

I. Notions and concepts

1. The basics

Political system: usually boils down to either **democracy** or **dictatorship**.

Forms of government: today **monarchy** is constitutional, whereas **aristocracy** is a system ruled by a few wealthy and educated elites; in **federal systems**, member states form a unity but are independent as regards internal affairs.

Ideologies: **communism** believes **capitalism** is detrimental to the masses; **socialism** aims to improve the quality of life in society; **conservatism** is depicted as reactionary and traditional; **liberalism** believes in the individual to ensure their full freedom.

No-politics (also known as [aka] anti-politics): rejects traditional politics as counterproductive and favors **direct action** and **social disobedience**.

2. UK institutions

The regime: **constitutional (aka parliamentary) monarchy** headed by a monarch with powers controlled by constitutional law. The Queen/King is **head of state** (the Prime Minister is **head of government**).

The Constitution: the **Constitution of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland** consists mainly of unwritten laws and principles (Habeas Corpus, Bill of Rights...).

Parliament: **House of Lords** and **House of Commons** (elected and more powerful of the two).

Government: can be considered synonymous with Parliament – as typified by the **General Election**.

Branches of power: **legislative** power lies with Parliament (House of Commons, House of Lords and Monarch), **executive** with the Government (Prime Minister and Cabinet), and **judicial** with the law (House of Lords and Courts).

3. US institutions

The regime: a representative democracy and federal constitutional republic.

The Constitution (1789): enshrines the principles of democratic governing.

The Bill of Rights (1791): the first ten amendments to the Constitution ensure basic individual rights and freedoms.

President: elected for a 4-year term, (s)he is head of the executive, commander-in-chief and chief diplomat.

Congress: the **House of Representatives** and **Senate** vote laws and can declare war.

Branches of power: **legislative** power lies with Congress, **executive** with **Administration** (President and secretaries), and **judicial** with the Supreme Court.

Federal system: each state has a similar power structure, but federal law is sovereign in principle.

► **Looking further**: whipping system, case law, National Assembly, two-party system, first past the post, coalition government, governor, separation of powers, checks and balances, impeachment, lame president, winner takes all, electoral college

II. Facts and figures

1. The UK

Political parties: the **Conservatives** (aka the Tory Party or the Tories), a right-wing party currently in power, and the **Labour Party** (or Labour), a left-wing party, have traditionally shared power alternately. The **Liberal Democrats** (Lib Dems) have recently emerged as a third force – as has the **Scottish National Party (SNP)** in the wake of the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence. **Plaid Cymru** (Party of Wales) champions Welsh independence. The **UK Independence Party (UKIP)**, a populist far-right party, stands against immigration and the EU.

These are a few key dates in recent **UK history**: **1997**: Tony Blair elected PM; **1998**: **Good Friday Agreement**; **1999**: devolution; **2002-2003**: September dossier and Hutton inquiry; devolution; **2005**: London bombings; **2010**: first coalition government in years; **2012**: Diamond Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II; **2014**: Scottish independence referendum; **2016**: Brexit vote and Cameron's resignation; **2017**: Brexit launched, Manchester Arena bombing, Westminster attack and London Bridge attack.

2. The US

Political parties: the **Democratic Party** (Democrats) is more left than the conservative **Republican Party** (aka Grand Old Party, GOP). Both major parties have long shared power alternately. There are other parties at national level like the **Libertarian Party**, the **Green Party** or the **Constitution Party**, and minor or local parties (Communist Party USA, Legal Marijuana Now Party, Vermont Progressive Party...). None is likely to produce a president due to the strong two-party-system tradition.

The following can be considered **milestones in 21st-century US history**: **2000**: G.W. Bush elected 43rd President; **2001**: 9/11 and Afghanistan war; **2003**: Iraq war; **2005**: Hurricane Katrina; **2008**: subprime crisis and B. Obama elected 44th President; **2010**: Obamacare; **2011**: Bin Laden killed; **2013**: Boston Marathon bombings; **2014**: Ferguson events; **2015**: San Bernardino attack; **2016**: D. Trump elected 45th President; **2017**: Muslim ban, Trump leaving the Paris Agreement