



The English Constitution

Walter Bagehot (1826 - 1877)

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The United Kingdom does not have a single document that sets forth the structure and governance of the body politic. The term “constitution’ instead refers to a collection of laws and principles drawn from statutes, common law, parliamentary convention and works of authority that define the relationship between the individual and the state and the functioning of the legislature, the executive and the judicial branches of government. *The English Constitution* by Walter Bagehot is considered by many to be the most accessible work on the subject. The focus is on the functioning of Parliament and the Monarchy, defining the rights of the monarch, and dividing the principles into two groups, the dignified and the efficient. Bagehot gives considerable at-

tention to the contrasts between the British and American systems, finding considerable flaws and absurdities in the American methods, particularly the lack of flexibility and accountability and the fact that Congress cannot effect a change of government. His remarks on the selection of the president are especially relevant today: “Under a presidential constitution the preliminary caucuses that choose the president need not care as to the ultimate fitness of the person they choose. They are solely concerned with his attractiveness as a candidate; they need not regard his efficiency as a ruler.” The book was an inspiration for Woodrow Wilson’s *Congressional Government: A Study in American Politics* and is a standard guidebook for British monarchs and politicians past, present and future.

Walter Bagehot (February 3, 1826 – March 24, 1877) was a British journalist, author, and businessman remembered for his works about government and economics. He was born in Somerset to a prominent banking family and studied mathematics at University College in London, earning a master’s degree in moral philosophy as well. He joined the family banking and shipping business after college and married Elizabeth Wilson, daughter of James Wilson, founder of *The Economist*. He became the magazine’s editor-in-chief in 1860 and greatly expanded its political coverage and influence over his 17-year tenure. His notable works include *The English Constitution*; *Physics and Politics*, a study of the life cycles of civilizations; and *Lombard Street: A Description of the Money Market*, an overview of the world of finance. His influence continues to reverberate; *The Economist* to this day contains a weekly commentary on UK current affairs in his honor, and the British Political Studies Association awards the Walter Bagehot Prize annually for the best work in the field of government and public administration. His health was compromised by a bout of pneumonia in 1867 and led to his untimely death ten years later.