

The King's loyal supporters and advisers made up the House of Lords, the earliest of the two chambers of Parliament to be established. Gradually it became the practice for the King to summon representatives of the common people to advise him: it was in the thirteenth century that the House of Commons came into being. By Edward III's reign (1327–1377) members of the House of Commons were elected to represent local areas. The system was far from democratic. It was not the 'ordinary' men and women who voted but rather those who owned property (it was to be the twentieth century before the right to vote was fully extended to all men and women irrespective of property).

1530–1700

In the reign of Henry VIII (1509–1547) a situation arose which was to have a profound consequence for the future. England at the time was a Roman Catholic country: its religious head being the Pope in Rome. Henry VIII had first married his deceased brother's widow, Catherine of Aragon. Catherine gave Henry a daughter, later Queen Mary, but not a male heir. Henry turned his attentions to Ann Boleyn. The Roman Catholic Church did not recognise divorce and marriages could only be formally set aside by a decree of nullity issued by the Church. Henry sought an annulment, claiming that his first marriage was not valid on account of Catherine being his deceased brother's widow. The Pope refused Henry's request. Determined to get his way, Henry declared that England would no longer follow the Catholic Church, but rather establish its own church, the head of which would be the King. And so the Church of England came into being. Henry's marriage to Catherine was annulled and Henry married Ann.[†]

The break with Rome ushered in a period of severe religious repression. Mary Tudor, Henry's daughter by Catherine of Aragon, (reigned 1553–1558), was an ardent Roman Catholic. She married the Catholic heir to the Spanish throne, Philip, and was intent of re-establishing Catholicism in England. Elizabeth I (reigned 1558–1603), Henry VIII's daughter by Anne Boleyn, by contrast, firmly established the Church of England. The political situation at home was complicated by the fact that England was now a Protestant country while her sometime allies (sometime enemies) to the south – France, Italy and Spain – remained Catholic.[‡] Nevertheless, Elizabeth I's long reign was characterised by tolerance and a flourishing of the arts. Furthermore England was now established as an international power. The Tudor era ended with Elizabeth's death in 1603, the crown being assumed by James VI of Scotland who assumed the title of James I of England, thereby uniting the two countries under a common crown. (James succeeded under the terms of the Treaty of Berwick, 1586, agreed by Elizabeth and James.)

James' reign was characterised by a shortage of money. When Parliament denied him funds he resorted to issuing proclamations to achieve his objective, thereby making law without Parliament's consent. When a judge had the impertinence to challenge the King's use of the prerogative to make new law, the judge – Coke CJ – was dismissed by the King (see the *Case of Proclamations* (1610) 12 Co Rep 74; 2 St Tr 723.)

The reign of Charles I (1625–1649) was also one marked by tensions between the Crown and Parliament. Charles I was autocratic and made full use of his royal powers. When Parliament displeased him, he dismissed it and assumed the power to rule under the prerogative. This abuse of power was, however, to lead to civil war which first broke out in 1641. Charles I was tried for treason and executed in 1649. England was now under military rule. Oliver Cromwell declared himself Protector of England. The monarchy was abolished, as was the House of Lords and the Church of England. A period of puritanical rule commenced, with music, dancing and all forms of entertainment banned and acts of immorality met with harsh punishment. Cromwell did draft a written constitution for England, but it was never to come into being. By the end of the 1650s England had had enough of military rule. Following Oliver Cromwell's death and the inability of his son to assert the same authority as his father, the monarchy was restored.

While civil war raged in England, Charles I's heir was in France. His return to England as Charles II (reigned 1660–1685) not only restored the monarchy but also ushered in a period in which culture, science and the arts flourished and international trade expanded. During this period also the seeds of what would later become the two main political parties – Conservative and Liberal (though not called that) – were sown.

[†] Ann Boleyn was beheaded and Henry would go on to marry Jane Seymour, Anne of Cleves, Catherine Howard and Catherine Parr.

[‡] The Protestant Reformation took hold in Northern Europe and also in Scotland.