Tensions between free-market principles and interventionist practices deepened with the Great Depression—1929 through much of the 1930s—and with World War II (1939–1945). Fear of depression and yearnings for a better life after the war, transformed the role of the state and led to a period of unusual political harmony.

Collectivist Consensus (1945–1979)

The term *collectivism* describes the consensus in politics after World War II, when most Britons and all major political parties agreed that governments should work to narrow the gap between rich and poor, and provide for basic necessities through public education, national health care, and other policies of the **welfare state** (the set of policies designed to provide health care, pensions, unemployment benefits, and assistance to the poor). They also accepted state responsibility for economic growth and full employment. Most people in Britain came to expect that the state should be responsible for economic growth and full employment (understood as a rate of unemployment at 4 percent or below). In time, however, economic downturn and political stagnation unravelled the consensus.

welfare state

A set of public policies designed to provide for citizens' needs through direct or indirect provision of pensions, health care, unemployment insurance, and assistance to the poor.

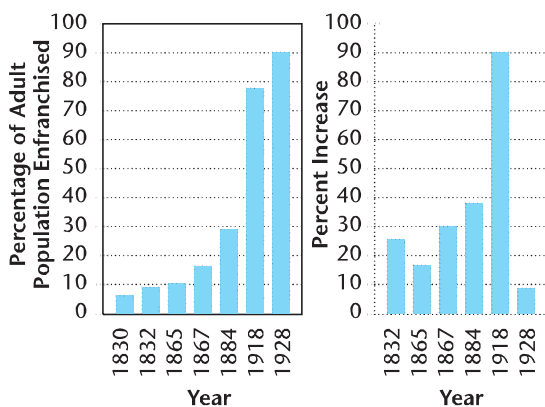


FIGURE 2.2 Expansion of Voting Rights. Expansion of the franchise in Britain was a gradual process. Despite reforms dating from the early nineteenth century, nearly universal adult suffrage was not achieved until 1928.

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Margaret Thatcher and the Enterprise Culture (1979–1990)

The 1970s saw the beginning of economic stagnation and declining competitiveness of key British industries in international markets. This fueled industrial strife. Class-based tensions remained near the surface of politics. No government or party could manage the economy. Edward Heath's Conservative government (1970–1974) could not resolve the economic problems or the political tensions of increased inflation and reduced growth (stagflation). The Labour government of Harold Wilson and James Callaghan (1974–1979) fared no better. Unions became increasingly disgruntled, and the country underwent a rash of strikes throughout the winter of 1978–1979, the “winter of discontent.” Labour could not discipline its trade union allies to accept wage policies of the Labour government, which hurt the party in the election in May 1979. The traditional centrist Conservative and Labour alternatives seemed exhausted, at least within the collectivist mould. Many Britons were ready for a new policy agenda.

Margaret Thatcher met the challenge. Winning the leadership of the Conservative Party in 1975, she launched a set of bold policy initiatives after the Conservatives returned to power in 1979. Re-elected in 1983 and 1987, she never lost a general election.

Thatcher believed collectivism had weakened British industry and permitted powerful, self-serving unions to hold the country for ransom. To reverse Britain's relative economic slide, Thatcher sought to jump-start the economy by cutting taxes, reducing social services where possible, and using government policy to stimulate competitiveness and efficiency in the private sector.

Thatcher's leadership as prime minister (1979–1990) marks a critical dividing line in postwar British politics. Like few others, she set the tone and redefined the goals of British politics. The Thatcher government inaugurated a decisively right-wing regime, set out to divide and conquer trade unions, and to commit the country to a firm neoliberal path. A conviction politician, Thatcher led her party and the country with a style that was characterized by some as “authoritarian populism.” In November 1990, a leadership challenge within Thatcher's own Conservative Party caused her sudden resignation. Her anti-EU stance and high-handed leadership style brought her down. John Major replaced her, serving from 1990 to 1997 and leading the Conservative Party to a victory in 1992 before succumbing to Tony Blair's New Labour in 1997.

New Labour's Third Way

Under the leadership of Blair and Brown, the Labour Party was determined to modernize itself. Although its official name did not change, the party was reinvented as New Labour—a party committed to modernization that promised to fundamentally recast British politics. It offered a “third-way” alternative to Thatcherism and the collectivism of traditional Labour. New Labour rejected interest-based politics, in which unions and working people voted Labour and businesspeople and the more prosperous were Conservatives. Labour won in 1997 with support from across the socioeconomic spectrum. It rejected the historic ties between Labour governments and the trade unions and emphasized partnership with business. Early in their careers, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown had formed an alliance as rising stars in the Labour Party. Blair pushed the party to modernize and expand its political base well beyond its heritage as a labor party. Brown became shadow chancellor (the opposition party's spokesman on the economy).