

United kingdom political system

[Politics](#)



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The United Kingdom is a unitary democracy governed within the framework of a constitutional monarchy, in which the Monarch is the head of state and the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom is the head of government. Executive power is exercised by Her Majesty's Government, on behalf of and by the consent of the Monarch, as well as by the devolved Governments of Scotland and Wales, and the Northern Ireland Executive.

Legislative power is vested in the two chambers of the Parliament of the United Kingdom, the House of Commons and the House of Lords, as well as in the Scottish parliament and Welsh and Northern Ireland assemblies. The judiciary is independent of the executive and the legislature. The highest national court is the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom. The UK political system is a multi-party system. Since the 1920s, the two largest political parties have been the Conservative Party and the Labor Party.

Before the Labor Party rose in British politics the Liberal Party was the other major political party along with the Conservatives. Though coalition and minority governments have been an occasional feature of parliamentary politics, the first-past-the-post electoral system used for general elections tends to maintain the dominance of these two parties, though each has in the past century relied upon a third party to deliver a working majority in Parliament. The current Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government is the first coalition since 1974.

With the partition of Ireland, Northern Ireland received home rule in 1920, though civil unrest meant direct rule was restored in 1972. Support for nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales led to proposals for devolution in the 1970s though only in the 1990s did devolution actually happen. Today, <https://assignbuster.com/united-kingdom-political-system/>

Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland each possess a legislature and executive, with devolution in Northern Ireland being conditional on participation in certain all-Ireland institutions.

The United Kingdom remains responsible for non-devolved matters and, in the case of Northern Ireland, co-operates with the Republic of Ireland. It is a matter of dispute as to whether increased autonomy and devolution of executive and legislative powers has contributed to a reduction in support for independence. The principal pro-independence party, the Scottish National Party, won an overall majority of MSPs at the 2011 Scottish parliament elections and now forms the Scottish Government administration, with plans to hold a referendum on negotiating for independence. In Northern Ireland,

the largest Pro-Belfast Agreement party, Sinn Féin, not only advocates Northern Ireland's unification with the Republic of Ireland, but also abstains from taking their elected seats in the Westminster government, as this would entail taking a pledge of allegiance to the British monarch. The constitution of the United Kingdom is uncodified, being made up of constitutional conventions, statutes and other elements such as EU law. This system of government, known as the Westminster system, has been adopted by other countries, especially those that were formerly parts of the British Empire.

The United Kingdom is also responsible for several dependencies, which fall into two categories: the Crown dependencies, in the immediate vicinity of the UK, and British Overseas Territories, which originated as colonies of the British Empire. The British Monarch, currently Queen Elizabeth II, is the Chief of State of the United Kingdom. Though she takes little direct part in

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government, the Crown remains the fount in which ultimate executive power over Government lies.

These powers are known as Royal Prerogative and can be used for a vast amount of things, such as the issue or withdrawal of passports, to the dismissal of the Prime Minister or even the Declaration of War. The powers are delegated from the Monarch personally, in the name of the Crown, and can be handed to various ministers, or other Officers of the Crown, and can purposely bypass the consent of Parliament. The head of Her Majesty's Government; the Prime Minister, also has weekly meetings with the sovereign, where she may express her feelings, warn, or advise the Prime Minister in the Government's work.

According to the uncodified constitution of the United Kingdom, the monarch has the following powers: Domestic Powers The monarch appoints a Prime Minister as the head of Her Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom, guided by the strict convention that the Prime Minister should be the member of the House of Commons most likely to be able to form a Government with the support of that House. In practice, this means that the leader of the political party with an absolute majority of seats in the House of Commons is chosen to be the Prime Minister.

If no party has an absolute majority, the leader of the largest party is given the first opportunity to form a coalition. The Prime Minister then selects the other Ministers which make up the Government and act as political heads of the various Government Departments. About twenty of the most senior government ministers make up the Cabinet and approximately 100 ministers in total comprise the government. In accordance with constitutional <https://assignbuster.com/united-kingdom-political-system/>

convention, all ministers within the government are either Members of Parliament or peers in the House of Lords.

As in some other parliamentary systems of government (especially those based upon the Westminster System), the executive (called "the government") is drawn from and is answerable to Parliament - a successful vote of no confidence will force the government either to resign or to seek a parliamentary dissolution and a general election. In practice, members of parliament of all major parties are strictly controlled by whips who try to ensure they vote according to party policy. If the government has a large majority, then they are very unlikely to lose enough votes to be unable to pass legislation.

The Prime Minister and the Cabinet David Cameron, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom (2010) The Prime Minister is the most senior minister in the Cabinet. She/he is responsible for chairing Cabinet meetings, selecting Cabinet ministers (and all other positions in Her Majesty's government), and formulating government policy. The Prime Minister is the de facto leader of the UK government, since s/he exercises executive functions that are nominally vested in the sovereign (by way of the Royal Prerogatives). Historically, the British monarch was the sole source of executive powers in the government.

However, following the rule of the Hanoverian monarchs, an arrangement of a "Prime Minister" chairing and leading the Cabinet began to emerge. Over time, this arrangement became the effective executive branch of government, as it assumed the day-to-day functioning of the British government away from the sovereign. Theoretically, the Prime Minister is <https://assignbuster.com/united-kingdom-political-system/>

primus inter pares (Latin for "first among equals") among his/her Cabinet colleagues. While the Prime Minister is the senior Cabinet Minister, s/he is theoretically bound to make executive decisions in a collective fashion with the other Cabinet ministers.

The Cabinet, along with the PM, consists of Secretaries of State from the various government departments, the Lord High Chancellor, the Lord Privy Seal, the President of the Board of Trade, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Ministers without portfolio. Cabinet meetings are typically held weekly, while Parliament is in session Government departments and the Civil Service The Government of the United Kingdom contains a number of ministries known mainly, though not exclusively as departments, Ministry of Defense.

These are politically led by a Government Minister who is often a Secretary of State and member of the Cabinet. He or she may also be supported by a number of junior Ministers. In practice, several government departments and Ministers have responsibilities that cover England alone, with devolved bodies having responsibility for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, (for example - the Department of Health), or responsibilities that mainly focus on England (such as the Department for Education). Implementation of the Minister's decisions is carried out by a permanent politically neutral organization known as the civil service.

Its constitutional role is to support the Government of the day regardless of which political party is in power. Unlike some other democracies, senior civil servants remain in post upon a change of Government. Administrative management of the Department is led by a head civil servant known in most

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Departments as a Permanent Secretary. The majority of the civil service staff in fact work in executive agencies, which are separate operational organizations reporting to Departments of State. " Whitehall" is often used as a metonym for the central core of the Civil Service.

This is because most Government Departments have headquarters in and around the former Royal Palace Whitehall. Legislatures The UK Parliament is the supreme legislative body in the United Kingdom (i. e. , there is parliamentary sovereignty), and Government is drawn from and answerable to it. Parliament is bicameral, consisting of the House of Commons and the House of Lords. There is also a devolved Scottish Parliament and devolved Assemblies in Wales and Northern Ireland, with varying degrees of legislative authority. UK Parliament

House of Commons It is a Sand-colored building of Gothic design with large clock-tower. Parliament meets at the Palace of Westminster British House of Commons The Countries of the United Kingdom are divided into parliamentary constituencies of broadly equal population by the four Boundary Commissions. Each constituency elects a Member of Parliament (MP) to the House of Commons at General Elections and, if required, at by-elections. As of 2010 there are 650 constituencies (there were 646 before that year's general election.

Of the 650 MPs, all but one - Lady Sylvia Hermon - belong to a political party. In modern times, all Prime Ministers and Leaders of the Opposition have been drawn from the Commons, not the Lords. Alec Douglas-Home resigned from his peerages days after becoming Prime Minister in 1963, and the last Prime Minister before him from the Lords left in 1902 (the Marquis of <https://assignbuster.com/united-kingdom-political-system/>

Salisbury). One party usually has a majority in Parliament, because of the use of the First Past the Post electoral system, which has been conducive in creating the current two party system.

The monarch normally asks a person commissioned to form a government simply whether it can survive in the House of Commons, something which majority governments are expected to be able to do. In exceptional circumstances the monarch asks someone to 'form a government' with a parliamentary minority which in the event of no party having a majority requires the formation of a coalition government. This option is only ever taken at a time of national emergency, such as war-time. It was given in 1916 to Andrew Bonar Law, and when he declined, to David Lloyd George and in 1940 to Winston Churchill.

A government is not formed by a vote of the House of Commons; it is a commission from the monarch. The House of Commons gets its first chance to indicate confidence in the new government when it votes on the Speech from the Throne (the legislative program proposed by the new government).
House of Lords The House of Lords was previously a largely hereditary aristocratic chamber, although including life peers, and Lords Spiritual. It is currently mid-way through extensive reforms, the most recent of these being enacted in the House of Lords Act 1999.

The house consists of two very different types of member, the Lords Temporal and Lords Spiritual. Lords Temporal include appointed members (life peers with no hereditary right for their descendants to sit in the house) and ninety-two remaining hereditary peers, elected from among, and by, the holders of titles which previously gave a seat in the House of Lords. The <https://assignbuster.com/united-kingdom-political-system/>

Lords Spiritual represent the established Church of England and number twenty-six: the Five Ancient Sees (Canterbury, York, London, Winchester and Durham), and the 21 next-most senior bishops.

The House of Lords currently acts to review legislation initiated by the House of Commons, with the power to propose amendments, and can exercise a suspensive veto. This allows it to delay legislation if it does not approve it for twelve months. However, the use of vetoes is limited by convention and by the operation of the Parliament Acts 1911 and 1949: the Lords may not veto the " moneybills" or major manifesto promises (see Salisbury convention). Persistent use of the veto can also be overturned by the Commons, under a provision of the Parliament Act 1911.

Often governments will accept changes in legislation in order to avoid both the time delay, and the negative publicity of being seen to clash with the Lords. However the Lords still retain a full veto in acts which would extend the life of Parliament beyond the 5 year term limit introduced by the Parliament Act 1911. The Constitutional Reform Act 2005 outlined plans for a Supreme Court of the United Kingdom to replace the role of the Law Lords. The House of Lords was replaced as the final court of appeal on civil cases within the United Kingdom on 1 October 2009, by the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom.

Devolved national legislatures Though the UK parliament remains the sovereign parliament, Scotland has a parliament and Wales and Northern Ireland have assemblies. De jure, each could have its powers broadened, narrowed or changed by an Act of the UK Parliament. However, Scotland has a tradition of popular sovereignty as opposed to parliamentary sovereignty

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and the fact that the Scottish parliament was established following a referendum would make it politically difficult to significantly alter its powers without popular consent.

The UK is therefore a unitary state with a devolved system of government. This contrasts with a federal system, in which sub-parliaments or state parliaments and assemblies have a clearly defined constitutional right to exist and a right to exercise certain constitutionally guaranteed and defined functions and cannot be unilaterally abolished by Acts of the central parliament. All three devolved institutions are elected by proportional representation: the Additional Member System is used in Scotland and Wales, and Single Transferable Vote is used in Northern Ireland.

England, therefore, is the only country in the UK not to have a devolved English parliament. However, senior politicians of all main parties have voiced concerns in regard to the West Lothian Question, which is raised where certain policies for England are set by MPs from all four constituent nations whereas similar policies for Scotland or Wales might be decided in the devolved assemblies by legislators from those countries alone.

Alternative proposals for English regional government have stalled, following a poorly received referendum on devolved government for the North East of England, which had hitherto been considered the region most in favor of the idea, with the exception of Cornwall, where there is widespread support for a Cornish Assembly, including all five Cornish MPs. England is therefore governed according to the balance of parties across the whole of the United Kingdom. The government has no plans to establish an English parliament or assembly although several pressure groups are calling for one.

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One of their main arguments is that MPs (and thus voters) from different parts of the UK have inconsistent powers. Currently an MP from Scotland can vote on legislation which affects only England but MPs from England (or indeed Scotland) cannot vote on matters devolved to the Scottish parliament. Indeed, the former Prime Minister Gordon Brown, who is an MP for a Scottish constituency, introduced some laws that only affect England and not his own constituency. This anomaly is known as the West Lothian question.

The policy of the UK Government in England was to establish elected regional assemblies with no legislative powers. The London Assembly was the first of these, established in 2000, following a referendum in 1998, but further plans were abandoned following rejection of a proposal for an elected assembly in North East England in a referendum in 2004. Unelected regional assemblies remain in place in eight regions of England. There are two main parties in the United Kingdom: the Conservative Party, and the Labor Party.

There is also a significant third party, the Liberal Democrats. The modern Conservative Party was founded in 1834 and is an outgrowth of the Tory movement or party, which began in 1678. Today it is still colloquially referred to as the Tory Party and its members as Tories. The Liberal Democrats were formed in 1988 by a merger of the Liberal Party and the Social Democratic Party (SDP), a Labor breakaway formed in 1981. The Liberals and SDP had contested elections together as the SDP-Liberal Alliance for seven years before.

The modern Liberal Party had been founded in 1859 as an outgrowth of the Whig movement or party (which began at the same time as the Tory party

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and was its historical rival) as well as the Radical and Peelite tendencies. The Liberal Party was one of the two dominant parties (along with the Conservatives) from its founding until the 1920s, when it rapidly declined and was supplanted on the left by the Labor Party, which was founded in 1900 and formed its first government in 1924.

Since that time, the Labor and Conservatives parties have been dominant, with the Liberal Democrats also holding a significant number of seats and increasing their share of the vote in parliamentary general elections in the four elections 1992. Conservatives; The Conservative Party won the largest number of seats at the 2010 general election, returning 307 MPs, though not enough to make an overall majority. As a result of negotiations following the election, they entered a formal coalition with the Liberal Democrats to form a majority government.

The Conservative party can trace its origin back to 1662, with the Court Party and the Country Party being formed in the aftermath of the English Civil War. The Court Party soon became known as the Tories, a name that has stuck despite the official name being 'Conservative'. The term "Tory" originates from the Exclusion Bill crisis of 1678-1681 - the Whigs were those who supported the exclusion of the Roman Catholic Duke of York from the thrones of England, Ireland and Scotland, and the Tories were those who opposed it.

Both names were originally insults: a "whiggamore" was a horse drover (See Whiggamore Raid), and a "tory" (Tóraidhe) was an Irish term for an outlaw, later applied to Irish Confederates and Irish Royalists, during the Wars of the Three Kingdoms. Generally, the Tories were associated with lesser gentry

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and the Church of England, while Whigs were more associated with trade, money, larger land holders (or "land magnates"), expansion and tolerance of Catholicism.

The Rochdale Radicals were a group of more extreme reformists who were also heavily involved in the cooperative movement. They sought to bring about a more equal society, and are considered by modern standards to be left-wing. After becoming associated with repression of popular discontent in the years after 1815, the Tories underwent a fundamental transformation under the influence of Robert Peel, himself an industrialist rather than a landowner, who in his 1834 "Tamworth Manifesto" outlined a new "Conservative" philosophy of reforming ills while conserving the good.

Though Peel's supporters subsequently split from their colleagues over the issue of free trade in 1846, ultimately joining the Whigs and the Radicals to form what would become the Liberal Party, Peel's version of the party's underlying outlook was retained by the remaining Tories, who adopted his label of Conservative as the official name of their party. The crushing defeat of the 1997 election saw the Conservative Party lose over half their seats from 1992 and saw the party re-align with public perceptions of them.

In 2008, the Conservative Party formed a pact with the Ulster Unionist Party to select joint candidates for European and House of Commons elections; this angered the DUP as by splitting the Unionist vote, republican parties will be elected in some areas. After thirteen years as the official opposition, the Party returned to power as part of a coalition with the Liberal Democrats in 2010. Historically, the party has been the mainland party most pre-occupied

by British Unionism, as attested to by the party's full name, the Conservative & Unionist Party.

This resulted in the merger between the Conservatives and Joseph Chamberlain's Liberal Unionist Party, composed of former Liberals who opposed Irish home rule. The unionist tendency is still in evidence today, manifesting sometimes as a skepticism or opposition to devolution, firm support for the continued existence of the United Kingdom in the face of separatist nationalism, and a historic link with the cultural unionism of Northern Ireland. Labor; The Labor Party won the second largest number of seats in the House of Commons at the 2010 general election, with 258 MPs.

The history of the Labor party goes back to 1900 when a Labor Representation Committee was established which changed its name to "The Labor Party" in 1906. After the First World War, this led to the demise of the Liberal Party as the main reformist force in British politics. The existence of the Labor Party on the left of British politics led to a slow waning of energy from the Liberal Party, which has consequently assumed third place in national politics.

After performing poorly in the elections of 1922, 1923 and 1924, the Liberal Party was superseded by the Labor Party as the party of the left. Following two brief spells in minority governments in 1924 and 1929-1931, the Labor Party had its first true victory after World War II in the 1945 "khaki election". Throughout the rest of the twentieth century, Labor governments alternated with Conservative governments. The Labor Party suffered the "wilderness years" of 1951-1964 (three straight General Election defeats) and 1979-1997 (four straight General Election defeats).

During this second period, Margaret Thatcher, who became leader of the Conservative party in 1975, made a fundamental change to Conservative policies, turning the Conservative Party into an economic neoliberal party. In the General Election of 1979 she defeated James Callaghan's troubled Labor government after the winter of discontent. For most of the 1980s and the 1990s, Conservative governments under Thatcher and her successor John Major pursued policies of privatization, anti-trade-unionism, and, for a time, monetarism, now known collectively as Thatcherism.

The Labor Party elected left-winger Michael Foot as their leader after their 1979 election defeat, and he responded to dissatisfaction with the Labor Party by pursuing a number of radical policies developed by its grass-roots members. In 1981 several right-wing Labor MPs formed a breakaway group called the Social Democratic Party (SDP), a move which split Labor and is widely believed to have made Labor unelectable for a decade. The SDP formed an alliance with the Liberal Party which contested the 1983

and 1987 general elections as a centrist alternative to Labor and the Conservatives. After some initial success, the SDP did not prosper (partly due to its unfavorable distribution of votes in the FPTP electoral system), and was accused by some of splitting the anti-Conservative vote. The SDP eventually merged with the Liberal Party to form the Liberal Democrats in 1988. Support for the new party has increased since then, and the Liberal Democrats (often referred to as LibDems) in 1997 and 2001 gained an increased number of seats in the House of Commons.

The Labor Party was badly defeated in the Conservative landslide of the 1983 general election, and Michael Foot was replaced shortly thereafter by

Neil Kinnock as leader. Kinnock expelled the far left Militant tendency group (now called the Socialist Party of England and Wales) and moderated many of the party's policies. Yet he was in turn replaced by John Smith after Labor defeats in the 1987 and 1992 general elections. Tony Blair became leader of the Labor party after John Smith's sudden death from a heart attack in 1994.

He continued to move the Labor Party towards the 'center' by loosening links with the unions and embracing many of Margaret Thatcher's liberal economic policies. This, coupled with the professionalizing of the party machine's approach to the media, helped Labor win a historic landslide in the 1997 General Election, after 18 years of Conservative government. Some observers say the Labor Party had by then morphed from a democratic socialist party to a social democratic party, a process which delivered three general election victories but alienated some of its core base - leading to the formation of the Socialist Labor Party (UK).

Liberal Democrats; The Liberal Democrats won the third largest number of seats at the 2010 general election, returning 57 MPs. The Conservative Party failed to win an overall majority, and the Liberal Democrats entered government for the first time as part of a coalition. The Liberal Democrats were formed in 1988 by a merger of the Liberal Party with the Social Democratic Party, but can trace their origin back to the Whigs and the Rochdale Radicals who evolved into the Liberal Party. The term 'Liberal Party' was first used officially in 1868, though it had been in use colloquially for decades beforehand.

The Liberal Party formed a government in 1868 and then alternated with the Conservative Party as the party of government throughout the late 19th

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century and early 20th century. The Liberal Democrats are heavily a party on Constitutional and Political Reforms, including changing the voting system for General Elections (UK Alternative Vote referendum, 2011), abolishing the House of Lords and replacing it with a 300 member elected Senate, introducing Fixed Five Year Parliaments, and introducing a National Register of Lobbyists.

They also claim to champion of fairness and social mobility, notably in government where they have introduced legislation introducing a pupil premium - funding for schools directed at the poorest students to give them an equal chance in life - equal marriage for homosexual couples and increasing the income tax threshold so that no one will pay anything on the first £10, 000 they earn. Other parliamentary parties The Green Party of England and Wales gained its second MP, Caroline Lucas, in the 2010 General Election (the first MP was Cynog Dafis, Ceredigion 1992 who was elected on a joint Plaid Cyru/Green Party ticket).

It also has seats in the European Parliament, two seats on the London Assembly and around 120 local councilors. The Respect party, a left-wing group that came out of the anti-war movement has one MP, George Galloway. It also has a small number of seats on local councils across the country. There are usually a small number of Independent politicians in parliament with no party allegiance. In modern times, this has usually occurred when a sitting member leaves their party, and some such MPs have been re-elected as independents.

The only current Independent MP is Lady Hermon, previously of the Ulster Unionist Party. However, since 1950 only two new members have been

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elected as independents without having ever stood for a major party: Martin Bell represented the Tatton constituency in Cheshire between 1997 and 2001. He was elected following a "sleaze" scandal involving the sitting Conservative MP, Neil Hamilton—Bell, a BBC journalist, stood as an anticorruption independent candidate, and the Labor and Liberal Democrat parties withdrew their candidates from the election.

Dr. Richard Taylor MP was elected for the Wyre Forest constituency in the 2001 on a platform opposing the closure of Kidderminster hospital. He later established Health Concern, the party under which he ran in 2005. Current political landscape Since winning the largest number of seats and votes in the 2010 general election, the Conservatives under David Cameron are now behind the Labor Party now led by Ed Miliband. Their coalition partners have also experienced a decline in support in opinion polls.

At the same time, support for the UK Independence Party has shown a considerable advance, with some polls now placing them in third place ahead of the Lib Dems. UKIP's growing strength was illustrated by the result of the Eastleigh by-election in which the party advanced by 24% to take second place from the Conservatives, less than 5% behind the Lib Dems who retained the seat. Local government The UK is divided into a variety of different types of Local Authorities, with different functions and responsibilities.

England has a mix of two-tier and single-tier councils in different parts of the country. In Greater London, a unique two-tier system exists, with power shared between the London borough councils, and the Greater London Authority which is headed by an elected mayor. Unitary Authorities are used

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throughout Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. European Union Further information: European Movement UK, Euroskepticism in the United Kingdom, and Members of the European Parliament from the United Kingdom.

The United Kingdom first joined the European Economic Community in January 1973, and has remained a member of the European Union (EU) that it evolved into; UK citizens, and other EU citizens resident in the UK, elect 78 members to represent them in the European Parliament in Brussels and Strasbourg. The UK's membership in the Union has been objected to over questions of sovereignty,[27] and in recent years there have been divisions in both major parties over whether the UK should form greater ties within the EU, or reduce the EU's supranational powers.

Opponents of greater European integration are known as " Euroskeptics", while supporters are known as " Europhiles". Division over Europe is prevalent in both major parties, although the Conservative Party is seen as most divided over the issue, both whilst in Government up to 1997 and after 2010, and between those dates as the opposition. However, the Labor Party is also divided, with conflicting views over UK adoption of the euro whilst in Government (1997-2010), although the party is largely in favor of further integration where in the country's interest.

UK nationalists have long campaigned against European integration. The strong showing of the euroskeptic United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) in the 2004 European Parliament elections has shifted the debate over UK relations with the EU. In March 2008, Parliament decided to not hold a referendum on the ratification of the Treaty of Lisbon, signed in December

2007. [28] This was despite the Labor government promising in 2004 to hold a referendum on the previously proposed Constitution for Europe.