

Unit 3: Absolutism and Constitutionalism

Unit 3 compares two models of state power in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Absolutist monarchs centralized authority and claimed divine right, while England moved through civil war and revolution toward constitutional limits on the crown. The same period reshaped the economy through mercantilism, agricultural change, and Dutch commercial leadership, and reshaped diplomacy through the balance of power.

AP European History

Absolutism and Constitutionalism

About 12 minutes to read

How to use this guide

Read it in order the first time because the unit is organized as a comparison. Start with England on the other road, then read the economic changes and the Dutch and diplomatic sections as the setting, and finish with absolutism and its monarchs. Exam questions often ask you to compare absolutist and constitutional approaches, so keep the two models side by side as you read. Exam questions often ask you to compare absolutist and constitutional approaches, so keep the two models side by side as you read.

After the first read, use the trap boxes and the comparison tables to review the distinctions that exam questions test most often. Finish with the practice questions, then complete the recall check on the last page out loud and note any items you cannot explain yet.

What this unit is worth. Absolutism and Constitutionalism is about 10 to 15 percent of the AP European History exam. Unit 3 sets up the comparison between absolutism and constitutionalism that the exam keeps returning to. The exam returns to this contrast in the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and nineteenth-century reform movements.

3.2 England Takes the Other Road

Constitutionalism is the principle that government power is limited by law and shared with representative bodies. It is the opposite model from absolutism. Where the absolutist claimed to answer only to God, the constitutionalist system put legal limits on the ruler and gave Parliament a permanent share of power. It emerged victorious in England.

The **English Civil War** was the mid-seventeenth-century conflict between Parliament and **Charles I** over royal authority. Charles pressed absolutist claims. Parliament resisted. The war ended in the king's execution and a short-lived republic. Charles I is the illustrative example of absolutist claims defeated by Parliament.

That defeat did not produce constitutional monarchy right away. **Oliver Cromwell**, the parliamentary leader who ruled England as Lord Protector after the Civil War, governed as a military ruler. England had traded one form of unchecked power for another, and the republic did not survive him.

Trap. Parliament's victory in the Civil War did not immediately create a constitutional monarchy. Cromwell's rule as Lord Protector came first. The constitutional settlement followed later. Watch the order: Civil War, then Cromwell, then the restoration of the monarchy, then the Glorious Revolution.

3.2 The Glorious Revolution and Its Settlement

The **Glorious Revolution** was the overthrow of James II and the installation of William and Mary, securing parliamentary power in England. Unlike the Civil War, this change of rulers came with a permanent constitutional settlement rather than a military regime.

The **English Bill of Rights** was the law that limited royal power and guaranteed parliamentary rights after the Glorious Revolution. It spelled out what the king could not do and what Parliament could demand. This is the moment constitutionalism won in England: government power limited by law and shared with a representative body.

Trap. Constitutionalism in this period did not mean modern democracy. Parliament represented a narrow slice of the population, and voting remained restricted. The achievement was that royal power was limited by law and shared with a representative body, not that ordinary people voted. Do not read modern democracy back into the Bill of Rights.

3.3 New Production: Agriculture and Cottage Industry

The **Agricultural Revolution** brought improvements in farming, such as enclosure and new techniques, that increased food production and supported population growth. More food meant more people, and more people meant more workers and consumers for the changes that followed.

Cottage industry, also called the putting-out system, was rural manufacturing in which merchants supplied materials to households. Families produced goods at home, and merchants collected and sold the finished products. It was a step toward industrialization, but it was not industrialization. Production was still in the home, still powered by hand, and still organized by merchants rather than factory owners.

Trap. Cottage industry is pre-factory production. Do not confuse it with the factory system of the Industrial Revolution. The putting-out system belongs to this unit because it shows how manufacturing was already expanding before machines and factories arrived. Order matters: Agricultural Revolution and cottage industry first, factories later.

3.4 Economic Change: Mercantilism

Mercantilism was the set of economic policies aiming to increase national wealth through a favorable balance of trade, bullion reserves, and colonial control. In this view, the world's wealth was limited, so one state's gain was another's loss, and governments managed trade aggressively to come out ahead.

A **favorable balance of trade** meant exporting more than was imported. It was the central mercantilist goal for building state wealth. Colonies served the system as sources of raw materials and as markets for finished goods, while bullion reserves measured success.

Trap. Mercantilism is not free trade. The state intervened on purpose: tariffs, monopolies, colonial restrictions, and subsidies were the tools. If a question describes government management of trade to build state wealth, the answer is mercantilism. Free trade and laissez-faire belong to a later economic tradition.

3.5 The Dutch Golden Age

The **Dutch Golden Age** was the seventeenth-century period of Dutch commercial, artistic, and financial dominance built on trade and religious toleration. The Dutch Republic was small, but its merchants, bankers, and artists shaped Europe far beyond its size.

The **Dutch East India Company (VOC)** was the powerful Dutch trading corporation, an illustrative example of Dutch commercial power. It ran trade across the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia, acting almost as a state within a state, with its own ships, soldiers, and territories.

Religious toleration in the Dutch Republic meant the practice of permitting diverse faiths, including Calvinists, Catholics, Jews, and dissenting Protestants, to worship, often discreetly. This toleration drew merchants and skilled migrants and helped fuel the Dutch Golden Age. It was practical as much as principled: a commercial republic needed the people who made commerce work.

Trap. Dutch toleration was relative and pragmatic, not modern religious equality. Catholics often worshipped in hidden churches, and public life still favored the Reformed church. The point is that the Dutch tolerated more than their neighbors did, and that the policy served trade. Do not describe it as full modern pluralism.

3.6 The Balance of Power

The **balance of power** was the diplomatic principle of preventing any single state from dominating Europe, pursued through shifting alliances. When one power grew too strong, others combined against it. Alliances were tools, not friendships, and they changed as the threat changed.

The **War of the Spanish Succession** (1701–1714) is the clearest example. After the childless Charles II of Spain died, Britain, Austria, and the Dutch Republic allied to prevent Louis XIV's grandson from uniting the French and Spanish crowns. The **Treaties of Utrecht** (1713) preserved the balance of power and left Britain with Gibraltar and major colonial gains. Notice who benefited: the power that helped stop French domination grew stronger itself, which is how the balance kept shifting.

Trap. Balance-of-power alliances were about preventing domination, not about permanent friends and enemies. The same states that fought each other in one war could ally in the next. When a question asks why a coalition formed, look for the state that was getting too powerful, not for ideological agreement among the allies.

3.6 The Seven Years' War

The **Seven Years' War** was the mid-eighteenth-century global conflict whose outcome established Britain as the dominant colonial and naval power. It was fought across Europe, North America, and Asia, which is why it is sometimes called the first world war. Britain's victory confirmed the shift that had been building since Utrecht: France was no longer the unquestioned leading power, and Britain now dominated overseas.

Read the two wars together. The War of the Spanish Succession checked French power at the start of the eighteenth century. The Seven Years' War confirmed Britain's rise to dominance by its middle. The balance of power did not stay still. It moved, and the diplomatic system moved with it.

Trap. The Seven Years' War is a balance-of-power topic, not just a British-French war. Its significance is the outcome for the European system: Britain emerged as the dominant colonial and naval power.

3.7 Absolutism: Power Claimed as Unlimited

Absolutism is a system in which monarchs claimed unlimited, centralized power over the state. The key word is claimed. Absolutist rulers worked to concentrate authority in their own hands, reducing the power of nobles, independent courts, and regional assemblies.

The doctrine that justified this claim was the **divine right of kings**: the idea that monarchs derive their authority directly from God. If the king answers only to God, then no earthly body has the right to limit him. Divine right was the theory. Absolutism was the practice of governing as though the theory were true.

Louis XIV of France became the model of absolute monarchy in Europe. His long reign showed what the system looked like when it worked: a king who centralized government, directed the army and the bureaucracy, and made his court the center of political and cultural life. Other monarchs copied him.

The **Palace of Versailles** was the symbol of this power, and it was also an instrument of it. Louis XIV built the grand palace and moved his court there, which kept the most powerful nobles at court under his watch instead of on their estates where they might organize against him. Versailles turned architecture into a political tool.

Trap. Divine right described the justification for absolutism, not the reality of it. Even Louis XIV faced practical limits: finances, wars, local resistance, and nobles who never fully disappeared. When a question asks about absolutism, look for centralization and the divine right claim. Do not assume the king controlled everything.

3.7 Absolutism on the Periphery: Russia

Peter the Great westernized Russia's military, government, and culture to strengthen absolutist power. His reforms were not about sharing power. They were about making the Russian state stronger and more effective, with himself firmly at the top. He imported Western technology and administrative methods so that the tsar's authority could reach further.

Catherine the Great corresponded with philosophes and pursued limited reforms while strengthening autocracy. The Enlightenment connection can be misleading. She read and wrote to the leading thinkers of the age, and she made some reforms, but the direction of her rule was toward more autocracy, not less. Historians sometimes call this enlightened absolutism: Enlightenment ideas used in the service of absolute rule, not against it.

Trap. Reform under an absolutist is not the same as constitutionalism. Peter and Catherine changed how Russia was governed, but neither gave representative bodies real power. If a question asks whether Catherine's reforms limited autocracy, the answer is no. They strengthened it.

Confusions That Cost Points

PAIR	HOW TO KEEP THEM STRAIGHT
Absolutism vs constitutionalism	Absolutism: the monarch claims unlimited, centralized power. Constitutionalism: power is limited by law and shared with a representative body. England is the constitutional example; France under Louis XIV is the absolutist one.
Divine right vs actual control	Divine right was the justification, the claim that the king answers only to God. It did not give the king unlimited practical control. Finances, nobles, and resistance still limited what rulers could do.
English Civil War vs Glorious Revolution	The Civil War was the mid-seventeenth-century fight that ended with Charles I executed and Cromwell ruling as Lord Protector. The Glorious Revolution was the later overthrow of James II and the installation of William and Mary, followed by the Bill of Rights and a lasting constitutional settlement.
Reform under absolutism vs constitutional limits	Peter the Great and Catherine the Great reformed Russia, but their reforms strengthened autocracy. Reforming how the state works is not the same as limiting who holds power.
Mercantilism vs free trade	Mercantilism means the state manages trade to build wealth: favorable balance of trade, bullion, colonial control. Free trade means removing state management. They are opposites.
Balance of power vs permanent alliances	The balance of power was a principle, and alliances were the shifting tools used to enforce it. States combined against whoever was getting too strong, then rearranged when the threat changed.
Dutch toleration vs modern pluralism	The Dutch tolerated more faiths than their neighbors, often with worship kept discreet, and the policy served commerce. It was pragmatic and limited, not modern religious equality.
Cottage industry vs the factory system	Cottage industry was rural, household production organized by merchants through the putting-out system. Factories came later with the Industrial Revolution. Keep the order: agriculture and cottage industry first.

Practice Questions

Original questions written for this guide in the style of the AP exam. Answers and explanations are on the next page, so complete the questions before checking them.

- 1.** Which of the following best describes the doctrine of the divine right of kings?
 - A. Monarchs derive their authority directly from God, justifying absolute rule
 - B. Kings must share power with a representative parliament
 - C. A ruler's authority comes from an agreement with the people
 - D. Kings are chosen by the nobility and may be removed by them

- 2.** The Glorious Revolution is best understood as
 - A. the overthrow of James II and the installation of William and Mary, securing parliamentary power in England
 - B. the execution of Charles I after the English Civil War
 - C. the restoration of unlimited royal authority in France under Louis XIV
 - D. the war that gave Britain control of Gibraltar and colonial gains

- 3.** A mercantilist government would most likely favor which of the following policies?
 - A. Encouraging exports while limiting imports to build a favorable balance of trade
 - B. Removing all tariffs to encourage free trade between nations
 - C. Abandoning colonies as too costly to maintain
 - D. Forbidding the export of manufactured goods

- 4.** Britain, Austria, and the Dutch Republic allied in the War of the Spanish Succession primarily because they
 - A. feared that uniting the French and Spanish crowns would upset the balance of power
 - B. sought to spread Protestantism to Catholic Spain
 - C. were responding to a French invasion of England
 - D. wanted to protect the Dutch Golden Age from decline

Answer Key

1. A. Divine right is the doctrine that monarchs derive authority directly from God, which justified absolute rule. B describes constitutionalism, the opposite model. C describes a later theory of government by agreement, not the claim absolutists made. D describes an elective or aristocratic system, which has nothing to do with divine right.

2. A. The Glorious Revolution was the overthrow of James II and the installation of William and Mary, which secured parliamentary power and led to the English Bill of Rights. B describes the English Civil War, an earlier and separate event. C reverses the direction of change; Louis XIV is the absolutist example, not the constitutional one. D describes the War of the Spanish Succession, which ended with the Treaties of Utrecht.

3. A. Mercantilism aimed at a favorable balance of trade: exporting more than was imported, building bullion reserves, and using colonial control. B is free trade, the opposite of mercantilist policy. C contradicts mercantilism, which treated colonies as sources of materials and markets. D contradicts the goal of exporting more; mercantilists wanted exports high, not banned.

4. A. The alliance formed to prevent Louis XIV's grandson from uniting the French and Spanish crowns, which would have given France overwhelming power. This is the balance of power in action. B misreads the war as religious; it was about preventing one state from dominating Europe. C invents an invasion that never happened. D is out of period; the Dutch Golden Age was a seventeenth-century phenomenon, while this war began in 1701.

One-Page Recall Check

- Define absolutism and explain how the divine right of kings justified it.
- Explain why Louis XIV's reign became the model of absolute monarchy in Europe.
- Describe how the Palace of Versailles functioned as an instrument of power.
- Compare Peter the Great's and Catherine the Great's reforms, and explain why neither limited autocracy.
- Define constitutionalism and contrast it with absolutism.
- Trace England's path: the Civil War, the execution of Charles I, Cromwell as Lord Protector, the Glorious Revolution, and the English Bill of Rights.
- Explain why Parliament's Civil War victory did not immediately produce constitutional monarchy.
- Describe the Dutch Golden Age and the roles of the VOC and religious toleration.
- Explain the limits of Dutch religious toleration.
- Define the balance of power and explain the War of the Spanish Succession as an example of it.
- Explain the outcome of the Seven Years' War and what it changed for Britain.
- Define mercantilism and a favorable balance of trade.
- Describe the Agricultural Revolution and cottage industry, and explain why both come before industrialization.

Where to go next. Turn every missed item above into flashcards and drill them spaced out over several days rather than in one sitting. In Rycal, open the AP European History deck under the AP Course Hub. The deck covers the terms in this guide, and its practice questions target the same traps named here. If you have a test date, add it in the Test Planner. You can also start your next review with a Brain Dump, then check what you missed against this guide.

Key terms for this unit

Absolutism, Catherine the Great, Charles I, Constitutionalism, Cottage industry (putting-out system), Divine right of kings, Dutch East India Company (VOC), Dutch Golden Age, English Bill of Rights, English Civil War, Favorable balance of trade, Glorious Revolution, Louis XIV, Mercantilism, Agricultural Revolution, Balance of power, Oliver Cromwell, Palace of Versailles, Peter the Great, Religious toleration (Dutch Republic), Seven Years' War, War of the Spanish Succession.

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