Increasing power in the 17th century essay sample

Countries, England

Governmental systems in both France and England were greatly changing during the 17th Century. In England, absolute monarchies lost power while Parliament gained supremacy. France, on the other hand, saw Louis XIV strengthening his own offices and weakening both the Estates General and the local nobility. Absolutism, a political theory holding that all power should be vested in one ruler, was attempted by James I and Charles I of England, and Louis XIV of France. However, neither English king could establish an absolute monarchy as successfully as Louis XIV. Louis has been hailed as the extreme absolutist; he epitomized the ideal of kingship. " Seventeenth-century France, in contrast to England, saw both discontent among the nobility and religious pluralism smothered by the absolute monarchy and the closed Catholic state of Louis XIV. An aggressive ruler who sought glory in foreign wars, Louis XIV subjected his subjects at home to ' one king, one law, one faith'" (The Western Heritage 430). Louis succeeded in establishing an absolute monarchy while English rulers struggled with a power hungry Parliament.

Both James I and Charles I of England tried to establish absolute monarchies by ruling without consenting Parliament. James developed other sources of income to avoid calling Parliament, and Charles only called Parliament when he needed money for a war against Scotland. Parliament, however, was too strong an institution to be dissolved so quickly. The English people had always been dependant upon the joint rule of both Parliament and a king. Both the noble and middle classes supported Parliament because it was a representation of the people, whereas the king was a sole ruler. When Charles I tried to gain complete control, Parliament reacted negatively, and

as a result, Charles I and Parliament continued to vie for supremacy until January 1642 when a full-scale civil war broke out. Driven by religious divergences and an ultimate battle for power, the war engulfed England for the next four years. Oliver Cromwell, head of the parliamentary army, led the " roundheads" to an eventual victory by executing Charles and abolishing his monarchy, the House of Lords, and the Anglican Church. The war may not have succeeded in making Parliament the supreme authority of England, but it did force all kings thereafter to acknowledge the power of Parliament. Beginning with Charles II, all future kings learned that they had to work with Parliament and learn to compromise. Parliament was such a strong central force in English government, it was impossible for an absolute monarchy to thrive.

Louis XIV established the first successful monarchy in European history. While at first he was nearly thwarted by the local townspeople, Louis managed to use this near-defeat to his advantage. He convinced people that they needed a strong king to save them from the tyrannical rule of the exceedingly divergent regional claims. Louis XIV then assumed personal control of the throne rather than appointing a chief minister as was the tradition. As the sole ruler, Louis XIV managed to centralize the power of the monarchy while decreasing the power of the nobles. " Louis's genius was to make the monarchy the most important and powerful political institution in France while also assuring the nobles and other wealthy groups of their social standing and political and social influence on the local level" (430).

Rather than completely nullifying the power of the nobles, Louis managed to gain their support and to work through them.

He made them strive to be his servants at his extravagant palace of Versailles. With complete control of the nobility and no parliamentary opposition, Louis managed to control all aspects of government. He kept his popularity among the people with his excessive use of propaganda. He imposed upon people the idea of the divine right of kings. If kings are God's regents on Earth, then they can not be bound by a people or parliament. Louis XIV succeeded in instigating an absolutism that was popular with all social classes of France.

The differing political systems in France and England resulted in one absolute monarchy and one nearly supreme parliament. Louis XIV did not face the challenge of a Parliament-like institution, while England depended upon that institution to maintain its government. Louis also had the support of the people while the English gave their allegiance to Parliament. France and England were destined to have contrasting forms of government in the 17th century.

Works Cited

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