



# **Chapter Eight**

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## **Politics in Britain**

**Comparative Politics Today, 9/e**

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# Country Bio: United Kingdom

- Pop: 59.6 million
- Territory: 94,525 sq. miles
- Year of Independence: 12<sup>th</sup> century
- Constitution: unwritten; partly statutes, partly common law and practice
- Head of State: Queen Elizabeth II
- Head of Government: Prime Minister Tony Blair
- Language: English, plus about 600,000 who regularly speak Welsh and 60,000 who speak the Scottish form of Gaelic
- Religion:
  - Anglican: 26.1 million
  - Roman Catholic: 5.7 million
  - Presbyterian: 2.6 million
  - Methodist: 1.3 million
  - Other Christian: 2.6 million
  - Muslim: 1.5 million
  - Hindu: 500,000
  - Sikh: 330,000
  - Jewish: 260,000
  - Other: 300,000
  - No religion: 8.6 million
  - Did not state a religion: 4.4 million

# United Kingdom

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- Old democracy
- Britain did not become a democracy overnight.
  - Evolution not revolution
  - Democratization was a slow process
  - Contrasts with the dominant European practice of countries switching between democratic and undemocratic regimes

# Policy Challenges Facing Britain

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- Thatcher and Blair governments
  - Opened Britain up to international trade
  - Forced the British economy to become more competitive
- Problems
  - Maintaining economic growth
  - Fighting crime
  - Multiculturalism
  - Blair government: too much “emphasis on selling”
  - Who will succeed him in the Labour Party?
  - What of the Conservative Party?
    - Cameron

# Policy Challenges Facing Britain

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- Liberal Democratic Party
  - Closest approximation to a “left” party that Britain has today
- General Election
- Where does Britain belong? How should it act?
  - Leading world power or small neutral country?
    - 49% favored being a small neutral power; 34% world power

# Policy Challenges Facing Britain

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- British Empire
- Commonwealth
  - Antigua and Australia to Zambia and Zimbabwe differ from each other in many ways including their commitment to democracy.
- Special relationship with U.S.
- Britain's world position has declined
- European Community (1957) – now the EU
  - Britain did not join until 1973.
  - Created more policy challenges: beer in metric units or a British pint

# The Environment of Politics

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- One Crown but five nations
  - United Kingdom
    - Great Britain and Ireland created in 1801
    - Great Britain, the principal part of the UK was divided into England, Scotland and Wales.
      - Wales
      - Scotland
      - Northern Ireland
        - The remainder of Ireland rebelled against the Crown in 1916 and a separate Irish state with its capital in Dublin was recognized in 1921.



## National Identities

TABLE 8.1

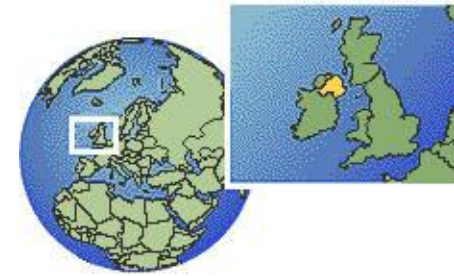
	England	Scotland	Wales	Northern Ireland
		(% identifying)		
British	51	19	27	47
English, Scots, Welsh, Irish	38	75	60	27
Other, don't know	11	6	13	26*

\*Includes 21 percent identifying as Ulster

Source: England: British Social Attitudes Survey, 2004; Scotland: Scottish Social Attitudes Survey, 2004; Wales: Life and Times Survey, 2003; Northern Ireland: Life and Times Survey, 2004.

# The Environment of Politics

- A union: a political system having only one source of authority, the British Parliament
- National identity – UK is a multinational state
- Historically, Scotland and Wales have been governed by British Cabinet ministers accountable to the Westminster Parliament.
  - In May, 1999, a Scottish Parliament with powers to legislate, tax, and spend was first elected to sit in Edinburgh.
    - 129 seat Parliament
    - Mixed system: first past the post and proportional ballots.
  - Welsh Parliament (1999)
    - 60 seat Welsh Assembly; Mixed system
  - Northern Ireland is the most un-English part of the UK
    - Formally a secular polity
    - National identity questions: Catholics and Protestants
    - In turmoil since 1968; IRA
    - British policy in N.Ireland has been erratic
    - Good Friday Agreement



# A Multiracial Britain

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- Relatively small but noteworthy number of immigrants from other parts of Europe
- The worldwide British Empire was multi-racial but not democratic.
  - It is now a multiracial commonwealth.
  - These immigrants have only one characteristic in common: they are not white.
  - 2001 census estimated the nonwhite population of the UK had risen from 74,000 to 4.6 million
  - 2006 the Home Office minister (immigration control) admitted that there were hundred of thousands of illegal immigrants in Britain.
  - British born offspring of immigrants largely see themselves as British, but many do not. Only 2/5s of Chinese identify as Chinese.
- Since 9/11 Labour's focus has been to stress the integration of immigrant families into the British way of life.
- Response to terrorist attacks: increase police powers; restrictions on asylum seekers; deportation made easier

# The Legacy of History



- Britain has a long past; limits current choices
  - General positive legacy
  - Great continuity of political institutions
- When did it develop a modern system of government?
  - No agreement on this question
  - Queen Victoria's reign (1837-1901)

## **The Legacy of History: Developments since WWII can be divided into five stages**

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- 1944 - Churchill: mixed economy  
Keynesian welfare state
- 1951-1965 – Churchill and the Conservative Party maintained a consensus about the welfare state – led to consumer prosperity. Failure to seize the Suez Canal.

## The Legacy of History: Developments since WWII can be divided into five stages

- Early 1960s – age of “hyper-innovation” – Labour Party- “Let’s go with Labor”
  - 1970s Heath’s Conservative government – Britain becomes member of the European Community
- Fourth stage: Thatcher’s radical break with both the Wilson and Heath policies
  - Thatcher never won more than 43% of the total vote but division within the other parties helped her win.
  - But public spending continued to grow in her era.
  - Autocratic governing style; replaced by John Major
- Fifth state; Tony Blair – Labour leader in 1994.
  - 2<sup>nd</sup> longest serving prime minister of the past century
  - Successor

# The Structure of Government

- Descriptions of a government often start with its constitution.
  - England never had a written constitution.
  - Unwritten constitution
    - Vagueness makes it flexible
    - Few constraints in an unwritten constitution compared to a written one
      - U.S. Constitution amendment procedure
      - Britain: can be changed by majority vote in Parliament or by the government of the day choosing to act in an unprecedented manner
      - English courts claim no power to declare an act of Parliament unconstitutional.



## Comparing an Unwritten and a Written Constitution

**TABLE 8.2**

	<b>Britain (unwritten)</b>	<b>United States (written)</b>
Origins	Medieval customs	1787 Constitutional Convention
Form	Unwritten, indefinite	Written, precise
Final power	Majority in Parliament	U.S. Supreme Court
Bill of individual rights	No	Yes
Amendment	Ordinary vote in Parliament; unprecedented action by government	More than majority vote in Congress, states
Policy relevance	Low	High

# The Crown and Government

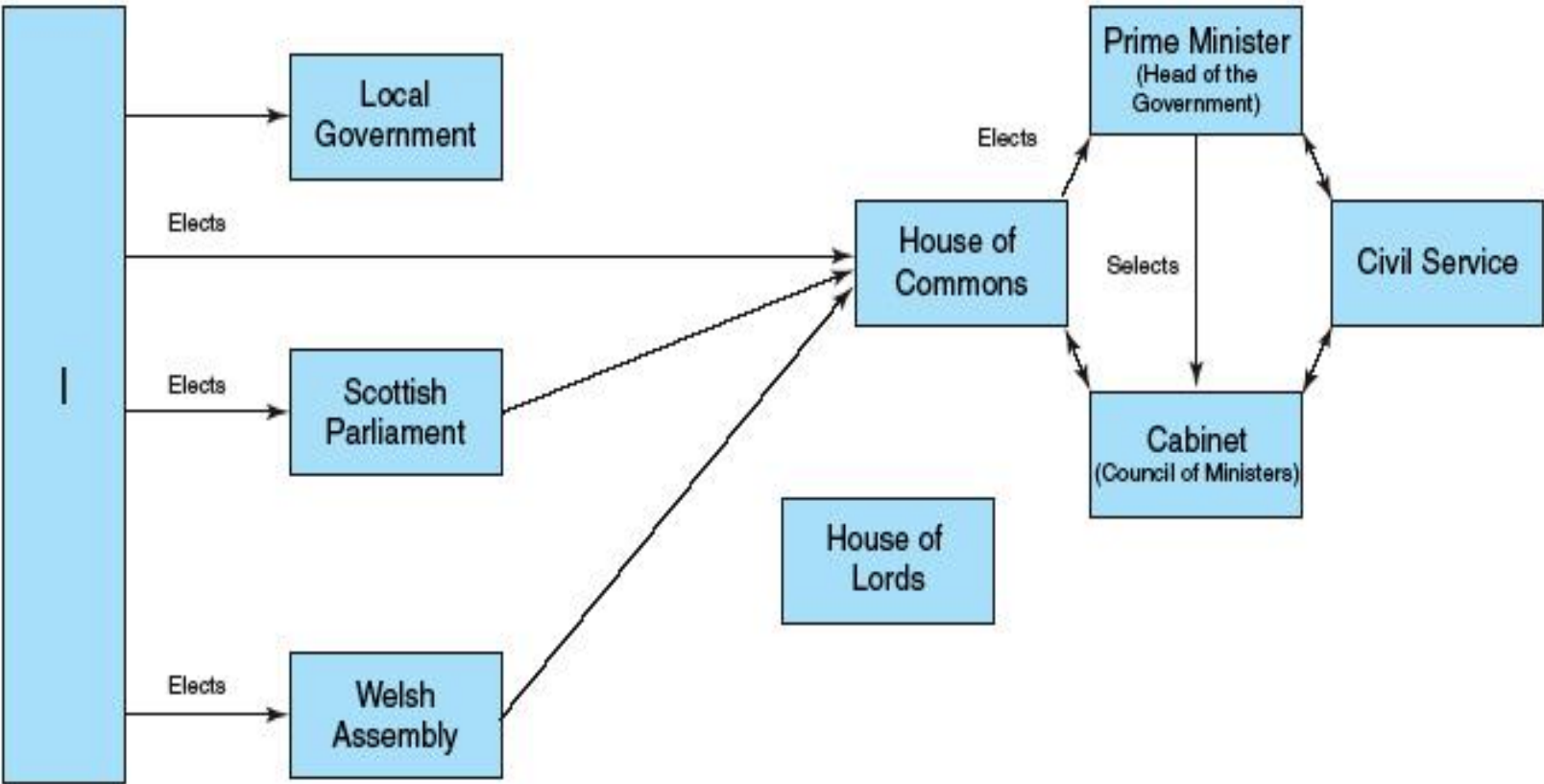
- Crown rather than a constitution symbolizes the authority of government.
  - Monarch only ceremonial head of state.
- What constitutes the Crown?
  - Government
  - Government officials
  - Whitehall
  - Downing Street
  - Parliament
  - Collectively referred to as Westminster



Electorate, Local and Regional

Legislature

Executive



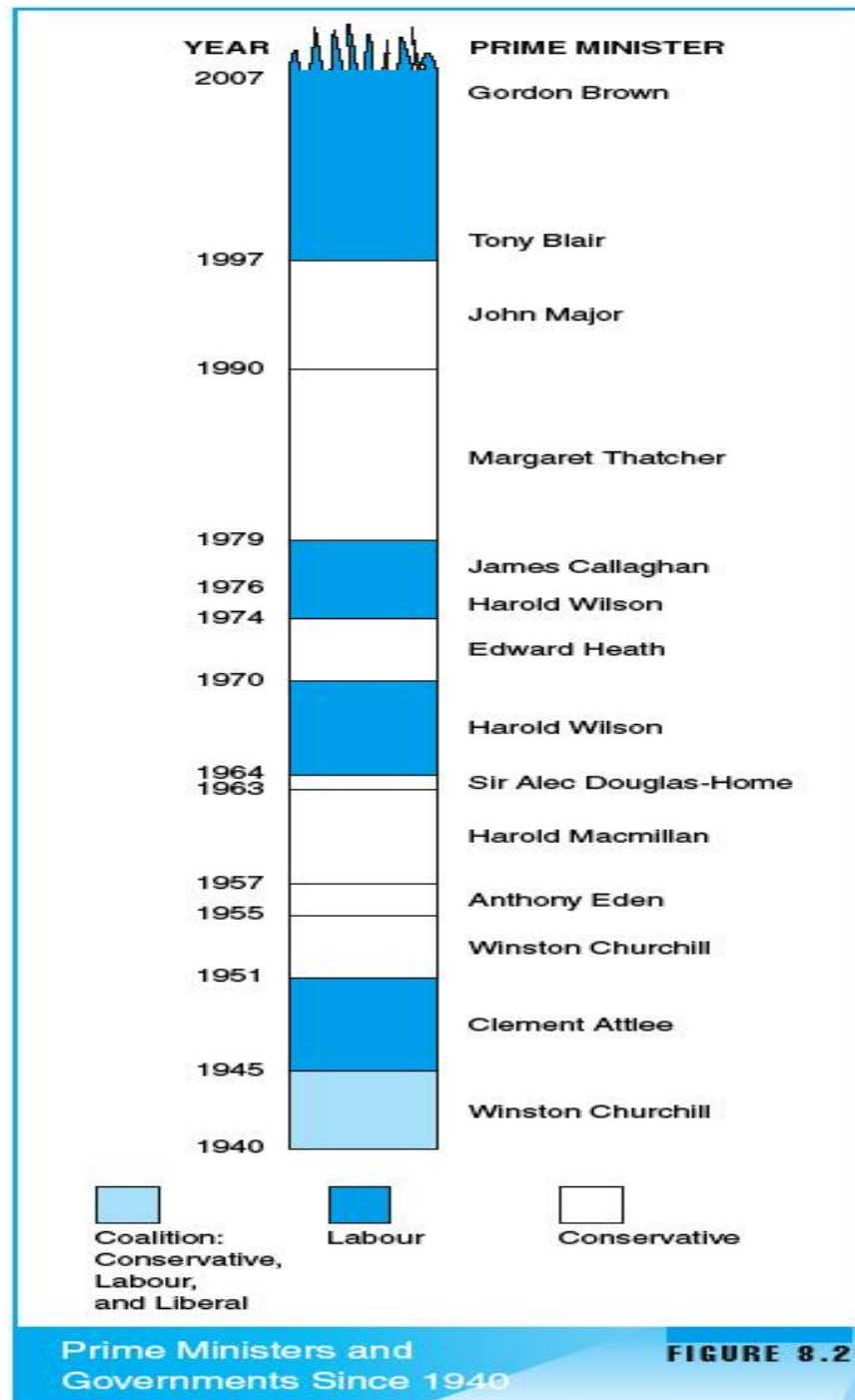
Structure of the British Government

FIGURE 8.1

# The Prime Minister

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- Prime minister
  - Primus inter pares
  - Imperatives of the prime minister
    - Winning elections
    - Campaigning through the media
    - Patronage
    - Parliamentary performance
    - Making and balancing policies



Prime Ministers and Governments Since 1940

FIGURE 8.2

# The Cabinet and Cabinet Ministers

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- Consists of senior ministers appointed by the prime minister. They must be either members of the House of Commons or of the House of Lords.
- No longer a place for collective deliberation about policies.
- Remain important as department heads
- Major Whitehall departments differ greatly from each other
  - Home Office – Home Secretary
  - Treasury – Chancellor of the Exchequer
- Political reputation of Cabinet ministers depends on their success in promoting the interests of their department in parliament, in the media and in battles within Whitehall.

# The Civil Service

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- Largest number of civil servants are clerical staff with little discretion.
- The most important group of civil servants is the smallest
  - Advise ministers and oversee work of their departments
  - Top civil servants are bipartisan, being ready to work for whichever party is the winner of an election
  - Thatcher: focus on making civil service more businesslike
    - Save money for tax cuts
  - Blair continued to focus on businesslike civil service but with the goal of providing more public services without raising taxes.

# The Role of Parliament

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- The principal division in Parliament is between the party with a majority of seats in the House of Commons and the opposition party.
  - If a bill or motion is identified as a vote of confidence in the government, the government will fall if it is defeated.
  - MPs from the majority party generally vote as the party leadership instructs
    - Only by voting as a bloc can their party maintain control of government
    - If you vote against, it is a “rebellion”
  - Whitehall departments draft bills presented to Parliament
  - Government rather than Parliament sets the budget

# The Role of Parliament



- Functions of MPs
  - First, weigh political reputations
  - MPs in the governing party have private access to the government ministers.
    - Role of the whip
  - Third, publicizing issues
  - Scrutinizing legislation
  - Examine how Whitehall departments administer public policies

# The Role of Parliament

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- House of Lords
  - Unique as a second chamber because it was initially composed of hereditary peers
  - 1999 the Labour government abolished the right of all but 92 hereditary peers to sit in the House of Lords
    - Big majority of its members are life peers who have been given a lifelong title for achievement in one or another public sphere
    - No party has a majority there
    - 750 members
  - Government often introduces relatively noncontroversial legislation in the Lords if it deals with technical matters
  - Uses the Lords as a revising chamber to amend bills
  - Lords cannot veto legislation, but it can and does amend or delay the passage of some government bills

# The Role of Parliament

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- The limited influence of both houses of Parliament encourages proposals for reform.
- Controversies around the House of Lords
  - Necessary but...
  - Legitimacy issues

# Government as Network

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- Within the Whitehall network, a core set of political figures are especially important in determining policies.
  - Prime minister
  - Chancellor of the Exchequer, head of the Treasury



# Political Culture and Legitimacy

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- Trusteeship theory of government
- Interest group theory
- Individualist theory

# The Legitimacy of Government

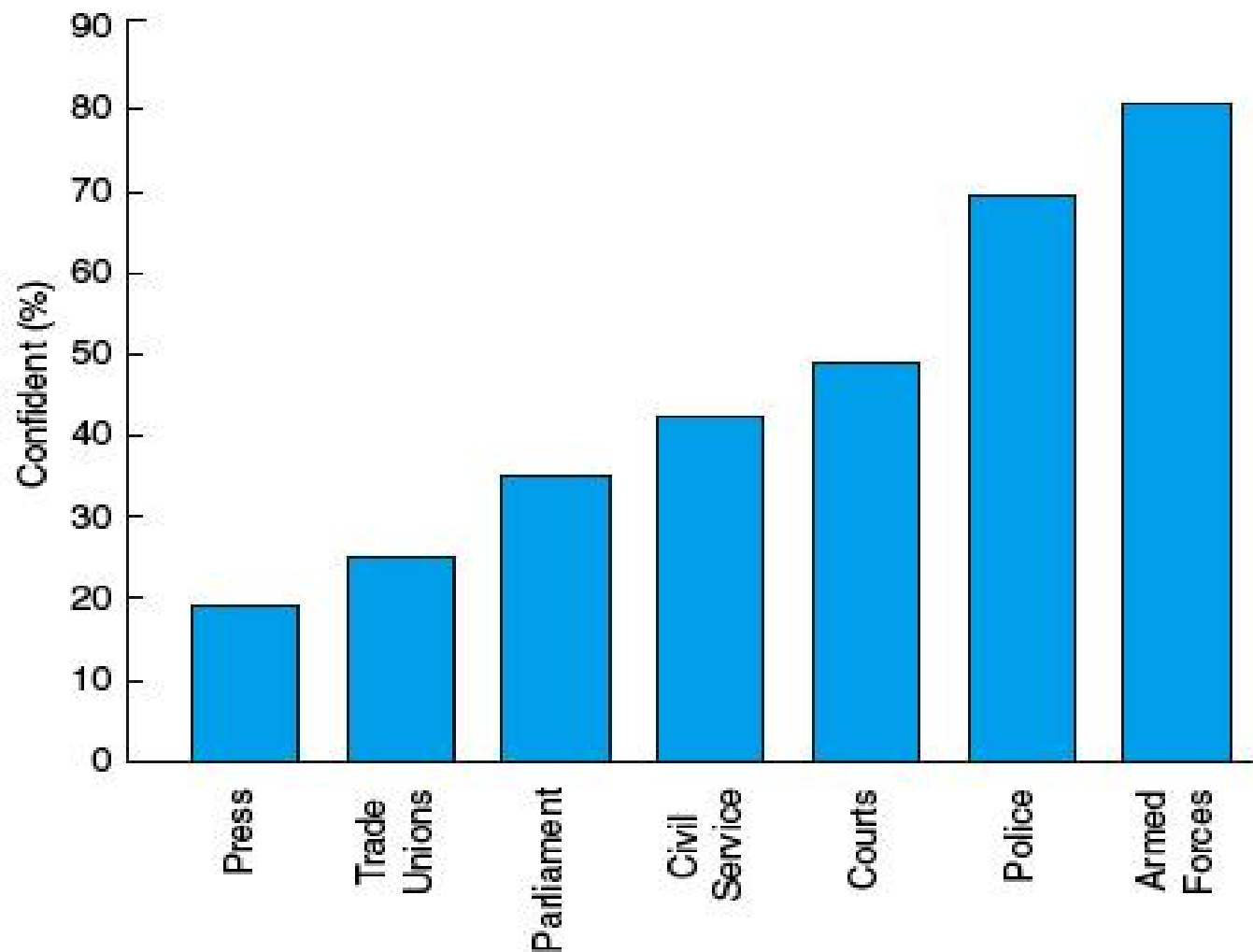
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- Evidenced by the readiness of the British people to comply with basic political laws
- Not related to economic calculations
- Symbols of a common past, such as the monarchy, are sometimes cited as major determinants of legitimacy.
- Habit and tradition

# Abuses of Power

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- Power of the government to get away with mistakes is supported by
  - Official secrecy
  - Doctrine of collective cabinet responsibility
- Examples of misleading parliament and the people
- Distrust of elected representatives
- Decline in ministerial accountability to parliament



### Trust in Political Institutions

**FIGURE 8.3**

Source: Ronald Inglehart et al., *World Values Survey and European Values Survey, 1999–2001*. (Ann Arbor: Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research). Interviews conducted in Great Britain, October–November 1999 (N = 1000).

# Culture as a Constraint on Policy

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- The values of the political culture impose limitations on the scope of public policy.
  - Cultural norms about freedom of speech prevent political censorship.
  - Today, the most significant limits on the scope of public policy are practical and political.
    - Health care limited by the economy and the reluctance to raise taxes

# Political Socialization

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- Socialization influences the political division of labor.
  - Family and Gender
  - Education
  - Class
  - Mass Media



# Political Participation

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- The wider the definition of political participation, the greater the number who can be said to be involved.
- The most politically involved are no more than 1/10 of the electorate.
  - Those who say they are interested in politics, take part in a demonstration or are active in a party or pressure group.

Social Differences in Voting (percentage of voters in 2005)

TABLE 8.3

	Labour	Conservative	Liberal Democrat	Other
<i>Gender</i>				
Women	39	34	22	5
Men	40	29	23	8
Difference	-1	5	-1	-3
<i>Age</i>				
18-29	44	20	30	6
30-59	40	30	23	7
60 plus	36	41	18	5
Difference	8	-21	12	1
<i>Class</i>				
Middle	36	36	23	5
Lower middle	32	39	24	5
Skilled manual	48	27	18	7
Unskilled manual	52	18	20	10
Difference	-16	18	3	-5

Source: British Election Survey, 2005; number of reported voters—2,787.

# Political Recruitment

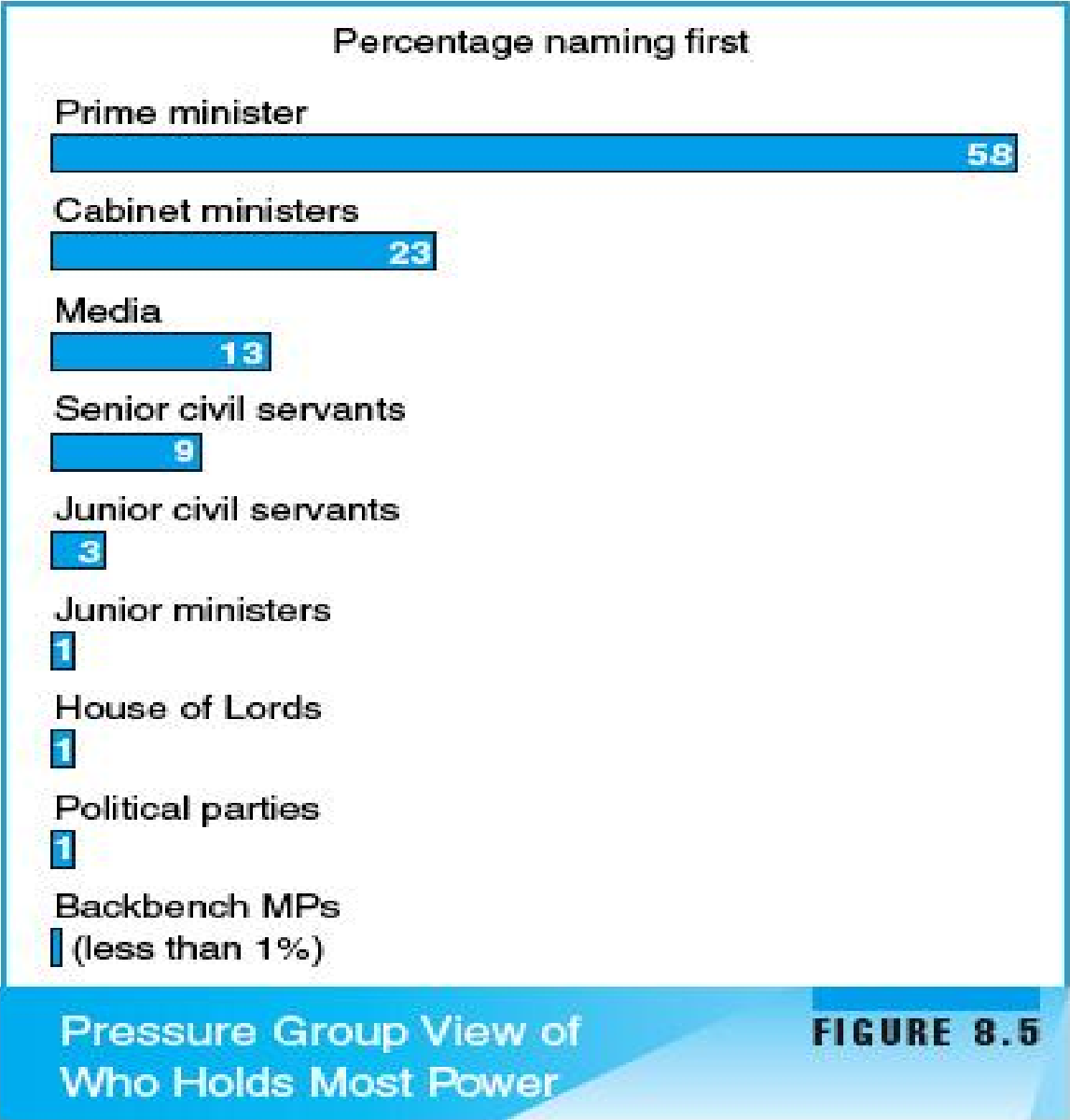
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- The most important political roles in Britain are those of Cabinet minister, higher civil servant, partisan advisers, and intermittent public persons (experts).
- Each group has its own recruitment pattern.
- Selective recruitment

# Organizing Group Interests

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- Civil society (institutions independent of government) has flourished in Britain for centuries.
  - Confederation of British Industries
  - Big business- direct contacts with Whitehall and with ministers
  - Trades Union Congress



Source: Survey of officials of business, labor, and campaign groups, as reported in Rob Baggott, "The Measurement of Change in Pressure Group Politics," *Talking Politics* 5, 1 (1992): 19.

# What Interest Groups Want

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- Most interest groups pursue four goals:
  - Information about government policies and changes in policies
  - Sympathetic administration of established policies
  - Influence on policymaking
  - Symbolic status
- Reciprocal benefits to government
  - Cooperation in administering and implementing policies
  - Information about what is happening in their field
  - Evaluation of the consequences of policies under consideration
  - Support for government initiatives

# Organizing for Political Action in Civil Society

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- Insider pressure groups
- Outsider pressure groups
- State-distancing strategy
  - Less reliance on negotiations with interest groups and more on independent authority of the Crown

# Party System and Electoral Choice

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- A general election must occur at least once every five years
- Within that period, the prime minister is free to call an election at any time.
- Winner is the candidate who is first past the post (plurality)
- The winner nationally is the party that gains the most constituency seats.
- Two party system
- Multiparty system
- To win a substantial number of seats in the House of Commons, a party must either gain at least one-third of the popular vote nationally or concentrate its votes in a limited number of constituencies.
  - The distribution of seats in the House of Commons different from the distribution of the share of votes
  - May have as little as 35 percent of the popular vote

# Control of Party Organization

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- Much of the work of party organizations is devoted to keeping together three disparate parts of the party:
  - Those who vote for it;
  - The minority who are active in its constituency associations;
  - And the party in Parliament.

# Control of Party Organization

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- Each British party leader is elected by rules that differ from party to party.
  - Labor Party
    - Electoral college composed of three groups: Labour MPs, constituency party members, and trade unions
  - Conservative Party
    - Until 1965 the party leader was not elected but “emerged” as a result of consultation among senior MPs and peers. Since then they have elected their leader.
    - First a ballot among Conservative MPs; then the two MPs with the most votes are then voted on by the party membership at large
  - Liberal Democrats
    - Have a small central organization
    - Candidates for leadership are nominated by Liberal MPs and the leadership is determined by vote of the party’s membership.
- Party leader is strongest when he or she is also prime minister.

# Party Images and Appeals

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- While the terminology of the left and right is part of the language of elite politicians, it is rejected by the great majority of British voters.
  - Median voter tends to choose the central position
  - Only a tenth place themselves on the far left or far right
  - Much consensus among voters on a variety of issues
  - Big divisions in contemporary British politics often cut across party lines
    - European Union
    - Iraq War
  - Parties increasingly emphasize collectivist economic interests and consensual goals.

# Party Images and Appeals

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- In office, the governing party has the votes to enact any parliamentary legislation it wishes, regardless of protests by the opposition.
  - For every government bill that the opposition votes against on principle in the House of Commons, three are adopted with interparty agreement.
- New governments must also enforce the laws enacted by the previous governments.

## Consensual Title of Party Election Manifestos

**TABLE 8.4**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Conservatives</b>	<b>Labour</b>
1964	Prosperity With a Purpose	Let's Go With Labour
1966	Action, not Words	Time for Decision
1970	A Better Tomorrow	Now Britain's Strong—Let's Make It Great to Live In
1974	Firm Action for a Fair Britain	Let Us Work Together
1974	Putting Britain First	Britain Will Win With Labour
1979	The Conservative Manifesto	The Labour Way Is the Better Way
1983	The Challenge of Our Times	The New Hope for Britain
1987	The Next Moves Forward	Britain Will Win
1992	The Best Future for Britain	Time to Get Britain Working Again
1997	You Can Only Be Sure	Because Britain Deserves Better Than the Conservatives
2001	Time for Common Sense	Ambition for Britain
2005	It's Time for Action	Britain Forward not Back

# Central Authority and Decentralized Delivery of Policies

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- In a unitary state, political authority is centralized.
  - They are binding on all public agencies through Acts of Parliament and regulations prepared in Whitehall.
  - Delivery of services
    - Turning good intentions into a program takes time and money.
    - Running the Whitehall obstacle race is the first step in intra-governmental politics.
  - Because of Treasury control of public expenditure, before a bill can be put to Parliament, the Treasury must authorize the additional expenditures required, because increased spending implies increased taxation.
  - A departmental minister must pilot a bill through Parliament.
    - If controversial, attacks from the Opposition and a host of amendments designed to test the minister's understanding of a policy.
  - Minister may also negotiate agreement with public agencies outside Whitehall, and with affected interest groups.

# Central Authority and Decentralized Delivery of Policies

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- Local government is subordinate to central government and in Scotland and Wales to devolved representative assemblies.
- Local council elections are fought on party lines.
- Local government is usually divided into two tiers of county and district councils, each with responsibility for some local services.
  - Jumble of more or less local institutions delivering such public services as education, police protection, refuse collection, housing, and cemeteries.
- Central government financial grants are the largest source of local government revenue.
- Both Conservative and Labour parties are centralist.
  - Centralization is justified in terms of territorial justice.

# Central Authority and Decentralized Delivery of Policies

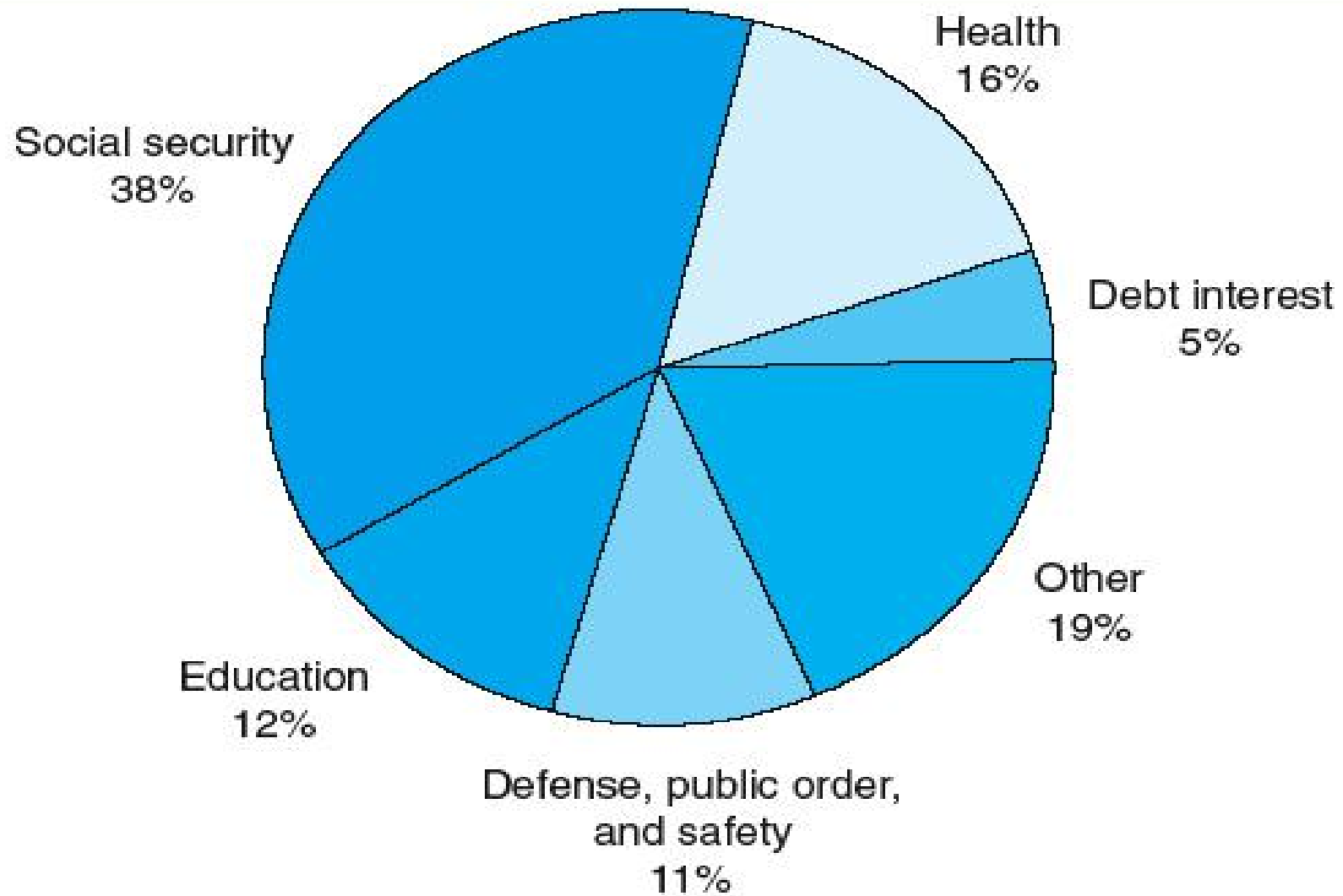
- Devolution
- Executive agencies
  - National Health Service (NHS)
- Quangos
  - Quasi-Autonomous Non-Governmental Organizations
    - Advisory Committees
    - Administrative Tribunals
- Turning to the Market
  - Privatization



# Central Authority and Decentralized Delivery of Policies

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- Civil service has relied on trust in delivering policies.
- Trust has been replaced by contracts.
- Theory of British government is centralist.
  - All roads lead to Downing Street; influence is contingent - it varies with the problem at hand
- Public policy matters
- Government relies on three major resources to produce the benefits of public policy: laws, money, and personnel.
  - Social security most costly program of the British government
  - Stealth taxes



Public Expenditure by Program

FIGURE 8.8

Source: Office for National Statistics, *United Kingdom National Accounts: The Blue Book*. (London: The Stationary Office 2004), 276ff.

# Policy Outcomes and Changes in Society

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- In an open society, like that of Britain, social conditions are a consequence of the interaction of public policies, the national and international economy, the not-for-profit institutions of civil society, and individual and household activities free of state control.
  - Defense is a unique responsibility of government.
  - Crime prevention
    - Policing AND whether there are lots of unemployed youths ready to violate the laws in pursuit of money.
  - British economy has grown since WWII.
  - Living standards are high.
  - Everyone makes use of publicly financed health and education services.

# Policy Outcomes and Changes in Society

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- Popular expectations
  - Generally low
    - Decades of economic difficulties have lowered expectations of what government can do to make the economy grow or prevent unemployment.
    - British people do not hold government responsible for what is most important in their lives
      - Personal circumstances are evaluated very differently from public policy.