

Chapter 1

The post-Westminster polity?

Alan Convery

What will this chapter tell me?

- This chapter outlines the most influential way of looking at UK politics: a set of ideas that scholars have labelled the Westminster Model. Because it is neither as precise nor stable as a model, this chapter suggests we view it as a narrative – a story that seeks to explain the world.
- This chapter examines the ways in which this Westminster Model Narrative fails to capture recent changes in UK politics. However, it still exerts a strong influence because it is generally the prism through which UK political elites view their roles.
- Instead, this chapter uses the Westminster Model Narrative as a starting point to suggest some of the ways in which we might view the UK as a 'Post-Westminster Model' polity.
- A Post-Westminster Model Narrative retains many of the core institutional features of the Westminster Model but it is much more decentralised, critical and contingent.

What do I need to know?

- The UK is a plurinational state of four parts: England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.
- 'Westminster' is a place: it refers to the area in London where the UK Parliament is located (in the Palace of Westminster). However, it is also used as political and academic shorthand for central UK Government ('the Government at Westminster') and a style of politics or institutions ('a Westminster-style system'). Similarly, 'Whitehall' (an area in London) is used as shorthand for the central UK Government departments.
- The UK was sometimes viewed as a centralised and unitary state. However, even before major decentralisation reforms in 1999, it tolerated a great deal of sub-state policy variation.

Introduction

This textbook aims to broaden what we view as *UK* and what we view as *politics*. In so doing, we want to disrupt some of the existing narratives about UK politics and suggest how we may study it in a more critical, territorial and expansive way. As a way into some of the key themes of the book, this chapter uses the ideas contained in the traditional Westminster Model to structure a series of questions about UK politics today. It examines some background assumptions about the study and practice of UK politics through the themes of representation, ideology, governing and identity.

The Westminster Model is both a descriptive list of attributes and a set of normative assumptions about the best way to govern. There is not a single standardised definition; rather, there are multiple ideas about the Westminster Model and about whether it is an ideal type set of arrangements that the UK originated and other countries emulated. Definitions typically contain some elements that students might already be familiar with (such as Parliament and the First Past the Post electoral system) and some less well-known doctrines (such as ministerial responsibility and institutionalised opposition).

The chapter reveals how some of the core preoccupations of the Westminster Model remain relevant for students of UK politics (Flinders et al. 2021). UK political elites – politicians, civil

servants, commentators – often describe their roles in these terms and students should be alert to stories or justifications that are refracted through a Westminster Model lens. Why is politics sometimes described in particular ways and to emphasise – and valorise – particular practices? However, this chapter's interrogation of the Westminster Model also reveals a polity that is in many ways 'post-Westminster'. That means we need both new tools to study 'Westminster' and to pay more attention to people and processes outside it.

What is the Westminster Model or Narrative?

The most influential way of explaining UK politics is a set of ideas known as the Westminster Model (Gamble 1990; Kerr and Kettell 2006; McAnulla 2006; Hall 2011). As the name suggests, this explanation revolves around what happens at the centre of UK Government in London. It is commonly referred to as a 'model', which suggests that it provides a coherent account of how politics works, perhaps with some testable propositions. It is more a disparate jumble of institutions, ideas and rules about how things ought to work. It describes a certain mode of working and provides a justification for the power relationships within it. It might therefore more accurately be characterised as the Westminster 'narrative' (Hall 2011: 43), mindset or philosophy. This narrative tells a story about UK politics from a central perspective, providing a creation myth, an idealised way of working and a justification for why power lies – and should lie – in certain places.

There is no single agreed account of what the Westminster Model covers and there have been several attempts to define it (e.g. Lijphart 1999). Figure 1.1 distils some of the central

Representation
First-past-the-post electoral system
Parliamentary system
Two-party system
Institutionalised opposition
Strong party discipline
Ideology
Parliamentary sovereignty
Absence of judicial review
Unitary state
Adversarial political culture
Constitutional flexibility
Governing
Single-party majority government
Neutral civil service
Cabinet government
Executive dominance
Individual ministerial responsibility
Centralised government
Executive drawn from the legislature
Collective cabinet responsibility

Figure 1.1 Ideas associated with the Westminster Model

Source: Lijphart (1999: 10–21); Russell and Serban (2021: 752)

components. There is also a lively academic debate about whether it is a concept that has been 'stretched beyond repair' (Russell and Serban 2021) or remains 'stretched but not snapped' (Flinders et al. 2021). The Westminster Model functions firstly as a description of UK politics. It describes some of the central features and how they relate to one another. In the middle of the twentieth century, it also provided the prism through which UK politics was studied.

The description of UK politics that the Westminster Model Narrative offers is not entirely wrong. You can recognise elements of this account that still ring true today. UK Government is still highly centralised, especially in England (Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) 2019; Carrascal-Incera et al. 2020), and the executive does tend to get its way in Parliament. There is a strong argument that UK Government elites are still influenced by a tendency to want to hoard power at the centre (Flinders 2010: 22; Diamond 2013: 21; Ward 2020; Kenny and Casey 2021). Some scholars have also argued that Brexit has resulted in a re-assertion of Westminster Model assumptions because the UK Government attempted to keep returning powers at the centre, rather than devolve them to other legislatures in the UK (Baldini et al. 2022; Dudley and Gamble 2023).

Nevertheless, the overall account is too simplistic and incomplete to be a convincing guide to how the UK's political system works. It fails to take into consideration, for example: the policy impact of Parliament (Russell and Cowley 2016); long-standing features of the UK's territorial politics or the devolution reforms after 1999 (Bogdanor 1999; Mitchell 2009; Flinders 2010); the challenges to the idea of untrammelled parliamentary sovereignty from EU membership, devolution or critical scholars (Loughlin and Tierney 2018); or the dispersal of power and functions from Westminster to arm's-length bodies and quangos (Matthews 2013).

However, crucially, the Westminster Model also has a prescriptive or normative quality. It describes how the system *ought* to work (Rhodes 2011: 306–307; Diamond 2013: 43–45). The Westminster Model emphasises the power of elites at the centre. There is a strong tendency to want to protect the centre of government from being forced to react to public opinion (Richards 2014). Instead, it should be insulated between elections so that it can take difficult and necessary decisions in the national interest. Strong government is sustained by adherence to the concept of parliamentary sovereignty (which often in practice means the sovereignty of the executive) and an electoral system that tends towards single-party majority governments. Local government is not a prominent feature and there is no strong role for the courts. There is also no discussion of how access to the levers of power described here might be affected by class, race or gender or other inequalities in society (Marsh et al. 2003; Akram 2024). It is therefore not a neutral description of UK politics.

Even so, it is important for students to recognise the Westminster Model Narrative because it tends to be the implicit mental model of how UK Government works that UK elites use:

the Westminster Model presents a false picture of how the British political system works. The key features – parliamentary sovereignty, ministerial responsibility and collective responsibility – do not function as the model suggests. However, unsurprisingly, it is the view of democracy shared by actors in the core executive ... it legitimises their authority and power. As such it affects how the system works. It shaped the process of constitutional and organisational reform and continues to maintain elite rule. (Marsh et al. 2003: 247)

When English or British politicians talk about how government works, they tend to reach for explanations that implicitly draw on a Westminster Model Narrative (Richards and Smith 2002: 48;

Rhodes 2011). Much political and journalistic commentary on UK politics also tends to describe the system using Westminster Model assumptions. There is not a blanket adherence to a description outlined in academic books, but as students of politics it is often useful to label a particular way of describing institutions so that we can question the assumptions behind it. In 2011, the Government published the *Cabinet Manual*, a distilled version of various conventions and assumptions in the Cabinet Office, as a guide to UK Government. The outline it gives draws

Westminster Model Narrative	Post-Westminster Model Narrative
Representation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unified political nation represented in Parliament First Past the Post transmits the will of the UK electorate Centralised statewide parties aggregate interests in UK party system Trusteeship model of representation where the characteristics of representatives do not matter Institutions open to all via democratic means
Ideology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adherence to Parliamentary Sovereignty as a governing ideology, creation myth and symbol of national distinctiveness Judicial restraint and weak judicial review, anonymous courts Unitary understanding of the nature of the UK Export of Westminster practices
Governing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong executive as legitimate locus of political power – centralisation is democratic and good for policy making Executive dominance of weak Parliament via absolute majorities and strong party discipline Ministerial accountability to Parliament National pluralism recognised via Westminster Weak local government and no interest in meso-level government for England
Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unified national identity with Englishness masked under Anglo-British attitudes and institutions Homogeneous and unquestioned white Britishness
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Greater recognition of plurinational UK and contested meanings of Britishness Multiple UK electorates with competing priorities and multi-level electoral behaviour Multi-level statewide parties and different party systems Contested understanding of representation and critical attention to <i>who</i> represents Critical understanding of political institutions as sites that can reflect or reproduce unequal distributions of power
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contested sovereignty claims (which nation?), popular sovereignty via referendums, post-sovereign understandings of political power Greater judicial intervention and controversy Post-unitary understanding – a union state/state of unions Multiple Westminsters – and Eastminster
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contested understanding of the wisdom of strong executive and critical view of whether executive is in control (government to governance) Greater recognition of Parliament as a check on executive and erosion of party discipline Critical view of accountability (delegation, arm's-length bodies, parties protect their ministers) Devolved government, intergovernmental relations, multi-level policy making Meso-level English governance via metro mayors and devolution
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contested multiple national identities with new recognition of Englishness and England as a political unit beyond Westminster Recognition of diversity and attention to the effects of, for example, gender, race, class, disability and their interactions on political outcomes and access to power

Figure 1.2 Westminster and Post-Westminster Narratives of UK politics

heavily on Westminster Model ideas (Cabinet Office 2011: 2–4). The *Ministerial Code* (Cabinet Office 2022) and the UK Parliament also use this frame to structure their descriptions (Flinders et al. 2021: 358–359). Politicians and civil servants therefore operate in a world in which they view their roles in the system through a (more or less) Westminster Model Narrative prism (Rhodes 2011: 306).

This textbook attempts to disrupt the Westminster Model Narrative and to draw attention to aspects that it ignores or downplays. In the left-hand column of Figure 1.2, we suggest an expanded set of ideas that might constitute the Westminster Model Narrative. In the right-hand column in Figure 1.2, we suggest the elements that might make up a Post-Westminster Narrative. The gravitational pull of elements like parliamentary sovereignty and First Past the Post are still there, but we need to view them critically and in light of recent developments. The next section of this chapter examines representation, government, ideology and identity in turn. It suggests how we might view UK politics through a Post-Westminster lens. The aim is not to use the Westminster Model Narrative as a ‘straw man’; we do not suggest that it is subscribed to in its entirety or that it ever accurately reflected how UK politics was studied and practised. Instead, we use it here as a jumping-off point to structure some initial thoughts about continuity and change in UK politics.

The idea is not to provide a coherent new account, but rather to focus students’ attention on the ways in which the study and practice of UK politics has moved beyond the Westminster Model Narrative (Marsh et al. 2003). The intention is not to be prescriptive; rather, we want to be provocative. A central open question is: what is UK politics like now and how should we study it? The authors in this volume do not all agree on the answer to that question, but we hope to provide students with the tools to make up their own mind.

Representation

The Westminster Model Narrative suggests a unified political nation represented in Parliament. The wishes of the electorate are transmitted via the majoritarian First Past the Post electoral system and there is a reverence for an MP’s strong and individual constituency link. That MP’s representative duty tends to be framed in terms of a trusteeship model: an MP should not slavishly follow their constituents’ opinions; rather, they do their best work when they trust their own judgement. Centralised statewide parties provide the means for recruiting candidates, forming governments, and representing territorial interests at the parliamentary centre.

Viewing UK politics through the lens of a Post-Westminster Narrative, in contrast, draws our attention to a much messier and more contested picture. The idea of a single UK political nation is much more difficult to sustain in the 2020s and some scholars would argue that it never existed at all. The UK is a multi-national state of four parts: England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland has always had a different party system (see Whitten, in this volume) and had a devolved government from 1921 to 1972. In Scotland and Wales, electoral behaviour has been diverging from England since the 1970s (Miller 1981; Griffiths et al. 2023; Larner and Wyn Jones, in this volume). In the 2016 referendum on EU membership, England and Wales voted to leave and Scotland and Northern Ireland voted to remain (Henderson et al. 2021). After the 2019 UK general election, the third-largest party in the House of Commons was the Scottish National Party, which is not a statewide party and only fields candidates in one part of the UK. As Ailsa Henderson argues in Chapter 8, there is no such thing as a UK electorate.

The study of elections in the UK is now therefore a multi-level exercise. Talking about people like the 'typical British voter' occludes major differences in behaviour and outlook across the UK. When we talk about British elections, we are sometimes in danger of describing an imaginary place or we say 'UK' when we actually mean 'England' (Henderson et al. 2017: 632). Instead, a Post-Westminster Narrative seeks to disaggregate the multiple political nations in the UK and pay attention to where they converge and diverge. For instance, Scottish voters behave differently at the ballot box, but many of their underlying political attitudes are in fact very similar to voters in England (Henderson 2014a).

The First Past the Post (FPTP) electoral system still generates majority governments from minority shares of the vote at the UK level. The idea of a strong majority government that can be removed at periodic elections is a central feature of the Westminster Model Narrative. Strong central authority is tempered with strong electoral accountability: there is little prospect of a defeated governing party clinging on to power through a rejigged coalition arrangement. However, FPTP at Westminster and in English and Welsh local government is no longer the only game in town in terms of electoral systems. Scottish local government and the Northern Ireland Assembly use the Single Transferable Vote (STV) system. The Scottish Parliament, Welsh Parliament and London Assembly use a form of Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) electoral systems. The Welsh Parliament plans to move towards a different proportional system and Welsh local authorities can choose to switch to STV if they wish.

Within and beyond England, the UK's political parties confront a much more volatile electorate. The Westminster Model Narrative's focus on the idea of a two-party system masks a great deal of churn underneath the surface. Voters switch their vote to a different party in greater numbers between elections. Voters react more strongly to shocks (like Brexit) because they are less and less attached to the established parties and more likely to vote for other parties (Fieldhouse et al. 2020). Vote switching peaked in the 2015 general election when there was a collapse in support for the Liberal Democrats, a big rise in support for the SNP in Scotland, and the rise of smaller parties like UKIP in England (Fieldhouse et al. 2023: 539). The Brexit shock has had a wider sorting effect and started to shift the traditional bases of support for the two parties in England that tend to alternate in government at Westminster. As Fieldhouse et al. (2023: 541) summarise: 'Labour [is] losing a substantial proportion of its support among its traditional heartlands, especially more socially conservative, older, working-class voters—while gaining support among younger, highly educated, and socially liberal voters. The Conservatives increased their support in those groups that deserted Labour.' This shift underlines a wider trend in England of urban areas leaning Labour and rural areas and towns leaning Conservative (Jennings and Stoker 2017; Furlong and Jennings 2024).

The Westminster Model Narrative in the 2020s also confronts different ways of understanding the concept of representation. The trusteeship model of MPs' behaviour tends to be invoked selectively and does not quite capture the multi-faceted nature of the role. In Chapter 2, Sarah Childs argues that we need to engage more deeply and critically with the question of what makes a 'good' representative. It is not a zero-sum game among different groups, but rather a messy question of evaluating the quality of representation. The MP's role itself has also changed markedly in the latter half of the twentieth century. As Marc Geddes outlines (in this volume), MPs need to be adept at playing different roles, moving from constituency champion to policy wonk, debater, fundraiser and (for some of them) government minister. We can also broaden the conversation to include discussions of the practical barriers to becoming an MP (Hardman 2018), the type of people who go into politics (Weinberg 2020) and MPs' mental health

(Flinders et al. 2020). The changing media landscape and social media also affects how we view the representative process (Llewellyn and Vaccari, in this volume).

Given the uneven access to political power across different groups in the UK, scholars have also increasingly focused on the institutions described in the Westminster Model as sites that might reflect and reproduce wider inequalities. As the chapters in this volume describe, we can observe how different groups experience institutions and how patterns of access have changed over time in terms of gender (Kenny, in this volume), race and ethnicity (Peace and Meer, in this volume) and social class (Greenwood-Hau, in this volume). Moreover, Kenny (in this volume) argues that gender is not just a substantive area of study, but also an analytical lens for understanding institutional power relations – and that the impetus for changing this system should be on institutions, not those affected by them. Other scholars would also draw our attention to the argument that these (and other) characteristics might intersect to contribute to the further marginalisation of different people (Smooth 2011; Celis and Childs 2020; Siow 2023a). The political institutions at the heart of the Westminster Model Narrative are not therefore neutral: Parliament, central government and the civil service are workplaces that are affected by the rest of everyday life in the UK.

Ideology

The Westminster Model Narrative conceals some underlying ideological assumptions about the legitimate exercise of power. The concept of parliamentary sovereignty is a cornerstone of the UK's constitutional arrangements. The idea that Parliament can make or unmake any law provides a public law concept to understand the constitution, a guide to where power lies and a heritage or culture to be defended. It is a part of the overall tendency of the Westminster Model Narrative to prefer strong central government. Although in theory Parliament is sovereign, the executive with its reliable majority ends up being sovereign in practice.

However, as Convery and Welikala (in this volume) show, parliamentary sovereignty has come under pressure on several fronts. It is often predicated on a unitary understanding of the nature of the UK that supposes that the English concept of parliamentary sovereignty simply expanded its territorial reach each time a new state joined. Such an understanding is not universally accepted (MacCormick 1999; Keating 2021). It has also come under greater pressure since the creation of the devolved legislatures in 1999. The UK Parliament can of course theoretically abolish these institutions, but its ability to do so in practice is constrained by political considerations and, in the case of Scotland, a declaration in the Scotland Act 2016 that such a move would require a referendum.

Referendums have provided another key challenge to the idea of parliamentary sovereignty. The 2014 referendum on Scottish independence explicitly recognised the sovereignty of the Scottish people to decide on the question of secession. The Belfast Agreement in Northern Ireland also recognises its right to secede from the UK (see Whitten, in this volume). There have been UK-wide referendums on EC membership (1975), changing the electoral system (2011) and EU membership (2016). As Ben Martill explains (in this volume), this latter referendum set up a showdown between parliamentary and popular sovereignty in 2018 and 2019 about how the UK should leave the EU (Russell and James 2023).

A Post-Westminster Narrative would therefore have to contend with multiple competing sovereignty claims that are not easily reconciled. Parliamentary sovereignty remains the key

organising feature of the UK's constitutional arrangements, but it is more contested than ever and is no longer capable of uniting the UK's multi-national state under a common sense of Britishness. Keating (2021) and Kenny (2024) discuss how the UK is now a 'fractured union'. The clash between parliamentary and popular sovereignty also poses new questions about the UK's tendency to emphasise a trusteeship model of representation.

The Westminster Model Narrative has almost nothing to say about the judiciary except to imply that its role is subordinate to supreme parliamentary authority. However, the courts are more involved in constitutional questions and controversial matters than ever before in the UK. The UK Supreme Court was established in 2005 and has gradually become a constitutional court in the way that other countries would recognise but which goes against the grain of the Westminster Model Narrative. Again, the 2016 referendum on EU membership set off a series of unintended consequences for parliamentary sovereignty and the UK constitution (Ewing 2017; Gordon 2019). There were two blockbuster constitutional cases in the Supreme Court that established that the executive required parliamentary approval to begin the process of exiting the European Union (Elliott 2017) and that the executive could not prorogue Parliament to prevent it debating issues (Elliott 2020).

The export of this political system elsewhere via the British Empire also means that there are multiple Westminster Models (Flinders et al. 2021). For Harshan Kumarasingham (in this volume), there also exists a version of 'Eastminster' that incorporates a tendency towards majoritarianism and a strong executive but with fewer minority rights and a more interventionist head of state (Kumarasingham 2016). Any pre- or post-Westminster narrative also bears the mark of the UK's imperial legacy, an inheritance that shaped both coloniser and colonised. There are further debates about echoes of Empire in the UK's foreign policy (see Honeyman, in this volume).

Governing

As David Judge argues, the English and then UK system has always had a tendency towards a strong central executive (Judge 1993). This feature is also a key bias of the Westminster Model Narrative. The uncodified constitution places a great deal of power in the hands of a government and a Prime Minister with a reliable parliamentary majority. It suggests that the Cabinet is the principal decision-making body in the UK with Parliament playing a peripheral role in the policy process. The Westminster Model Narrative also mentions nothing about local government or meso-level tiers of government beyond the centre. Local government has traditionally been weak and controlled by the centre (King 2007: 151). However, while it is still the case that UK central governments can achieve a great deal, the notion of the strong UK executive has come under greater scrutiny.

As Richard Parry (in this volume) points out, UK central government faces major challenges of organisation and performance. A major policy problem is the lack of economic growth. The Prime Minister's Office is enmeshed within a 'core executive' of key decision-makers that varies depending on the issue or the cast of politicians and civil servants involved (Dunleavy and Rhodes 1990; Rhodes 2011). It often includes the UK's all-powerful Treasury, an unusual finance *and* economics ministry with considerable sway over government policy. Daniel Kenealy (in this volume) argues that we need to ditch the idea of the all-powerful Prime Minister whose decisions cascade through the system and then into action. The Prime Minister's Office

is underpowered and lacks the bandwidth to be on top of every issue (Diamond 2013; Harris and Rutter 2014; Urban et al. 2024). Prime Ministers must negotiate, coordinate and exchange resources to get things done. Their impact depends on a complex interplay of personal and electoral factors (Blick and Jones 2010; Byrne and Theakston 2019).

The strong executive narrative also needs to contend with revisionist scholarship on the policy power of Parliament. The dominant view of Parliament in the latter half of the twentieth century and in the Westminster Model Narrative was that it was a peripheral player in the policy process (Flinders and Kelso 2011). Executive control over the agenda and strong party discipline ensured that the government got its way and did not need to pay too much attention to MPs' views. Journalists and academics bemoaned the tendency of MPs to vote with the government and lamented the loss a bygone golden age of parliamentary influence. However, as Marc Geddes argues (in this volume), this view of parliamentary decline needs to be qualified. An executive at Westminster with a majority is in a strong position in relation to Parliament but that does not mean that Parliament does not matter. Simply counting the number of times the government is defeated in Parliament is a misleading guide to its influence. Instead, deeper analysis of parliamentary votes and interviews with MPs, civil servants and ministers reveals a more complicated picture (Russell and Cowley 2016). We need to pay attention to anticipated reactions and the process before legislation is introduced: governments generally do not bring forward bills that are unpopular with MPs. Informal discussions before draft legislation is produced influence the policy process. Governments will also respond to parliamentary pressure for amendments to legislation in both the Commons and the Lords (Russell et al. 2016).

Moreover, recent parliamentary reforms have increased the power of backbench MPs to hold the government to account. The chairs of select committees in the House of Commons, for example, are now elected and have taken the enhanced role seriously. The devolved legislatures were designed to be at the forefront of parliamentary reform and committee empowerment but have found themselves behind the curve as Westminster has reformed itself (Mitchell 2009). The changes in our understanding of Parliament's position prompted one academic to ask whether the House of Commons has become too powerful (Norton 2019).

The changing nature of governance has sparked an academic debate about how far the UK Government has been 'hollowed out'. Rhodes argues that ministers at the centre are pulling rubber levers. Power has been dispersed downwards through devolution, upwards through international organisations, and sideways to agencies and other delivery bodies (Bevir and Rhodes 2003). For others, the strong UK executive of the traditional Westminster narrative remains down but not out. Central government has been undermined by fragmentation, complexity and some decentralisation. However, in any policy discussion it remains the most important actor with the most powerful resources, including budget-setting, legislation and regulation (Marsh et al. 2003; Bell and Hindmoor 2012). Moreover, the UK's devolution reforms were carried out within the parameters of the Westminster Model mindset (Marsh and Hall 2007). Parliament retains the ability to over-rule the devolved legislatures and did so during the implementation of Brexit (Keating 2022).

A Post-Westminster Model Narrative also draws our attention to the never-quite-unitary nature of the UK – and the ways in which its constitution has become more decentralised in recent years. The Scottish Office and the Welsh Office gradually gained more functions over the course of the twentieth century (Mitchell 2014), giving a distinctive territorial dimension to public policy. The devolution reforms of the Labour Governments (1997–2010) cemented this trend through the creation of the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly, Northern Ireland Assembly, and the London Assembly and Mayor.

The Conservative-led governments after 2010 built on this legacy and started to experiment with devolution of power *within* England through the creation of combined authorities and metro mayors (Sandford 2023a). However, as with the late 1990s devolution arrangements, these new tiers of government occupy an ambiguous position in the Westminster Model Narrative. On the one hand, they have significant powers over transport, housing and economic development. However, they also lack any entrenched constitutional protection and rely on central government for their powers and most funding. The process has been top-down and uneven, resembling a contractual process in which central government decides the circumstances under which it will outsource the delivery of certain policy areas to local government and then monitor implementation (Sandford 2016). Devolution in England has therefore been designed specifically not to significantly alter the balance of power between central and local government (Ayres et al. 2017).

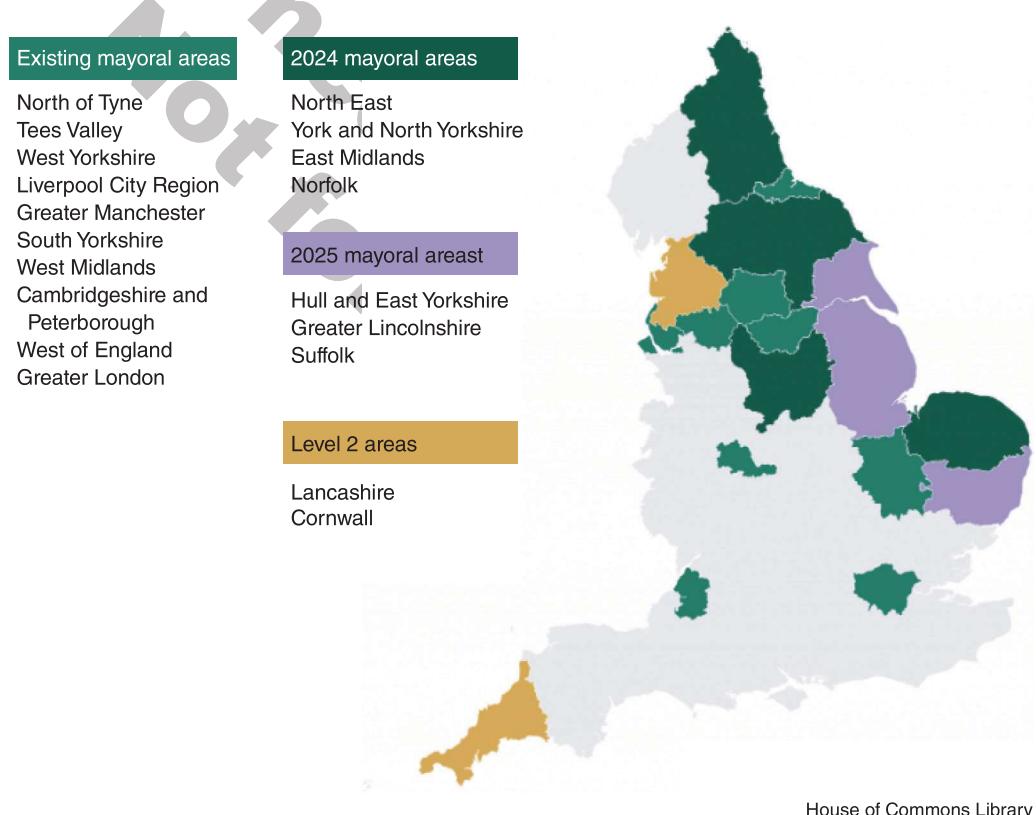


Figure 1.3 English devolution: current and future

Source: House of Commons Library (<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/english-devolution-deals-in-the-2023-autumn-statement/>)

The Government at Westminster is still an important actor in the UK political system (perhaps even the most important actor – Marsh et al. 2003). However, it now interacts with increasingly powerful sub-state institutions, a UK Parliament that influences policy much more

than the hoary caricatures suggest, and a series of governing problems that are becoming more difficult to manage. It carries out these functions in a UK that is increasingly fragmented, as we will now explore.

Identity

The Westminster Model Narrative's underlying assumption is that the multi-national nature of the UK is expressed through central institutions in London. There is an over-arching British identity that unites the polity. The institutions at the centre are Anglo-British: they function in specifically English or in 'federal' UK-wide modes, but this distinction is never made explicitly. Englishness and England tend to be hidden in the Westminster Model Narrative.

A Post-Westminster Model Narrative, in contrast, confronts a much more complicated picture of identity and the institutions onto which it maps. First, the UK's multiple national identities have become more explicit and more important in recent years. In particular, the vote to leave the European Union in 2016 underlined fundamental differences in outlook shaped by national identity (Henderson and Wyn Jones 2023: 8). Understandings of Britishness are complicated and work differently in different parts of the UK. British identifiers in Scotland and Wales tend to like the central institutions of the UK state and are more likely to have voted for Brexit. In contrast, British identifiers in England tend to have a much more cosmopolitan set of views and are more likely to have voted to remain in the EU in 2016 (Henderson et al. 2021). Identifying as Scottish or Welsh in Scotland or Wales tended to increase your likelihood of voting Remain. Citizens in England who identified as English, in contrast, were more likely to have voted Leave (Henderson and Wyn Jones 2021). There is also an ambivalent attachment to the territorial integrity of the UK state in all areas.

Crucially, therefore, a Post-Westminster Narrative must take England and Englishness seriously. As Ben Wellings points out (in this volume), the tendency to elide Englishness and Britishness creates serious problems for our understanding of UK politics. There has been a rise in the number of people who identify as English in England and we know that they tend to resent the power of Scotland within the union and the perceived level of public spending outside England (Henderson and Wyn Jones 2021). A new English politics of the meso-level also requires our attention as more power is devolved from Whitehall to the new combined authorities (however tentatively).

Second, the UK has gradually become a much more ethnically diverse society since 1945. As Peace and Meer point out (in this volume), that shift has had major consequences for political representation, public policy and the study of politics. It is also linked in part to a legacy of the British Empire (Kumarasingham, in this volume). Migration in the postwar period from countries that were formerly part of the British Empire fundamentally changed the makeup of the UK and UK politics. Part of this change is often symbolised by the arrival of the *SS Empire Windrush*, but the UK had always been a migrant nation. This shift requires students of UK politics to confront questions about, for instance, whether ethnic minority candidates are penalised for providing substantive representation for minority groups (Martin and Blinder 2021) and the sort of expectations they feel about the representative role (Sobolewska et al. 2018). More broadly, Akram (2024) argues that the whole discipline of UK politics has neglected questions of race and racism: 'The overall effect of this position is that the discipline has been unwilling or indeed unable to respond to Grenfell, to the Windrush scandal, to the Black Lives Matter Movement, or the Sewell Report' (Akram 2024: 2).

The expansion of higher education has also opened another divide in the electorate: between graduates and non-graduates. Levels of education have become a major predictor of values and voting intention (Sobolewska and Ford 2020: 22). Sobolewska and Ford (2020) call the new political context 'Brexitland'. They make a distinction between voters who prioritise their in-group identity (ethnocentrism) and voters who are much more open to a range of identities and may view diversity in society as a positive good to be promoted and extended. On the one hand, there are what they term 'identity conservatives': 'white voters with lower levels of formal education who most frequently hold ethnocentric worldviews, making them more strongly attached to in-group identities ... and more threatened by out-groups such as migrants and minorities' (Sobolewska and Ford 2020: 22). On the other hand, there are 'two 'identity liberal' groups – university graduates and ethnic minorities – who for different reasons reject ethnocentrism' (Sobolewska and Ford 2020: 22). Thus: 'The conflict between these groups runs right through the heart of the electorate, and the activation of this conflict is a major source of the political upheavals and volatility of the past decade' (Sobolewska and Ford 2020: 22).

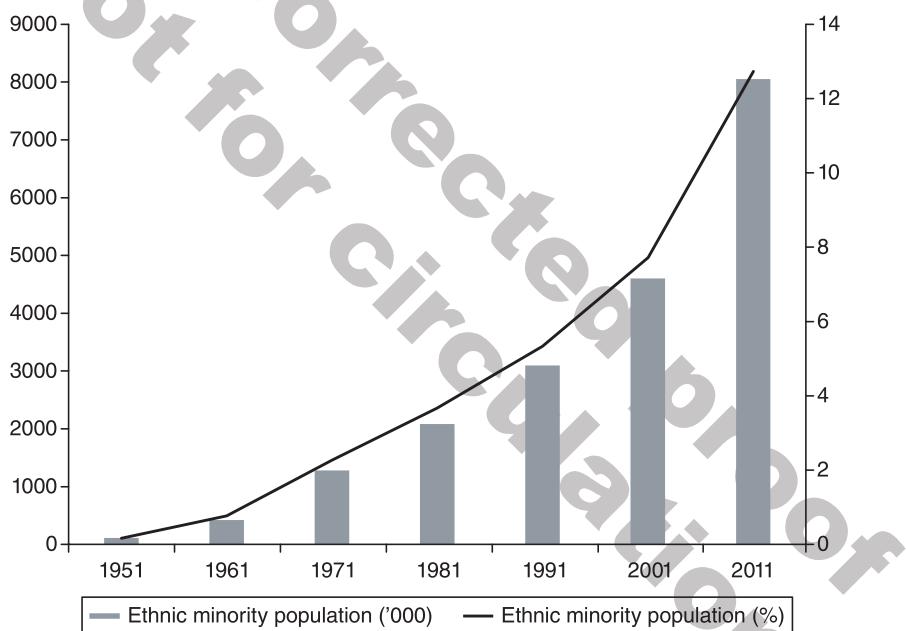


Figure 1.4 Ethnic group distribution (high-level categories), 2011 and 2021, England and Wales

Source: Office for National Statistics (2022) - <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/ethnicity/bulletins/ethnicgroupenglandandwales/census2021#:~:text=The%20largest%20increases%20were%20seen,%25%2C%20564%2C000%20in%202011>.

The Leave/Remain identities that emerged after the referendum in 2016 were not created on that date; rather, they reflected much deeper trends in the electorate. Students should be aware of these long-term transformations. The shift from a mostly white school-leaver electorate to a much more graduate and ethnically diverse electorate is a powerful driver of surface-level political conflict (Sobolewska and Ford 2020).

These long-term trends have changed the profile of voters for the two main parties. Broadly, the Conservatives draw much of their support from older voters and those who own their own home outright (Convery, Chapter 6 in this volume). The Labour Party now draws much of its support from younger voters and is especially ahead among those who rent their home (Pike, in this volume). The changed electoral context creates strategic dilemmas and opportunities for the parties. There are also gender gaps that increase with age (Sanders and Shorrocks 2019). In the 2019 general election, women were more likely than men to vote Labour and men were more likely than women to vote Conservative (Campbell and Shorrocks 2021). These effects are more pronounced among younger voters.

Finally, therefore, in that context, the study of UK politics in a Post-Westminster sense pays much more attention to the diversity of the UK. It asks questions about why certain groups are over- or under-represented in Parliament and Government (Childs, in this volume).

It asks what a gender (Kenny, in this volume), race and ethnicity (Peace and Meer, in this volume) or class (Greenwood-Hau, in this volume) lens can tell us about the distribution of power in UK politics. It now pays much more attention to the inequalities in UK society that affect how politics is conducted and discussed.

Conclusion

This chapter has used the Westminster Model Narrative as a starting point to explore the ways in which the study and practice of UK politics has evolved. It has tried to disrupt the narrative and critically engage with its explicit (and implicit) assumptions. As a starting point, we have suggested trying to view UK politics through a 'Post-Westminster Model' Narrative lens. The central institutions of the Westminster Model Narrative and many of its assumptions and modes of operating remain intact. However, they now sit on much shakier foundations and in some cases provide a polite fiction to paper over anomalies and incongruities.

Summary

- The Westminster Model Narrative is the traditional lens through which UK politics has been viewed.
- It presents an inaccurate account of how UK politics works but it is important to be aware of it because it still influences how UK politics is conducted and discussed.
- Using the assumptions in the Westminster Model Narrative as a starting framework, we can construct a Post-Westminster Model Narrative that tries to grapple with recent changes in UK politics, society and the constitution.
- Some central features of the Westminster Model Narrative remain in place (especially the tendency towards a strong executive), but what emerges elsewhere is a much more decentralised, contested and diverse polity.
- Trying to make sense of this mixture of old and new is part of the joy of studying UK politics – and is the task this book sets itself.

Recommended and further reading

- Hall's (2011) *Political Traditions and UK Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave) is an excellent introduction to the Westminster Model, the British Political Tradition, and other alternatives.
- For a suggestion of an Asymmetric Power Model to replace the Westminster Model, see Marsh, D., Richards, D. and Smith, M. (2003) 'Unequal plurality: towards an Asymmetric Power Model of British politics', *Government and Opposition*, 38(3): 306–332. They argue that the centre of UK Government remains the most important actor in the system, even if it has been challenged on several fronts.
- Bevir and Rhodes' (2003) *Interpreting British Governance* (London: Routledge) suggests that there are multiple competing narratives that operate alongside the Westminster Model Narrative. They argue for an interpretivist lens on UK politics that concentrates on understanding political practices by examining actors' beliefs.
- For a robust challenge to the discipline of British politics on the question of ignoring race and racism, see Akram, S. (2024) 'Dear British politics—where is the race and racism?', *British Politics*, 19(1): 1–24. Akram argues that these topics are hidden because the discipline does not talk about them enough.

Uncorrected proof
Not for circulation