

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-58988-8 - Regicide and Republic England 1603–1660  
Graham E. Seel  
Excerpt  
[More information](#)

---

# Politics and religion, 1603–29

## 1

# England in 1603

## Introduction

The **middle way** became a term used to describe the religious settlement fashioned by Elizabeth in 1559, which was a compromise between Catholicism and Protestantism. Notably, although celebration of the mass was henceforth forbidden, bishops remained.

A **faction** is a small group of courtiers, usually based on support for the leading figure, or figures, of the group, for example the Howards, though the identity was often based on policy as well, for example war with Spain. Monarchs usually listened to different factions at the same time. If they listened to one only then an excluded faction might out of frustration resort to violence, as was the case with Essex and his followers in 1601.

The royal **court** was both a physical and a political entity, and although usually based in the palace at Whitehall it would also accompany the monarch on any royal progress into the country. By 1585 it was

It is extraordinary that the death of Elizabeth I in 1603 did not result in a political crisis, perhaps even civil war. The virgin queen had failed to produce an heir and there were a number of contenders for the English throne and the Tudor inheritance. Nevertheless, shortly after the queen's death, James VI, the Stuart king of Scotland, was successfully proclaimed as her successor and henceforth took the dual title of King James VI of Scotland and King James I of England. Yet, within 40 years of James's accession, England was divided by civil war. To find an explanation for this has proved to be one of the most intractable historical problems in English history.

Before considering the key events and developments of early and mid seventeenth-century England, we need to consider an outline view of the condition of this country in the latter period of the reign of Elizabeth I. The actions and words of individuals as important as Sir Thomas Wentworth, William Laud, John Pym and Oliver Cromwell, all of whom were born in the Elizabethan period, cannot be explained without some knowledge of England before the arrival of James Stuart.

## A decade of crises, 1593–1603

In 1598 Elizabeth celebrated her 40th year as queen, four decades in which, for the large part, she had ruled with care, caution and with no little skill. At a time when other countries were being divided by religious conflict between Catholic and Protestant, Elizabeth had managed to avoid driving either group to rebellion, mainly by desiring not to make 'windows into men's souls'. Instead, she deliberately steered a **middle way** between the two extremes. Moreover, at a time when royal marriages often caused political division and sometimes even civil war, Elizabeth had refused to marry. Another cause of potential political division was **faction** at **court** but, in this respect also, the queen, at least until the very end of her reign, had managed to balance different factions.



Elizabeth I with figures representing Time and Death in an allegorical portrait, painted after her death, by an unknown artist. Her appearance is in vivid contrast to the glorious representations of the queen from the earlier part of the reign.

### War with Spain

Yet, in the last ten years of Elizabeth's reign, England was beset by no less than four major crises: a foreign war, a rebellion in Ireland, a court revolt and an economic depression. Each on its own represented a challenge to Elizabeth's government but, combined, they proved a severe test.

The foreign war was against Spain, the wealthiest and most powerful of all European states. As the leading Catholic state, Spain had, for some time, been attempting to put down a rebellion against its authority in the Netherlands (also known as the United Provinces or Holland). In 1585 England had gone to war in support of the Netherlands, a fellow Protestant state. This was the immediate background to the Spanish Armada campaign in 1588. Even though the Armada was defeated, the Spanish did not give up and the war dragged on until 1604.

### Essex and the revolt in Ireland

By the late 1590s it had been clear that the earl of Tyrone represented a challenge to English authority in Ireland which had to be put down, not least because the Irish were for the large part Catholic and thus represented what

also firmly established as a centre of artistic performance and patronage, an aspect which flourished during the reign of Charles I. The court was composed of hundreds of servants known as the household who were attendant upon the needs of the monarch.

**Ulster** is the most northern of the four Irish provinces, comprising the counties of Fermanagh, Tyrone, Londonderry, Antrim, Armagh, Down, Donegal, Cavan and Monaghan.

The **Poor Laws** were medieval in origin. Drawn up by parliament, they enshrined the principle of compulsory giving. Amongst other things they included provision for the relief of those genuinely unable to work and measures to restrain vagrants. By the early seventeenth century it is possible to speak of a national Poor Law system in England.

Identify four problems that Elizabeth bequeathed to her successor, James VI and I.

**Monopolies**, which gave to the purchaser the sole right either to make or to distribute a particular commodity, were sold by the crown. They became a grievance of the political nation and featured in the parliaments of 1621 and 1624 (see pp. 13 and 14).

many in England believed were the ‘enemy within’. In 1599 the earl of Essex, the queen’s favourite, led a force to crush a rebellion in **Ulster** headed by Tyrone. Having failed in his objective, however, and believing that his position at court was under threat, Essex returned to London and launched a revolt against royal authority – an action for which he was executed in 1601. In the same year, the Irish Rebellion, briefly supported by a Spanish force, was ultimately defeated.

### Economic depression

The economic depression was caused by a series of bad harvests, an effect of which was the doubling of the price of wheat in the three years from 1594 to 1597. There is evidence of starvation, or near starvation, in parts of northern England and it is certain that the number of able-bodied beggars and vagabonds increased. The **Poor Laws** had to be revised in 1598 and 1601 in order to help deal with the problem.

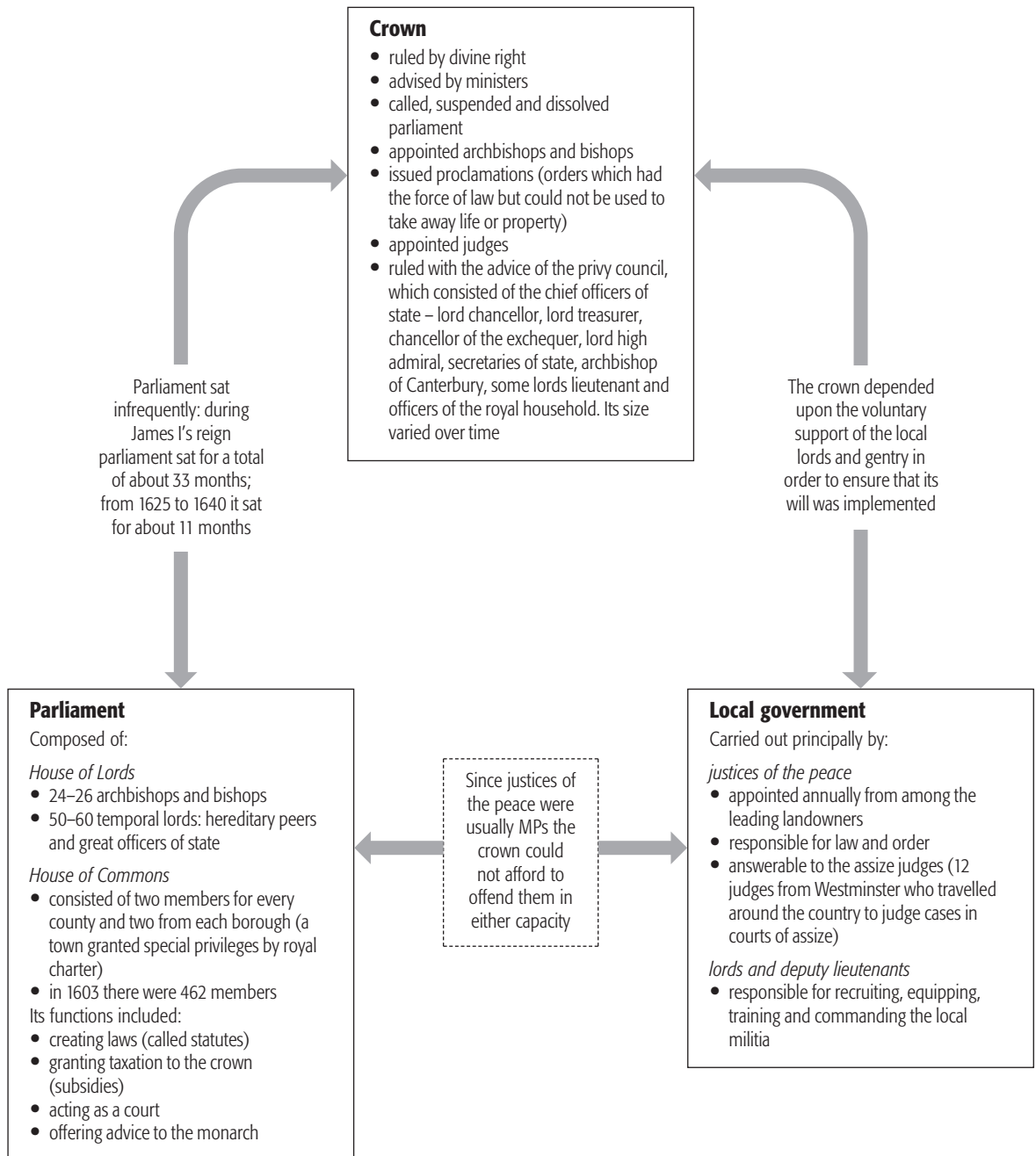
### Parliamentary opposition

There were other problems that resulted from these crises. In particular, Elizabeth had to meet with parliament in 1589, 1593, 1597–98 and 1601 in order to request money. Consequently, to the higher prices of the 1590s was added the extra burden of higher taxes. Even as they agreed to more taxes, MPs grumbled about financial devices such as **monopolies** and complained about what they saw as the abuse of royal power. Alarmingly for the crown, as more was asked of parliament, MPs began to demand more in privileges and freedoms.

What was the nature of the government that had to deal with the consequences of these several crises?

## The government of England

At the head of the government was the crown. It enjoyed extensive powers collectively known as the royal prerogative and ruled by means of the main formal institution of government, the privy council, supplemented from time to time by a parliament (see page 5). The privy council had its origins in the medieval royal council. It varied in size from no more than 11 in 1590 to 13 in 1603. It grew steadily to over 30 during the reign of James VI and I and was about 40 strong under Charles I. It was composed of men chosen directly by the monarch. They were expected to discuss matters of state and present advice to the monarch. According to a contemporary of Elizabeth, the council acted as ‘the wheels that hold the chariot of England upright’. It discharged a wide range of political, administrative and judicial functions.



The machinery of state in early seventeenth-century England. Members of the political nation served the crown and their local communities. Justices of the peace, for example, were usually MPs. In certain circumstances, this dual allegiance could lead to dangerous stresses within the system. This, in turn, could result in a 'functional breakdown' of government.

**Justices of the peace** were granted their authority by the crown and acted as 'the great surveyors of the kingdom'. In particular they ensured that the criminal law was effectively administered through the holding of Quarter Sessions, a court convened every three months at which all the JPs of a county were supposed to be present. There was an average of about 50 JPs in each county by the 1630s.

The term **patronage** can be used in one of two related ways. The first is the support given by a patron, a powerful figure, to a group of clients. The second is the power of appointment to government (or church) posts. Individuals appointed to such posts would be expected to support the patron in return. The monarch had the greatest patronage but many senior ministers (state and church) gained powers of patronage of their own.

**Common law** was the law of custom and practice, upheld by and developed by judges' decisions over many years. **Statute law** was the written law: law passed by parliament, and act of parliament. Common law was based on tradition but could be overridden by a new act of parliament.

In an age when there was no civil service, efficient royal government was largely dependent upon the monarch obtaining and maintaining the goodwill of members of the political nation – composed of those members of society who, as a consequence of their wealth (usually measured in terms of property, family connections and education) enjoyed power and influence in the political process. Indeed, MPs would also often act in their localities as **justices of the peace**, a dual role that sometimes resulted in tension. However, this was generally avoided through the distribution of royal **patronage**. In turn, councillors could use patronage to manipulate parliament and control local government.

The monarch was powerful but not all-powerful. The crown had to live within the law of the land. Judges, even though appointed by the crown, did not always make the legal judgements the crown wanted and were obliged to uphold the law in the form of **common law** and **statute law**. England was, therefore, a mixed monarchy rather than an absolute monarchy and the Magna Carta of 1215 remained an important constitutional document. Nevertheless, at a time when many European monarchs were trying to establish some kind of royal absolutism, many English people feared that England might go the same way.

## The church in England

The government of early modern England also included the church. Religious beliefs and practices were central to people's lives. They believed that Heaven and Hell really existed. They went to church at least once a week. There was only one religion, Christianity, as was the case throughout Europe. There was only one Christian church, the Church of England. The head of the Church of England was the crown, not the archbishop of Canterbury. England had what was known as an established or Erastian church, one attached to and subordinate to the government. This had been so since the reign of Henry VIII. Until then, the church in England had been part of the Catholic Church, with the pope in Rome as its head. Everyone in England was a member of the church, at least in theory. It was an age of religious uniformity. The idea of religious toleration did not exist in the sixteenth century. There were still some who believed in the Catholic faith, who saw the pope as their spiritual leader, but they were a persecuted minority. They had to practise their Catholic faith in secret. Most Englishmen believed that the pope was the Antichrist. Because people's religion followed the monarch's, because religious uniformity was the norm, religious identity became tied up with national identity. A defining feature of late sixteenth-century England was its Protestant faith. This helped to bring it into conflict with Catholic states such as Spain, as was the case from 1585 onwards.

Catholicism was not the only challenge to the established church. Many Protestants wanted to make it more Protestant. They disliked Elizabeth's middle way. These reformers, the 'hotter sort of Protestant', became known as Puritans. They wanted to purify the church of any form of Catholic influence. Some Puritans wanted to simplify the church service and little more. Others wanted to reform the whole structure of the church, to replace the **episcopal** church with a **Presbyterian** version. As long as Elizabeth was queen, English Puritans would not get very far. They looked with hope to her successor.

## The royal succession

Unmarried, Elizabeth had no children to succeed her. The closest royal claimant was a descendant of her aunt, Margaret Tudor, sister of Henry VIII, who had married the king of Scotland. Their great-grandson was James VI. There was no one else with as strong a claim. Cecil, the dominant figure at Elizabeth's court in the last few years of her reign, made secret contact with James VI in order to ensure that, on Elizabeth's death, authority was passed quickly and peacefully to the Stuart king. 'The queen is dead. Long live the king.'

An **episcopal** church was governed by the episcopacy. This was a hierarchy of bishops and archbishops, appointed by the head of the church.

**Presbyterian** churches were governed by presbyteries. A presbytery was a hierarchy of church elders, often appointed by the church congregation.

What were the two main challenges to the established church?



## 2

## The reign of James I, 1603–25

### Focus questions

- ◆ What was the relationship between James I and parliament?
- ◆ How were relations between James I and parliament affected by financial matters?
- ◆ How serious were religious divisions in England?
- ◆ How were relations between James I and parliament affected by foreign affairs?

### Significant dates

- 1603 James VI of Scotland becomes James I of England.
- 1604 The Treaty of London is signed with Spain.  
James I holds the Hampton Court Conference.  
James I calls his first parliament, which lasts until 1611.
- 1605 The Gunpowder Plot is uncovered.
- 1606 Bate's Case occurred.
- 1610 The Great Contract between king and parliament is drawn up.
- 1614 James calls his second parliament (known as the Addled Parliament).
- 1615 George Villiers (earl of Buckingham from 1617) becomes James's favourite.
- 1618 The Thirty Years' War breaks out in the Holy Roman Empire.
- 1621 James calls his third parliament.
- 1623 Prince Charles and Villiers (to be made duke of Buckingham upon his return) travel to Madrid.
- 1624 James calls his fourth parliament.
- 1625 War breaks out against Spain.  
James I dies.

### Overview

In March 1603 James Stuart, James VI of Scotland, also became James I of England. His 22-year rule of England has been the cause of great historical



debate, mainly in the context of the civil war that broke out within 18 years of his death. Some historians have argued that James I was a key factor in bringing war about as his method and policies of government made relations between crown and parliament, between king and country very strained. His son, Charles I, certainly did not help improve relations, so this school of thought argues, but the root of the problem lay with James I. Other historians view James I more sympathetically. They believe that his government of England was, in the circumstances, quite successful and that he managed the problems of governing England with some skill. This school does not hold James I as being significantly responsible for causing the English Civil Wars.

So, what was the reality? How well did James I govern England? What problems did he face? How did he deal with them? If the key political relationship in early modern England was, moreover, that between crown and parliament, how well did the new Stuart king get on with English bishops, Lords and Commons? We need first to examine the nature of that relationship.

## Crown and parliament

### Introduction

The powers and privileges possessed by the crown are collectively known as the royal prerogative. A key aspect of the royal prerogative concerned parliament. The monarch could summon and dissolve parliament at will. The crown also had the ability to prorogue parliament, in other words to adjourn a session and thus leave open the prospect of calling it to a sitting at a later date. This was an important weapon in the management of parliament. It meant that the crown could prevent the development of any sustained opposition. The sovereign also had the right to veto any legislation passed by parliament. (Elizabeth rejected a total of seventy bills during her entire reign. James I was to veto seven bills, Charles I one.) The prerogative also gave monarchs the right to appoint and dismiss ministers, judges and bishops and to declare peace and war.

Though the prerogative gave monarchs great power, it did not allow them absolute power. England was often called a ‘mixed monarchy’, in which political power is shared, and the key body with which English monarchs had to work was parliament.

Parliament is usually seen as including the House of Lords and the **House of Commons**, though strictly it involves the crown as well. This is best illustrated by the need for all three branches of government to approve legislation before it becomes the law of the land. The House of Lords included the Lords Spiritual and **Lords Temporal**. The former consisted of 24 bishops as well as the archbishops of York and Canterbury, all appointed by the monarch.

#### The **House of**

**Commons** was far larger numerically than the Lords, totalling 462 in 1586 and 507 by the meeting of the Long Parliament in 1640. This growth was the result of new boroughs, or towns, being enfranchised.

#### The **Lords Temporal**

were hereditary peers, who were non-churchmen. By 1628 they were to have grown in number to 126 from 81 in 1615, as many peerages were sold by the crown.

The Lords Temporal were hereditary peers, either dukes, marquises, earls, viscounts or barons (in descending order of rank). An appointment to a title was often a reward for service to king and country, which could take the form of paying money into the royal accounts. Elizabeth had been reluctant to create peerages. James I was not. This expansion of the peerage was soon to become a political issue. English monarchs could usually rely on the support of the House of Lords, which saw itself as trying to keep the peace between the crown and the more argumentative House of Commons.

The House of Commons consisted of MPs who represented a certain territorial area, or constituency. There were two types of constituency, county and borough or country and town. The MPs were chosen by election but only men who owned land with a rateable value of 40 shillings a year or more had the franchise, the right to choose MPs. In other words, the franchise was restricted to property owners. It has been estimated that, during this period, the total electorate numbered some 300,000, which amounted to more than a quarter of the adult male population of England. Contested elections were rare. The victor was normally a nominee of the greater landowners.

Why would the monarch call a parliament? There were three main reasons. Firstly, it was a useful way of obtaining advice from and the support of the political nation. Secondly, parliament was needed to pass legislation. Although the crown did have the right to rule by issuing proclamations, a form of royal decree, these were limited in scope and often difficult to enforce. Statute law, as the laws passed by parliament were known, was more effective. The proposal for a new law, known as a bill, had to go through a number of stages in both Houses before being sent to the monarch for final approval, after which, if given, it became an act of parliament. In Elizabeth's parliaments, there was an average of 126 bills per session, of which around a quarter normally became acts. Few of these acts would have come from the king's government, unlike today. Thirdly, parliament could provide the crown with a form of income known as subsidies. Subsidies were a property tax, levied on goods and land. The rate of tax on goods was 2 shillings in the pound (10 per cent), on land 4 shillings in the pound (20 per cent). In 1603 one subsidy was worth about £70,000. Parliament would normally grant a number of subsidies at the same time. Only the House of Commons could introduce proposals to raise subsidies, which in this respect made it more important than the House of Lords.

If the crown had the royal prerogative, peers and MPs had parliamentary privilege as a counter balance. They claimed the right not to be arrested when parliament was sitting – except if accused of treason, felony or breach of the peace. Both Elizabeth and James had refrained from arresting any member while a parliament was sitting. Charles I was to be less cautious. Both Houses