

Introduction**Background****Politics Today**

- Everyone over 18 can vote except for the mentally ill, lords and some criminals.
- Voting is secret. No one can see how you vote.
- There are 651 constituencies in Britain, of roughly even size.
- Each constituency sends one MP to Parliament.
- In an election, voters vote for one person to be their MP. The candidate with the most votes becomes the MP.
- General elections are held every 5 years.
- Parliament is made up of the House of Commons and the House of Lords. Parliament passes all the new laws.
- The political party with the most MPs in Parliament forms the government.
- MPs are paid a salary.

Politics in 1800

- In 1800, nobody under 21 could vote. Fewer than 5% of the population had this political right.
- Most of the new cities and towns had no MP to represent them.
- Voting was open. There was no secret ballot, so it was possible to pay a voter to vote. Sometimes voters were frightened into voting for a particular candidate.
- The country was divided into constituencies made up of counties and boroughs. The seats were unevenly distributed. There were some boroughs where nobody lived or where there were only a few voters. These were called rotten boroughs.
- In many constituencies, there was only one candidate for voters to choose from.
- MPs in Parliament were not paid a salary, so they had to have enough money to support themselves.
- Parliament was made up of the House of Commons and the House of Lords. The king chose the Prime Minister, but increasingly the Prime Minister and his Cabinet made the decisions of government.
- Elections were held at least once every seven years.
- No women were allowed to vote.

King George III became king in 1760 and died in 1821. He was Head of State and, in the early years of his reign, he decided most government policy. Before an Act of Parliament became law, the king had to give his assent. Without this approval, the law could not be passed. George chose the Prime Minister and many of the other government ministers. He also controlled about thirty MPs who relied on his support to be elected. The king appointed the senior officers in the army and the navy, and was head of the church.

Society in 1800

The population of Britain in 1801 was about ten million. It had started to grow rapidly during the 18th century. Very few people lived in large towns or cities. About 75% of the population lived in the countryside.

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The majority of people lived into their late forties and fifties (if they managed to pass the age of five). Deaths of children below the age of five were very high, with many babies dying before their first birthday. Perhaps as many as 200 out of every 1000 babies died.

There was no government education system. The rich paid to send their children to school or hired private tutors. Middle-class children went to small boarding schools. There were cheap local schools for the poor in some parishes, but the working classes often had no education. The majority of children could not read or write. This caused problems when industries and manufacturers needed workers who could read instructions and make measurements. There were two universities in England, one in Cambridge, the other in Oxford, and very few people attended them.

Most of the population worked in agriculture. This was the case for both those who lived in the countryside and many of those who lived in the small towns. Small towns had very few industries, and many residents worked as craftspeople, for example as tailors or shoemakers.

Industry was small scale. In Birmingham the majority of industries were based on small workshops employing less than twenty people. In Manchester the textile industry was beginning to be based in large factories where the workers came to work rather than working at home. The source of power was important and both coal and water power were used to run machines. Food production and the woollen industry were the most important. Iron production, coal mining, textile and metal manufactories were becoming increasingly important.