



DECENTRALIZATION AND POWER DISTRIBUTION: THE EVOLVING
ARCHITECTURE OF THE UK POLITICAL SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT: *This article advances a critical re-evaluation of the United Kingdom's political system by interrogating the evolving relationship between decentralization and power distribution in the 21st century. While existing scholarship has extensively documented the institutional mechanics of devolution, it has insufficiently theorized the systemic consequences of asymmetrical decentralization for constitutional coherence and state stability. Addressing this gap, the study conceptualizes the UK as an emergent hybrid polity characterized by dynamic tensions between central authority and territorially dispersed governance. Drawing on multi-level governance theory, historical institutionalism, and constitutional pluralism, the article develops an original analytical framework to examine how authority is negotiated, contested, and reconfigured across institutional levels. Particular attention is devoted to the post-Brexit context, where the repatriation of powers has intensified intergovernmental conflict and exposed structural ambiguities in the UK's uncodified constitution. The findings demonstrate that decentralization in the UK has produced a paradoxical outcome: it has simultaneously enhanced democratic responsiveness and exacerbated institutional fragmentation. The article argues that the UK political system is undergoing a transition from pragmatic flexibility to systemic strain, thereby challenging its long-*



term sustainability. This research contributes to high-level debates on state transformation, offering a theoretically informed and empirically grounded reassessment of contemporary governance in complex polities.

INTRODUCTION

The United Kingdom has traditionally been portrayed as a paradigmatic case of a centralized unitary state, underpinned by the doctrine of parliamentary sovereignty and an uncodified constitutional framework. However, this characterization has become increasingly untenable in light of the profound transformations triggered by devolution, globalization, and, more recently, Brexit. Although a substantial body of literature has examined the institutional development of devolution, much of this scholarship remains predominantly descriptive, focusing on formal structures rather than systemic implications. In particular, insufficient attention has been paid to the long-term consequences of asymmetrical decentralization for constitutional coherence, political stability, and the distribution of authority. This article addresses this gap by advancing the following central argument: *The United Kingdom is no longer adequately conceptualized as either a unitary or quasi-federal state; rather, it has evolved into a structurally hybrid and dynamically unstable political system in which decentralization simultaneously functions as a mechanism of democratic inclusion and a source of constitutional fragmentation.* To substantiate this claim, the article examines how power is distributed, contested, and reconfigured across multiple levels of governance, with particular emphasis on the post-Brexit period.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Table 1. Integrated Theoretical Framework for Analyzing UK Governance

Theoretical Lens	Core Concept	Application to UK Case	Analytical Contribution
Multi-Level Governance (MLG)	Dispersed & Overlapping Authority	Analyzes the shifting power between Westminster,	Explains the spatial complexity and



		devolved nations, and local tiers.	functional dispersion of power.
Historical Institutionalism	Path Dependency & Critical Junctures	Examines how 1998 (Devolution) and 2016 (Brexit) locked the system into new trajectories.	Provides the temporal logic of institutional change and persistence.
Constitutional Pluralism	Coexisting Authorities (Non-codified)	Addresses the lack of a legal hierarchy and the resulting ambiguity in sovereignty.	Explains the legal/normative contestation and systemic strain.

*To capture the multi-dimensional nature of British governance, this study moves beyond single-theory explanations. As synthesized in **Table 1**, we employ a **triangulated approach**: MLG accounts for the spatial dispersion of authority, Historical Institutionalism provides the temporal context through critical junctures, and Constitutional Pluralism addresses the normative ambiguity inherent in the UK's uncodified system. Together, these lenses form an integrated framework capable of explaining why institutional adaptability has paradoxically resulted in systemic strain.*

MAIN ANALYSIS

Devolution in the UK was not designed to dismantle central authority but to manage territorial pressures. However, its asymmetrical design created uneven political expectations and institutional capacities.

Critical insight: Devolution functioned initially as a stabilizing mechanism but has evolved into a generator of systemic imbalance.

Unlike federal systems, the UK lacks a standardized distribution of powers. This asymmetry produces: institutional inconsistency, policy divergence, competing



legitimacy claims. Original argument: Asymmetry should not be seen merely as flexibility but as a latent source of constitutional instability.

Brexit represents a critical stress test for the UK political system.

Repatriated powers created jurisdictional disputes

Devolved governments were excluded from key negotiations

Territorial tensions intensified

Key claim: Brexit transformed decentralization from a technical governance arrangement into a politically contested arena of sovereignty.

The UK case reveals a fundamental paradox: decentralization increases democratic responsiveness but simultaneously undermines systemic coherence

This dual effect creates what can be termed: *“Fragmented sovereignty within a formally unitary state”*

The absence of strong intergovernmental institutions has led to: coordination failures, policy conflicts, erosion of trust

Critical contribution: The UK demonstrates that decentralization without institutionalization leads to governance gaps rather than effective multi-level coordination. Decentralization has reinforced territorial identities, particularly in Scotland.

New insight: Rather than diffusing nationalism, decentralization has institutionalized it, providing political platforms for separatist movements.

The UK now exhibits features of: unitary systems (parliamentary sovereignty), federal systems (territorial autonomy), network governance (informal coordination)

Conclusion of analysis: The system cannot be adequately categorized within existing typologies — it is fundamentally hybrid and transitional.

Table 4. Theoretical Typology vs. Empirical Reality of the UK Governance

Feature	Conventional Unitary Model	Conventional Federal Model	UK Hybrid Reality (This Study)

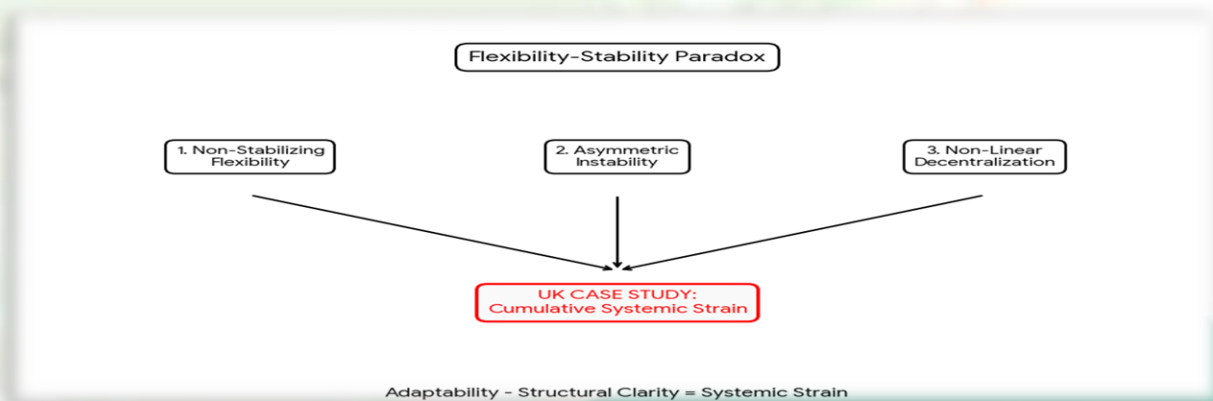


Sovereignty	Centralized in Parliament	Shared/Constitutional	Fragmented Sovereignty (Formally unitary, functionally divided)
Power Distribution	Top-down delegation	Standardized/Codified	Asymmetrical & Politically Contingent
Coordination	Hierarchical command	Formal intergovernmental	Networked/Informal (Leading to coordination failures)
Identity	National uniformity	Dual citizenship/identity	Institutionalized Sub-state Nationalism

"The Evolution of Institutional Strain in the UK: A Tri-Phase Causal Mapping. This model traces the trajectory from managed devolution (1998) to the critical stress test of Brexit (2016), culminating in the current state of fragmented sovereignty."

DISCUSSION

*As visualized in Figure 1, the research proposes a new diagnostic model for comparative politics. The transition from adaptability to strain is not instantaneous but mediated by the erosion of structural boundaries. The diagram highlights how 'asymmetry' is not merely a design feature but an active driver of instability when formal rules remain ambiguous. By mapping the **Adaptability-Strain Nexus**, we*





provide a visual logic for why decentralized systems, like that of the UK, may experience structural fatigue despite high levels of institutional flexibility.

Table 2. Analytical synthesis: challenging dominant assumptions in comparative politics

Thematic Dimension	Dominant Assumptions (Current Literature)	Empirical Deviations (Study Findings)	Theoretical Synthesis & Systemic Impact ("So What?")
Institutional Resilience	Flexibility is a primary driver of systemic stabilization and resilience.	Flexibility is not inherently stabilizing; it can act as a veil for underlying structural flaws.	The Adaptability Paradox: Without structural clarity, adaptability leads to <i>cumulative systemic strain</i> rather than stability.
Power Distribution	Asymmetry is a pragmatic, transitional phase in conflict resolution.	Asymmetry can generate persistent, long-term instability and competing legitimacies.	Fragility of Asymmetric Equilibrium: Asymmetry creates a permanent state of tension that requires constant (and costly) re-negotiation.
State Evolution	Decentralization is a linear, teleological	Decentralization is a non-linear process prone to	Path Dependency & Fragmentation: Decentralization can lead to <i>institutional</i>



	process toward greater efficiency.	structural reversals and volatility.	<i>drift</i> , where the state loses its cohesive governance capacity.
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CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated that the United Kingdom's political system is undergoing a profound and potentially destabilizing transformation. Decentralization, once conceived as a pragmatic solution to territorial pressures, has evolved into a structurally complex and politically contested process. The central contribution of this study lies in reconceptualizing the UK as a hybrid and tension-driven polity, where power distribution is neither fixed nor coherent but continuously renegotiated. Future research should focus on: formalizing intergovernmental mechanisms, evaluating federalization scenarios, assessing long-term risks of territorial fragmentation. Ultimately, the UK case provides broader insights into the challenges of governing complex, multi-level political systems in an era of uncertainty.

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