

3 Landeskunde

Britain

Politics in Britain

THE BRITISH ELECTORAL SYSTEM IN BRIEF

- ➡ **general elections:** held every four to five years
- ➡ **the Prime Minister:** can call an election when it best suits their party
- ➡ **voting system:** “first-past-the-post” → the candidate with the most votes in each constituency wins, even if they have only received a few more votes than the next candidate
- ➡ **problem:** British politics are dominated by a few large parties → very difficult for small parties to win seats

Parliament

The British Parliament is made up of two chambers:

The House of Commons

- ➡ The 650 Members of Parliament (MPs), elected by the citizens of Britain, debate current issues, discuss policy and make laws.
- ➡ After the last general election (2024), there were 650 MPs, each representing a constituency.
- ➡ 40 % of them are women, the highest ever proportion of women MPs.
- ➡ Strict seating plan: the Prime Minister and the Cabinet sit on the front bench, facing the Leader of the Opposition and the Shadow Cabinet across a table. The other MPs sit behind them and are known as “back-benchers”.

The House of Lords

- ➡ Traditionally, members were not elected but had an automatic right to a seat there: as an aristocrat, high-ranking member of the Church of England or a life peer (former politicians).
- ➡ Following a reform in 1999, most members are now life peers, i.e. people with political experience.
- ➡ The Lords have limited powers to influence the political decisions made in the House of Commons. They can suggest changes to laws and delay the passing of a new law for twelve months.
- ➡ The House of Lords used to be the highest court of appeal in Britain. However, since 2009, Britain has had a Supreme Court which has taken over these duties.

The political parties

There are two main political parties in the House of Commons and several smaller ones that also have a few seats in London. The smaller, regional parties have seats in the devolved parliaments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Party	Main facts
Labour Party	traditionally a left-wing workers' party with close trade union connections; now more centre-left to appeal to middle-class voters;
Conservative Party	centre-right; traditionally middle- and upper-class voters; known for cuts in public spending, healthcare and social benefits; many Brexit supporters
Liberal Democrats	centre-left; pro liberty, equality, community, environmentalism; pro-Europe
Scottish National Party	centre-left, social-democratic party; campaigns for Scottish independence
Green Party	emphasis on environmental issues and social justice
Plaid Cymru	means "Party of Wales"; centre-left; pro-Welsh nationalism and independence
Sinn Féin	means "We ourselves"; main Republican party of Northern Ireland; pro reunification with the Republic of Ireland
Democratic Unionist Party	right-wing populist party of Northern Ireland; extremely conservative; anti-EU & pro-Brexit
Reform Party (formerly Brexit Party)	right-wing populists; anti-immigration; anti-EU; pro fossil fuel & pro nuclear fuel

Devolution

At the end of the 1990s, separate parliaments were established for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. They have powers to deal with certain political matters on a regional level.

The Scottish Parliament

- ➡ opened in July 1999
- ➡ deals with education, health, agriculture, the environment, food standards, sport, the arts, transport and tourism
- ➡ can pass new laws

The National Assembly for Wales

- ➡ opened in 1999
- ➡ deals with education, health, economic development and similar issues