
The British Model of National Governance: Historical Traditions, Institutional Structures, and Contemporary Challenges

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper examines the British model of national governance, focusing on its historical traditions, institutional structures, and contemporary challenges. It explores how the UK’s flexible and uncodified constitutional system has supported political continuity while also creating problems of accountability, executive dominance, and constitutional uncertainty.

Design/Methodology/Approach – This paper adopts a literature-based review approach. It analyses three main aspects of British governance: historical traditions such as constitutional monarchy, parliamentary sovereignty, common law, and political conventions; institutional structures such as Parliament, cabinet government, the civil service, judiciary, and devolved governments; and contemporary challenges including devolution tensions, declining political trust, Brexit-related uncertainty, and House of Lords reform.

Findings – The review finds that the British model is resilient because of its flexibility and capacity for gradual reform. However, this flexibility also creates weaknesses. Parliamentary sovereignty may strengthen executive power, political conventions depend heavily on trust, and devolution has increased tensions between central authority and territorial diversity. The British model therefore combines institutional stability with unresolved democratic and constitutional challenges.

Research Implications – This paper highlights the British model as an evolving governance tradition rather than a fixed constitutional system. It argues that the future of British governance will depend on balancing flexibility with accountability, national unity with regional diversity, and historical continuity with democratic reform.

Keywords: British governance; Westminster model; parliamentary sovereignty

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I. Introduction

In comparative political studies, the British system of governance is a distinct example, often referred to as the Westminster model. This model is defined by the parliamentary system's principles of parliamentary sovereignty, cabinet government, the rule of the majority, a strong party discipline, and an intertwined relationship between the executive and legislature (Lijphart, 2012). The British system primarily relies on political as opposed to legal constitutionalism, unlike the presidential or federal constitutional systems. In this model, the key mechanisms of accountability are parliamentary oversight, electoral competition, ministerial responsibility, and political convention, rather than a codified constitution or a constitutional court (Dicey, 1885; Jennings, 1959).

The British system's important characteristic is its uncodified constitution. In the UK, there is no singular constitutional document. The constitution, instead, consists of various statutes, common law, conventions, and political practices (Bogdanor, 2009). Central to this is parliamentary sovereignty, meaning that Parliament holds the supreme legal authority and may legislate or repeal laws through ordinary Parliamentary processes (UK Parliament, n.d.). This has provided the British state, for a long time, a great deal of flexibility; however, this has also created a number of problems, of which the lack of legal constraint on executive power and constitutional uncertainty are the most prominent.

This paper reviews the British model of national governance through a literature-based study and is based on three questions: what historical traditions have impacted British governance, what institutional frameworks sustain the British model, and what are the present challenges that redefine the model. This paper contends that the British system is not a design framed in rigid institutions, but a dynamic tradition of governance that is historically continuous and contextually flexible.

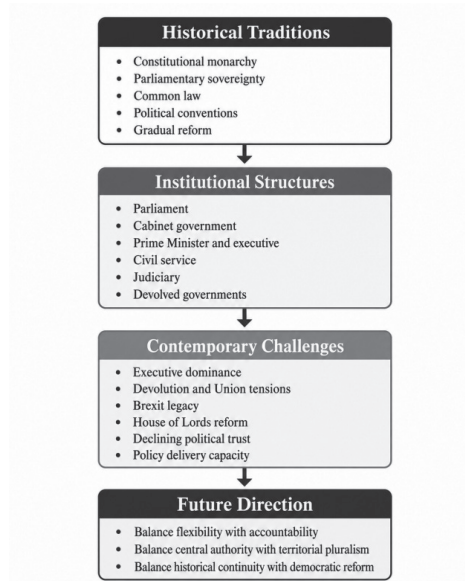


Figure 1. Analytical Framework of the British Model of National Governance

Figure 1 provides the framework for this analysis. The British model of national governance has three interrelated components: historical traditions, institutional frameworks, and emerging issues. Historical traditions reflect the British state's constitutional underpinning; institutional frameworks illustrate the model of governance in practice, while contemporary issues articulate the challenges confronting the model in the twenty-first century.

II. Historical Traditions of British National Governance

One of the most distinctive attributes of the British system of government is the gradual character of the British constitution. British constitutional development has generally not occurred through revolution, constitutional rupture, or comprehensive redesign. The development of the system of governance of modern Britain can be understood as a result of key events in British history, including the Magna Carta, the English Civil War, the Glorious Revolution, the Bill of Rights 1689, the Reform Acts, the extension of the franchise, and the establishment of the welfare state (Bogdanor, 2009).

The system of governance that Britain has developed through this evolutionary process is a system that is characterised by constitutional pragmatism. Rather than articulating a theory of governance and constitutionalism from which systems and governance can be derived, British constitutionalism has been responsive to the problems of governance. This quality of British constitutionalism has been captured by Bagehot in his distinction between the 'dignified' and the 'efficient' parts of the constitution in *The English Constitution*. The former relates to the monarchy, whilst the latter is the cabinet (Bagehot, 1867). This distinction is important and still holds, as Britain continues to have a form of a monarchy that is ceremonial and a system of governance that is representative.

Another key component is parliamentary sovereignty. Dicey famously stated that Parliament may make or unmake any legislation, and no person or body may legally override the will of Parliament (Dicey, 1885). This has long been a key component of the legal system of the UK Parliament. It is a hallmark of the UK system, in contrast to systems in which the courts may pronounce legislation as in contravention of the constitution. This principle enables extensive legislative power for the UK, including the power to effect changes to the constitution through parliamentary legislation.

There are, however, concerns that traditional parliamentary sovereignty in its strictest sense is insufficient to characterize the present-day British constitution. Bogdanor, for instance, argues that traditional parliamentary sovereignty in its strictest sense cannot be fully utilized to characterize the present-day British constitution (Bogdanor, 2009). Parliament is still legally the most powerful. But, politically, Parliament must work in harmony with a number of external and internal elements beyond its control, e.g. public sentiment, international factors, the justice system, and adherences to unwritten practices. Although parliamentary sovereignty is still the most important, the British parliamentary system has evolved to represent a great deal more than just parliamentary sovereignty.

British political conventions are equally as important. They determine the behavior of constitutional actors where laws do not exist or are flexible. Such conventions include the monarch following ministerial advice, collective cabinet responsibility, individual ministerial responsibility, and the Sewel Convention regarding devolution (Marshall, 1984). Adapting to political circumstances is the strength of conventions. However, their flexibility is their weakness. Political conventions are effective when there is trust, but when there is political discord, they are subject to contest.

III. Institutional Structures of the British Governance Model

The Parliament is the most important part of the British government. Officially, it makes up the Crown, the House of Commons, and the House of Lords. In reality, a majority of the power is held by the elected House of Commons. The governing party or coalition normally commands a majority in the House of Commons, and government ministers are usually drawn from Parliament. This means the UK Parliament, by definition, combines the powers of the government and the Parliament. This is part of the Westminster system (Lijphart, 2012).

The Westminster system is often praised for its speed and straightforwardness. A government with a majority in Parliament has the ability to pass legislation and put its planned policies into laws. In systems with a larger separation of power, this is often accompanied by legislative deadlock. However, the Westminster system is also criticized for producing an imbalanced system that is dominated by the executive branch. The majority party in Parliament, coupled with a strong party discipline, may reduce Parliament's ability to check the executive branch of government (Norton, 2013).

Cabinet government is another crucial part of the British system. According to the theory, the cabinet is a body that is integral to the collective decision-making process within government, with senior ministers making government policies. Ministers are to either resign, or, as a means of ensuring formal accountability and cohesion of the government, publicly support cabinet policies. Many believe that Britain has moved from a cabinet system to government by prime ministers. The prime minister has control over who fills cabinet posts, as well as significant power over government policies. The Cabinets, along with the Prime Minister's Office and the centrally administered policy units, have further promoted the dominance of the government head.

British civil services put important value in professionalism and merit. They remain politically neutral, permit personnel changes without disruption to day-to-day operations, and provide advice to ministers and implement government policy. One of the most significant traditions in British administration that has been an advantage to British national governance has been administration continuity over government transitions. There is little doubt that the British Whitehall model of government is being challenged by modern governance. Policy issues that span several governance challenges, including climate change, migration, digital issues, inequalities in health and regional services, and emerging inequalities, require cross vertical and horizontal collaboration, including the public-private spheres. Rhodes believes governance in modern Britain is about more than just the

traditional model of governance, which included vertical hierarchies. Modern British governance goes beyond vertical hierarchies to include collaboration with networks and negotiation across the public and private sectors (Rhodes, 1997).

The rule of law and the judiciary are important aspects of modern British governance. Dicey argued that the rule of law is a core part of the British Constitution and that law is the only acceptable form of governance that protects the individual from the arbitrary use of power (Dicey, 1885). Traditionally, courts of law could review and restrict the powers of the executive, and could not repeal legislation. In more recent years, the judiciary has not been as inactive. The Supreme Court was established in 2009 to formalize separation of the highest court from the House of Lords, and to strengthen institutional identity of the judiciary. The 1998 Human Rights Act also strengthened rights-based judicial review. While courts still cannot repeal legislation, they can issue declarations of incompatibility and can restrict the powers of the executive (Bogdanor, 2009).

Devolution is one of the most significant modern changes to the British system of governance. Since the late 1990s, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland have had the option to introduce devolved institutions which have varying abilities to collectively create legislative and executive functions. The framework fronting these initial legislatures is represented through the Scotland Act 1998, the Government of Wales Act 1998 and the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (Torrance, 2024). Politically, the devolution of functions has reshaped the UK from a centralised unitary governance state to one which is multi-layered and pluralistic. Regardless of this, the UK is still not a federal state. A limitation of devolved functions rests with the Acts of the UK Parliament, which legalistically constrain functions through the principle of parliamentary sovereignty. This creates a paradox in this constitution: devolved institutions have the right to function democratically with legitimacy within their geographic areas, and yet, the UK Parliament maintains absolute sovereignty (Keating, 2021).

IV. Contemporary Challenges Facing the British Governance Model

One of the more important issues impacting the British governance model is the dominance of the executive branch. This challenge is enhanced when choosing to view the British governance model through a parliamentary lens. Because government is usually formed from the majority in parliament, the UK government controls the majority of the legislative agenda, which dilutes the ability for parliament to challenge the government. Though there are some institutional checks on the executive, such as parliamentary committees, opposition debates, and oversight from the House of Lords, the challenges of the executive's dominance are critical. This is especially true considering the impacts of emergency legislation and rapidly developing situations. Flinders refers to the challenges surrounding emergency legislation and the dominance of the executive branch as part of a more generalized challenge revolving around what is termed “democratic drift,” which refers to the erosion of accountability within a democratic system, while the democratic system remains intact (Flinders, 2009).

The second important challenge is territorial governance. Devolved governance in the UK has resulted in

Scotland and Wales being able to develop and articulate their own particular regional and national identities, as well as their own political policies. Nonetheless, because of devolution, there are now more national conflicts, such as regional disputes surrounding governance and funding, the approval of legislation, and issues of national identity. Northern Ireland's position has been especially complex because it voted to remain in the EU in the 2016 referendum and has been directly affected by post-Brexit arrangements concerning the Irish border. Keating argues that the UK can best be described as a fractured union, whereby the politics surrounding state sovereignty, national identity, and the control of regions of the UK are all in sharp conflict (Keating, 2021). More than anything, the challenges are constitutional and not simply administrative: Parliament in Westminster has to govern a multinational state where regional areas are able to control many of their own governance matters, and in the case of the UK, have significant political differences.

Political trust presents another major challenge. In the British system, much of the constitution is based on conventions, political self-restraint, and the public's endorsement. If the public loses faith in government, Parliament, political parties, and politicians, the governing model loses its legitimacy. British Social Attitudes data show that the level of public trust in and confidence in the British system of government has never been lower. NatCen reports that 45 percent of respondents said that they would "almost never" trust British governments of any political party to put national interests above the interests of their party, and 79 percent of respondents believed that the system of governing Britain could be improved "quite a lot" or "a great deal" (Curtice, Montagu and Sivathanan, 2024). The decline in public trust also reveals an increasing concern for the integrity of politics, the delivery of policies, the economic situation, public services, and the aftermath of Brexit.

Another challenge is the reform of the House of Lords. The House of Lords provides expertise and value to the legislative process and revises legislation, but there are legitimate concerns of equity over their unelected membership. Although reforms have made changes to the hereditary membership of the House of Lords, the majority of the House of Lords remains appointed. Reforms in 2026, which removed the remaining hereditary members of the House of Lords, resolved one longstanding anomaly, but continued the debates on issues of the House of Lords' legitimacy, the size of the House, the methods of appointing members, and the potential of the House to serve a territorial purpose (House of Lords Library, 2026). Future reforms may take many forms: the House of Lords may remain an appointed revising chamber, become a partly or wholly elected chamber, be made smaller, or be redesigned to be a revising chamber representing the nations and the regions of the UK.

The British model also confronts the challenges of administrative capacity and policy delivery. National governance is more than constitutional provisions; it is the ability of the state to administer public policy. Britain has several interrelated problems of economic inequality, housing, the NHS, climate, migration, and development among the regions. Each of these problems requires long-term, coordinated effort involving multiple sectors of society and government (local and devolved, regulatory, and business). Moran argues that Britain has created an elaborate regulatory state, where governance is primarily through agencies, regulators, and networks, as opposed to direct ministerial instruction (Moran, 2003). This indicates that the British model of governance has to be flexible. While strong central leadership is needed, it must be married to capacity

and coordination across the governance and administrative spectrum, especially at the local level, within the government, and the public, while also employing science-based policy.

V. Literature Review Synthesis

To make the literature structure clearer, Table 1 summarises the main scholarly perspectives on the British model of national governance.

Table 1. Main Literature Perspectives on the British Model of National Governance

Perspective	Key Scholars / Sources	Main Arguments	Relevance to This Study
Traditional constitutional perspective	Bagehot (1867); Dicey (1885); Jennings (1959)	British governance is based on constitutional monarchy, parliamentary sovereignty, cabinet government, conventions, and the rule of law.	Provides the historical and theoretical foundation for understanding the British governance tradition.
Westminster model perspective	Lijphart (2012); Norton (2013)	The UK represents a majoritarian parliamentary system with strong executive power, party discipline, and legislative efficiency.	Explains the institutional logic of Parliament, cabinet government, and executive-legislative relations.
Governance and institutional change perspective	Rhodes (1997); Moran (2003); Flinders (2009)	Modern British governance is increasingly shaped by policy networks, regulation, fragmentation, and accountability challenges.	Helps explain why traditional Westminster institutions face pressure in modern policy delivery.
Constitutional reform and devolution perspective	Bogdanor (2009); Keating (2021); Torrance (2024)	Devolution, human rights reform, judicialisation, and Brexit have transformed the traditional British constitution.	Supports the analysis of contemporary challenges, especially territorial governance and the future of the Union.
Public trust and legitimacy perspective	Curtice, Montagu and Sivathanan (2024); UK Parliament (n.d.)	Declining public trust weakens the informal foundations of British governance, especially conventions and political accountability.	Shows why governance legitimacy has become a central contemporary issue.

According to Table 1 and Figure 1, the British model of national governance should not be described as a system of fixed constitutional arrangements. Rather, it is a system of historically situated, actively emerging, and dynamically changing governance, combining the elements of tradition, institutions, and modern-day politics. The scholarship on British national governance has been categorised into three main schools of thought. The first school is the traditional constitutional school, exemplified by Bagehot and Dicey, which provides an account of the British model's historical foundations but perhaps underappreciates the complexity of modern-day governance (Bagehot, 1867; Dicey, 1885). The second school is the Westminster model school, which focuses on the strength of the executive, the rule of the majority in the parliament, and the efficiency of institutions, perhaps over-simplifying the internal contradictions of the system (Lijphart, 2012). The third school is the governance and institutional change school, which focuses on networks and fragmentation, in conjunction with devolution, reform of the constitution, and the variability of the state (Rhodes, 1997; Moran, 2003; Flinders, 2009; Bogdanor, 2009; Keating, 2021).

Together, the scholarship indicates that the British model is neither a system of traditional Westminster governance in its entirety, nor a fully reconstructed model of constitutional governance. It is a hybrid system in which parliamentary sovereignty, cabinet government, and centralised executive power are preserved, but operate in a plural, legal, and complex system of governance.

VI. Conclusion

The British model of national governance combines constitutional monarchy, parliamentary sovereignty, cabinet government, common law, civil service professionalism, and gradual reform. Its distinctive feature lies not in a single codified constitutional design, but in the gradual evolution of institutions through political practice, legal tradition, and constitutional convention. The British system's traditional stronghold is over the centuries, through a lack of reliance on a single codified constitution, the UK has developed the flexibility to alter and amend its own institutions through the normal processes of politics.

Such flexibility can also be a weakness. While Parliamentary Sovereignty can be democracy-enhancing, it can also be wholly executive-dominating. Adaptability-promising Constitutional conventions can be the first to break when democracy and trust wane. Devolution may allow for some recognition of the differentiated governance of the regions, but also can be interpreted as contradictory to the Westminster's complete control of the UK. While the House of Lords fulfills that function of some level of scrutiny, its unelected nature raises issues of democracy. The Civil Service does complete the requisite of administrative continuity, yet modern policy issues are also very much in need of more coordinated, and networked governance.

This paper has tried to show that the British model is not about fixity, but rather an evolving governance tradition. It will hinge on whether Britain will, in the future, be able to strike the balance between flexibility and accountability, central authority and territorial pluralism, as well as the constant evolution of its institutions and the renewal of democracy. If this balance is struck, the British model may continue to adapt; if not, it may

become a source of deeper constitutional crisis.

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