

# [Changes to the westminster system since 1945](https://assignbuster.com/changes-to-the-westminster-system-since-1945/)

Howhas Westminster system in the UK changed since 1945?

Westminster is a system of government originally developed and followed in the UK as explained by Esaiasson and Heidar (2000). The term has originated from the Palace of Westminster of British Parliament. This type of arrangement involves a series of particular procedures suited to operate a legislature that has faced many changes since 1945. These significant changes over the course of time (Rhodes, 2002), were due to a number behavioural, institutional and political factors. The Westminster system is often compared to thepresidential systems of the United Statesor a semi-presidential system such as the one followed in France. This essay shall attempt to track these changes in the Westminster system from 1945 until now and analyse the factors behind it.

Westminster system as a model was rapidly adapted by numerous nations and states across the world, evolving into a government system as it moved to the developing world. The main purpose of this essay is to study theconventions and institutionsthat characterized the Westminster system and evolved since 1945 to later be adopted by governments outside of the UK. The essay has first provided an overview of the Westminster system of government, then it has highlighted the legislative process structured at Westminster, the third component is the conventions and institutions that characterized the system and their evolution over time and the factors that caused this change in the system. Lastly before concluding, the role of institutions, government, and opposition within such changes have been discussed.

Westminster is a name provided to aparliamentary democracy system mainly in the UK and other countries such asAustralia, Canada, Britain, and New Zealand. The focus of this essay is theWestminster system in the UK. Westminster model is the dominant theory ofBritish politics defined the way the British system of governance works or issupposed to work (Flinders, Gamble, and Hay, 2009). Core principles includeparliamentary sovereignty, the legislative process is handled by a governmentwith a parliamentary majority and a two-party system. Lijphart (1999: 9) usedthe term ‘ Westminster model’ interchangeably with a majoritarian model to referto a general model of democracy. Further, as studied by Bulmer (2002: 93), a keyfeature of this system is a democratically elected lower house that chooses thegovernment. Additionally, The government requires the support of majoritymembers of such chamber to stay in office; Prime minister is the head ofGovernment and leads Cabinet and Cabinet is responsible and accountable tolower house; there exists a loyal opposition which is led by party leader orleader of the party with the second highest number of seats in the lower house; there is a constitutional monarchy which is above politics and acts accordingto the advice of prime minister; a career public service also exists thatserves the government of the day impartially; armed services act according toinstructions of government and are outside of politics; with an independentjudiciary, there exists a rule of law subject to the constitution

According to Marsh (2008: 253), this system isalso called ‘ responsible government’, referring to a government which isresponsible and accountable to the parliament. The system varies from countryto country as per vernacular conditions. According to Dewan and Spirling (2011: 339), in the Westminster system, a bill is a proposed law that is to beintroduced in the parliament. A debate is made associated with the bill andonce it is approved by each parliament house and received royal consent, it ismade a law to be known as an act of law. A bill can be introduced by anyparliament member. For each parliament session, a legislative programme isarranged by the government including a plan of bills to be considered insession. If any government department has a proposal which it wishes to beincluded in the legislative programme, it has to submit a bid in relation tothe bill to parliamentary business and legislation committee of the cabinet. This bid is required a year before initiation of the session in question. Thesebids are considered by Parliamentary Business and Legislation (PBL) committeeand a recommendation is made to the cabinet regarding the provisional contentof the programme. This recommendation depends upon few factors such as the needfor the bill, its link with political priorities of government, publication ofbill as a draft for consultation and progress in working up the proposal. Kavanagh et al. (2006: 54) stated that when a provisional programme is agreedby Cabinet, it is reviewed by the PBL committee and a month before the start ofthe session; the programme is finalized by the cabinet. This is then announcedin the speech of the Queen at the first session of the parliament. Policy inthe bill requires agreement from a policy committee of the Cabinet.

We shall now discuss the conventions andinstitutions that characterise the system. Norris (2001: 882), documented thatconvention development can be regarded as growth rather than planning, forinstance, the constitution which is still in law that appointment of Governor-Generalis made by the Queen, however, current practice is that the governor general ischosen by existing prime minister. In this manner, many practices and laws havechanged in the Westminster system of different countries Kavanagh et al. (2006: 52). It is common that a law and a convention intersect such as convention ofprime minister choosing a governor general has the same subject as a law thatgives this right to the queen. There are other minor conventions that havedeveloped over time and have overridden previous laws. Kaiser (2008: 23) statedthat these conventions are associated with social rules and business dealingsof government. After the crisis of 1975, conventions were given more substanceand recognition. The issues and 1975 crisis resulted in additional conventions, in 1983, a set of 34 conventions was agreed and by 1985 additional 18conventions were introduced (Saalfeld, 2003: 629).

Russell and Sciara (2007: 303) stated thatmajor institutions that underpin the Westminster form of democracy are groupedalong two principal dimensions; federal-unitary and executive-parties. Thefederal-unitary dimension covers the distribution of power in the legislature, vertical division of power, constitutional amendment procedures, interpretationof the constitution in line with the constitutional compatibility of laws andthe central bank. Whereas the executives-parties dimension covers the partysystem, the cabinet, the executive-legislative relationship, the electoralsystem and interest groups. The political system in the UK has been transformedby multiple reforms; multiple types of electoral systems, devolution ofScotland and Wales, central bank independence, regulation of party funding, therole of the house of lords and reforms to the composition.

Major institutions that characterizedWestminster system were only public institutions while private institutions didnot have any power previously. Furthermore, according to Rhodes (2002), globalinstitutions such as the European Union and WTO had no or limited powers whichhave now increased. These global institutions started to characterize theWestminster system of government in the UK as the UK entered the membership ofthese institutions. Dicey (1889: 3) explained parliamentary sovereignty asparliament ‘ under the British constitution’ having the right to make or unmakeany law and that no person is recognised by the law of England as having aright to override or set aside the legislation of Parliament. According toBagehot (1867: 175), the ultimate authority in the English constitution is anewly-elected House of Commons, putting light on the importance of the BritishParliament in the political system. With the membership of the EU, theexplanation put forward by Dicey was sidelined since the EU law is able to setaside British statutes. The power has gradually drained away from Whitehall toboth the non-profit and corporate sectors. Bogdanor (2011: 186) counters thisargument, as supported by Brexit that the parliament can leave the EU at anytime. However, pure Westminster system as followed in 1945 gave the power tocentralize and unitary political system in which power was centralized incabinet House of Commons.

Additionally, globalisation is also studied byMarsh (2008: 257) as a major influence on the principle of parliamentarysovereignty. The influence of multinational organisations on the domestic andtaxation policies of the government has shown that the British government hasstruggled to stop British businesses from being taken over and exportedoverseas and encouraging foreign investment by keeping corporation tax low.

The transforming status of parliamentarysovereignty has lined the potential shift away from the British two-partysystem. The two-party system thrived until the 2010 election when the inclusionof Liberal Democrats in the governments showed the importance of smallerparties in the process of government formation Kaiser (2008: 26). The 2010general election was of monumental significance with regard to the partysystem. Formation of first coalition government since 1945, clearly showed amovement towards greater consensus, than majoritarian, in both the 2010 and2015 general elections. In terms of executive-legislative relationship, thefostering of long cabinet durations has been reduced by the Fixed-termParliaments Act 2011, which takes the power of the prime minister away to callan election at a time when his party has the best chance of winning (Norris, 2001: 884),. The executive dominance of one party gaining a majority and usingit to govern effectively has also suffered from the changing nature of theparty system.

The traditional role of the upper House ofLords is viewed as a revising chamber reviewing the problems with the billspresented in the lower house. Despite, the dominance of the government has thepower to over-rule the upper house’s decision, in recent times its role hasalso been transformed (Paun, 2011: 426). The House of Lords Act, 1999 providesgreater legitimacy to the upper house.

Following the above understanding, it isessential to discuss the factors that led to the changes in the Westminstersystem. One such factor is changing the population. Spolaore (2004: 119), documented that Britain has transformed materially since 1945 and a majordriver for change is the growth in population which is matched by risingexpectations regarding lifestyle. The composition of the population has alsoundergone significant change. Additionally, population diversity is anotherfactor due to large-scale immigration resulting in important culturalconsequences. The immigration is particularly from South Asia and the WestIndies and also from other regions like Eastern Europe. A major increase inpopulation with different cultures required few changes in Westminster systemas well.

Cultural and social change in the UK hasreflected the level to which population has become less deferential and moreindividualistic. Moral code in 1945 broke down a process formalized accordingto legal changes in the 1960s. Moral codes changed in such a way that abortionand homosexuality became legal, measures were taken to improve women positionand capital punishment was abolished. The changes were related to shifts inreligious practice, by 1990s it was noted that only one out of seven Britonswas an active member of the church, however, more claimed that they arebelievers (Bulmer et al., 2002: 41). This implies that for Britons, formalexpressions of faith were unimportant. Authority of experience and age was overthrownand voting age was lowered to 18 in the UK. Decreasing voting age implied thatyouth was now more empowered with the right to franchise.

In 1945, the UK was the largest colonial empirewhich eventually broke down as UK successfully fought a war between Argentinain 1982 and the most populous colonies of Britain were handed over to Chinaincluding Hong Kong in 1997. Further, the Westminster system changed due tomembership of Britain with international organizations like European Union, UnitedNations, and World Trade Organization  etc. Its membership amongst internationalorganizations also put a restriction on its powers because it then had tofollow the requirements of these multinational organizations. The Britishparliament is influenced, legally and politically, by their inclusion in thelike of the IMP, NATO and the UN (Russell and Gover, 2017). Powers of the UKgovernment became limited as compared to the powers it exercised previously.

Norris (2001: 879), stated that in contrast tothe situation of Scottish nationalism and northern Ireland remained non-violentand in 1997 enjoyed local control with devolved assembly. Britain entered the EuropeanUnion in 1973 which resulted in the erosion of national sovereignty and thetransfer of powers to Europe (Russell and Gover, 2017). Talking about nationallevel, it was noted that government was controlled by Labour party and itsConservative rival with no coalition ministries. These two parties i. e. Labourand Conservative shared major overlaps in policy in the post-war period. Conservatives were of the view that there should be individual liberty with lowtaxation while labour party wanted collectivist solutions, therefore, they werehappier to advocate major role for government.

In the post-war period, there was an uncertainpublic policy which played a major role in the decline of the British economywhich specifically pronounced in manufacturing. In the 1970s, it contributed toa sense of malaise which was coupled with the higher rate of inflation andthere was a sense that the economy has become ungovernable as coal minersboycotted government for the failure of wage policies of the government. Adecline in the manufacturing sector was seen with a rise in service sectorleading to a change in work experience for many. The rise was associated withgrowth in consumerism and spending became a major expression of identity and asignificant activity in leisure time (Stanbury, 2003). This increase inconsumerism resulted in more private organizations to offer goods and servicesto consumers to meet their demands and less of public organizations.

Role of prime minister and cabinet is animportant part while studying the change in Westminster government since 1945. According to O’Malley (2007: 12), the British prime minister has become morepowerful than the US president. The British system has changed to inclinetowards prime minister as compared to the president, however; this does notmean that power to prime minister goes unchecked. A system of checks andbalances ensures that the responsibility of the positions is fulfilled.

As explained earlier, the Westminster systemcan be defined as the parliamentary system of government developed andpractised in the United Kingdom. With an aim to examine the changes in theWestminster system within the United Kingdom since 1945, it is integral tohighlight the changing roles of institutions, government, and opposition in theWestminster system. To start with, it remains critical to examine that theWestminster system is a reflection of a series of procedures for the operationsof legislatures. According to Paun (2011: 448), one of the majorcharacteristics of the Westminster system in the United Kingdom is related tothe contrasting approach to government. The role of institutions, governmentand opposition seem to be more elaborative and prominent in the Westminstersystem as compared to the presidential system of the United States.

A lot of prominent changes can be witnessed inthe Westminster system of the United Kingdom since 1945 (Saalfeld, 2003: 626). During the introduction of the Westminster system in the United Kingdom, it wasnever expected that the system will receive immense support and popularity. However, the Westminster system made the institutions so strong that the systemstill prevails even in post-colonial regions. According to Heeg (2012: 10), themodel of parliamentary democracy has been changing with the passage of time. There would not be an exaggeration if it is claimed that the Westminster styleof government is popular and has been adopted by various countries as itstrengthens the institutions, governments, and oppositions. With the passage oftime, the role of institutions, government, and opposition have been changingin the Westminster system as more power and sovereignty has been given to allplayers.

The institutions as per the Westminster systemchanges in the United Kingdom since 1945 in a manner that executive branch hasnot been entirely separated from the legislative branch to the core (Russelland Gover, 2017). Essentially, the single largest institution that has themajority of the powers in Britain and is seen as a leading committee of theParliament is the cabinet. One of the major changes in the role of governmentis also depicted in the powers and jurisdiction of the prime minister of thestate. For instance, during 1945, the prime minister of Britain, the head ofthe government, used to have a choice to either reside in the House of Lords orthe House of Commons (Birch, 2013: 29). However, the current conventions bindthe prime minister as the serving member of the House of Commons. However, thecabinet ministers can belong to either of the houses as of today.

The essential role of institutions and governmentin the Westminster system in the United Kingdom has also changed in the mannerthat previously it was not necessary for the prime minister to make sure thathis serving cabinet is a part of House of Commons whereas if the prime ministerintends to see someone in the cabinet now, he needs to look for vacancies inthe House of Commons. The beginning of the twentieth century made it necessaryfor the Westminster system to bring about changes in the institutions ofgovernment through conducting general elections at large (Heeg, 2012: 9). TheParliament under the Westminster system in the United Kingdom provides completeresponsibilities to the prime minister and the cabinet. The major role of thegovernment is to ensure that legislation is prepared through parliament and thecountry’s budgets are taken care of.

Additionally, another role of the government isto make sure that the interests of the House of Commons and the cabinet remainfully aligned. The government must pave the way for transferring the powers tothe next government in an efficient manner (Flinders, Gamble, and Hay, 2009). While examining the changes in the Westminster system in the United Kingdomsince 1945, it is also important to note that the devolution of the UnitedKingdom resulted in the creation of Scotland’s parliament, and nationalassembly in Wales and Northern Ireland (Birch, 2013: 42). As a result, themajority of the powers were transferred to the nations of the United Kingdom. Interestingly, the Parliament used to control the devolved powers previously, however, the changes in the system empowered the separate bodies for decisionmaking like Scottish Parliament. However, the reserved powers are still withthe Parliament in the Westminster.

As far as the role of the opposition in theWestminster system of the United Kingdom is concerned, it is related to keepinga check and balance on the activities of the government. With the passage oftime, the role of opposition has become integral and crucial for the success ofthe Westminster system. The legislation is essentially scrutinized by theoppositions (Paun, 2011: 456). There would not be an exaggeration if it isclaimed that the role of opposition has become highly crucial in today’sWestminster system as compared to that of 1945. This is mainly because of thefact that challenges for running the countries have increased and therefore, the role of opposition has become far more critical in terms of criticising thelegislation that could create a negative impact on the country’ssustainability.

Historically Britain has fostered its politicalsystem to progress in majorly in an organic direction creating a uniquestructure. The Westminster system in the United Kingdom is considered as one ofthe best governmental approaches as compared to other systems likepresidential, monarchy and others.  Thepurpose of this paper was to examine how the Westminster system in the UnitedKingdom has changed since 1945. A brief introduction to the Westminster systemof government was given in this paper to examine the legislative process of thesystem. Additionally, the role of cabinet and prime minister, factors thatchanged the system and the role of institutions, government and opposition wasalso explored in the paper. In order to conclude, it can be suggested thatevery government system has several strengths and weaknesses. However, theWestminster system in the United Kingdom has been changing for betterment since1945.

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