

United Kingdom | Freedom House

POLITICAL RIGHTS: 39 / 40 (−1)

A. ELECTORAL PROCESS: 12 / 12

A1. Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections? 4 / 4

Executive power rests with the prime minister and cabinet, who must have the support of the House of Commons. The leader of the majority party or coalition usually becomes prime minister, and appoints the cabinet. Theresa May of the Conservative Party stayed on as prime minister following free and fair elections held in June 2017.

A2. Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 4 / 4

The UK has a bicameral Parliament. The lower chamber, the House of Commons, has 650 members directly elected to serve five-year terms. Members of the upper chamber, the House of Lords, are appointed by the monarch, and the number of members, who do not have to stand for election, varies with time. As of 2018, there were 780 eligible lords. The body largely plays an oversight role in reviewing legislation passed by the House of Commons

While a general election was not due until 2020, Parliament in April 2017 voted to approve a call for snap elections by Prime Minister May, who sought to strengthen her position to negotiate the UK's exit from the EU.

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) sent a limited mission to observe the elections, and in its final report offered relatively minor recommendations without questioning the integrity of the polls' results. The Conservative Party won 42 percent of the vote, which amounted to a loss of 13 seats, and resulted in a hung parliament. The Labour Party did better than expected, gaining 30 seats, with 40 percent of the vote. The Scottish National Party (SNP) lost 21 seats but still represented the third largest party in Parliament. The Liberal Democrats gained 4 seats, taking their share to 12 seats, and the conservative Northern Irish Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) increased its share of seats from 8 to 10. The Conservatives and the DUP forged an alliance whereby the DUP agreed to support May's minority government on key matters including Brexit and national security legislation.

A3. Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies? 4 / 4

The UK's electoral framework is robust and well implemented, though the limited OSCE mission that observed the 2017 snap polls urged lawmakers to consider reforms that could boost transparency surrounding campaign financing, as well as an annual cap on how much a single individual could donate to a party or candidate. As of 2018, no such limits are in place for donors.

The Conservative government has moved towards requiring voters to produce identification in order to vote. In May 2018, a pilot scheme was launched in five boroughs during local elections, and resulted in a small number of people being turned away at the polls. Further trials are planned for local elections in 2019, but a court case filed in December challenging their validity could derail the project. The Electoral Commission backs voter identification measures to prevent electoral fraud through impersonation, though some advocacy groups as well as the Labour Party maintain that it will discourage political participation among marginalized groups. Voter identification requirements already exist for elections that take place in Northern Ireland.

In September, the High Court ruled that the Electoral Commission had misinterpreted EU referendum laws, making it possible for the Vote Leave campaign to overspend during the 2016 Brexit referendum campaign.

Further evidence of Russian interference in the Brexit referendum emerged in 2018. In October, Twitter revealed that Russian trolls sent thousands of tweets encouraging people to vote leave around referendum day.

B. POLITICAL PLURALISM AND PARTICIPATION: 16 / 16

B1. Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings? 4 / 4

Parties do not face undue restrictions on registration or operation. The Conservative Party and the Labour Party have dominated British politics for decades, though other parties regularly win seats in Parliament.

B2. Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections? 4 / 4

Opposition parties operate freely, and have a realistic opportunity to increase their support and gain power through elections. The SNP supplanted the Liberal Democrats as the third-largest party in Parliament in the 2015 elections, a position it maintained after the 2017 elections.

B3. Are the people's political choices free from domination by the military, foreign powers, religious hierarchies, economic oligarchies, or any other powerful group that is not democratically accountable? 4 / 4

People's political choices are free from domination by powerful groups that are not democratically accountable, including the military, foreign powers, religious hierarchies, and economic oligarchies.

B4. Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, religious, gender, LGBT, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 4 / 4

Under Britain's system of "devolution," the UK Parliament has granted different degrees of legislative power to the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Welsh Assembly, and the Scottish Parliament, augmenting the political representation of regional populations.

Women, LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people, and members of racial or ethnic minority groups have been able to gain a political voice through their participation in the mainstream political parties. However, a government report released in February 2018 found that one in five staff working in Parliament had experienced sexual harassment in the prior 12 months. The report was published after numerous allegations of sexual harassment of women in Parliament by other lawmakers surfaced in late 2017, at least two of which prompted formal investigations.

C. FUNCTIONING OF GOVERNMENT: 11 / 12 (–1)

C1. Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government? 3 / 4 (–1)

Britain's freely elected officials can make and implement national policy without significant influence from actors who are not democratically accountable.

Elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly took place in March 2017, but legislators had failed to form a functioning government by the end of 2018, breaking the record of 589 days previously held by Belgium for the longest time without a government. The initial source of the impasse involved corruption allegations in the renewable-energy sector, but longstanding disagreements on a number of issues between the two largest parties, the unionist Sinn Féin and the nationalist DUP, stymied negotiations to break the deadlock.

Score Change: The score declined from 4 to 3 due to the continued failure of Northern Ireland lawmakers to form a functioning regional government after elections held in March 2017.

C2. Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 4 / 4

Large-scale corruption is not pervasive in domestic political and governance structures, and anticorruption bodies are generally effective. However, the UK is increasingly coming under scrutiny for the ways in which its banking and financial sectors, property market, and offshore services in overseas territories enable money laundering and facilitate

corruption globally.

C3. Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 4 / 4

Members of Parliament are required to disclose assets and sources of income, and this information is made available to the public. The country's Freedom of Information Law is reasonably well implemented, and journalists have been able to access information under its provisions about topics of interest to the public. However, there are growing calls to extend the law's reach to private companies contracted by government departments and agencies.

CIVIL LIBERTIES: 54 / 60

D. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND BELIEF: 14 / 16

D1. Are there free and independent media? 4 / 4

Press freedom is legally protected. The media are lively and competitive, and espouse viewpoints spanning the political spectrum. The state-owned British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) is editorially independent and competitive with its counterparts in the commercial market.

In March 2018, the culture secretary announced that the controversial Section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act would not be implemented, and ultimately would be repealed. Section 40 stipulates that, in media-related court cases, publishers who are not members of a recognized self-regulator can be ordered to pay their opponents' legal costs, even if they win. At year's end, the section had not yet been repealed.

D2. Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? 4 / 4

Freedom of religion is protected in law and practice. A 2006 law bans incitement to religious hatred, with a maximum penalty of seven years in prison. Nevertheless, minority groups, particularly Muslims, continue to report discrimination, harassment, and occasional assaults. In October 2018, the Home Office released statistics that showed a 40 percent increase in the number of reported religious hate crimes in England and Wales for the coverage period between April 2017 and March 2018, compared to the same period in 2016–17. The Home Office partly attributed the rise to improved reporting mechanisms, but added that there was a spike in reports of religious hate crimes after a string of terrorist attacks in London and Manchester in 2017.

D3. Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? 3 / 4

Academic freedom is generally respected. However, the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act of 2015 requires schools and universities to work to prevent students from being drawn into terrorism by reporting any students suspected of extremism to a local government body, and vetting the remarks of visiting speakers, among other obligations. The program has raised concerns that open debate and academic inquiry is being stifled.

D4. Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? 3 / 4

Concerns about the effects of mass surveillance on free and open private discussion persisted in 2018. The 2016 IPA, known by critics as the “snoopers’ charter,” requires communications companies to store metadata on customers’ activity for 12 months and, in some cases, allows this information to be accessed by police and other security officials without a warrant.

In April 2018, a High Court ruling stated that the government had until November to revise the IPA, as it did not comply with EU law due to inadequate oversight and provisions that allow authorities to access phone and internet records outside of criminal investigations. In September, the European Court of Human Rights declared in a landmark ruling that the UK’s surveillance program violates the “right to respect for private and family life/communications” and lacks safeguards. In response to the High Court ruling, new regulations came into force in October, which allow authorities to only access communications data while investigating serious crimes, and require the approval of an independent commission to obtain such data.

E. ASSOCIATIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL RIGHTS: 12 / 12

E1. Is there freedom of assembly? 4 / 4

Freedom of assembly is generally respected.

E2. Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work? 4 / 4

Civic and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) generally operate freely. However, groups identified as terrorist organizations can be banned, and there are concerns that the relevant legal provisions are broad enough that they could allow the ban or prohibition of legitimate associations and activism. In recent years, disclosures of surveillance of NGOs have drawn criticism.

A lobbying law adopted in 2014 concerning third-party campaigning was heavily criticized by NGOs for limiting the amount of money they can spend during election years.

E3. Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 4 / 4

Workers have the right to organize trade unions, which have traditionally played a central role in the Labour Party. The rights to bargain collectively and strike are also respected.

F. RULE OF LAW: 14 / 16**F1. Is there an independent judiciary? 4 / 4**

The judiciary is generally independent, and governmental authorities comply with judicial decisions. A new Supreme Court began functioning in 2009, improving the separation of powers by moving the highest court out of the House of Lords.

F2. Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 4 / 4

While due process generally prevails in civil and criminal matters, rights groups and some figures within the judiciary have criticized severe cuts in legal aid under reforms that took effect in 2013, which left many vulnerable people without access to formal legal counsel. The cuts notably affected those with immigration-related cases, and parties to cases heard in family courts.

The 2015 Counter-Terrorism and Security Act has been criticized for giving excessive powers to police, including the authority to seize travel documents of individuals attempting to leave the country if they are suspected of planning to engage in terrorist-related activities abroad, and to forcibly relocate terrorism suspects within the country up to 200 miles away from their homes. In September 2018, the House of Commons approved the controversial Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Bill, which would make viewing terrorist content online punishable by up to 15 years in prison, and would allow law enforcement agencies to keep fingerprints and DNA of terrorism suspects for up to five years, even if no charges are ultimately filed. A final vote to approve the bill was expected in early 2019.

F3. Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 3 / 4

Following a string of deadly attacks in 2017, there was only one significant terrorist incident in 2018, in which a man hit and injured three people with a car at Westminster in August. However, the threat of terrorism remains a significant concern.

While prisons generally adhere to international guidelines, the problems of overcrowding, violence, self-harm, and drugs in prisons remain significant, and were noted by the chief inspector of prisons for England and Wales in his 2017–18 annual report.

In Northern Ireland, attacks by paramilitary groups have increased significantly in recent years. According to police statistics, violent attacks by such organizations increased by 60 percent between 2013 and 2017.

F4. Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 3 / 4

The contentious 2016 EU referendum campaign, which featured anti-immigrant rhetoric, as well as a series of terrorist attacks in 2017, seemed to contribute to increased hostility towards foreigners. In October 2018, the Home Office said there had been over 94,000 recorded hate crimes in England and Wales between April 2017 and March 2018, a 17 percent increase over the same period in 2016–17.

Immigrants and their descendants receive equal treatment under the law but frequently face living standards below the national average. Immigration laws that took effect in 2016 require landlords to check the immigration status of their tenants, oblige banks to perform background checks before opening an account, and make it a criminal offense for migrants to obtain jobs without appropriate paperwork.

In 2018, the Windrush scandal roiled British politics and spurred further debate about the treatment of immigrants and minorities. Thousands of people who arrived in the UK from Commonwealth countries (mainly in the Caribbean) between 1948 and 1971 had, in recent years, been declared illegal immigrants. Many were denied health coverage and housing, and threatened with deportation. Some were detained and denied legal counsel, and at least 83 people may have been wrongfully deported. In April, Home Secretary Amber Rudd resigned in the wake of the scandal. Responding to the outcry, the government introduced a scheme in May to grant citizenship to members of the “Windrush generation.”

Asylum seekers and migrants can be detained indefinitely, and there have been persistent reports of poor conditions and abuse in immigration detention centers. The government has continued to hold children in immigration detention centers.

The authorities actively enforce a 2010 law barring discrimination on the basis of factors including sexual orientation and gender reassignment. While women receive equal treatment under the law, in practice gender discrimination persists in the workplace and elsewhere in society.

G. PERSONAL AUTONOMY AND INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS: 14 / 16

G1. Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 4 / 4

Citizens generally enjoy freedom of travel and choice of residence, employment, and institution of higher education.

As Brexit negotiations continued in 2018, the possibility that a “hard border” between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland would again be imposed contributed to concerns that the movement of goods and people across the border would be curtailed, and that the tensions that fueled the decades-long conflict in Northern Ireland could resurface with the potential re-establishment of border checkpoints.

G2. Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 4 / 4

Individuals may freely exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses.

G3. Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 3 / 4

The government generally does not place explicit restrictions on personal social freedoms. However, in Northern Ireland, abortion is allowed only to protect the life or the long-term health of the mother, meaning most women seeking legal abortions must travel outside the region. In June 2018, the Supreme Court stated that Northern Ireland’s abortion law was incompatible with the European Convention on Human Rights, but dismissed an effort to reverse it.

Same-sex marriage became legal in 2013 in England, Scotland, and Wales, but the Northern Ireland Assembly has blocked a similar change in Northern Ireland. The DUP, whose support allows Prime Minister May’s minority government to survive, has consistently used its power to veto or obstruct legislation on marriage equality, even as polling has shown widespread support for same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland.

G4. Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 3 / 4

A 2016 report by a government commission expressed concern about the social and economic isolation of many members of ethnic and religious minorities, and of the poor. According to the Office for National Statistics, income inequality increased in 2018, a trend that was partly the result of a cut in government benefits. The 2015 Modern Slavery Act increased punishments for human traffickers and provides greater protections for victims. However, its implementation has been weak. Children and migrant workers are among those most vulnerable to forced labor and sex trafficking.