

Absolutism and Constitutionalism

AP European History

Contextualizing State Building

Unit 3 covers **1648 to 1815**. Different models of **political sovereignty** changed relations among states and between rulers and their subjects. Earlier conflicts, including the English Civil War, provide necessary background.

Rulers sought revenue, armies and greater control. Nobles, regional groups and representative bodies defended their own powers. The Peace of Westphalia is an important context, but it did not instantly produce a uniform system of modern nation-states. Centralisation remained uneven. Religion remained politically important even as dynastic, state and colonial interests became more prominent in diplomacy.

The English Civil War and the Glorious Revolution

The **English Civil War** involved struggles among the monarchy, **Parliament** and other elites over taxation, religion and political authority. Charles I's efforts to govern and raise revenue without Parliament increased conflict. The wars also involved soldiers, local communities and religious groups. The CED's focus on elite institutions does not mean ordinary people played no part: the Putney Debates of 1647 included soldiers and Levellers arguing about wider voting rights.

The civil-war period did not lead directly to a stable constitutional monarchy: the monarchy was abolished, later restored, and challenged again. The **Glorious Revolution** of 1688 and the Bill of Rights of 1689 strengthened Parliament's position. The crown could not levy taxation without parliamentary grant. This limited royal authority and protected the gentry and aristocracy against absolutism. It did not establish universal voting rights or equal political participation.

Worked comparison: Charles I's conflicts with Parliament concerned whether the crown could act without parliamentary consent. The 1689 settlement strengthened parliamentary control, including over taxation. This changed the institutional limits on royal action; it did not give every adult a vote.

Continuities and Changes to Economic Practice

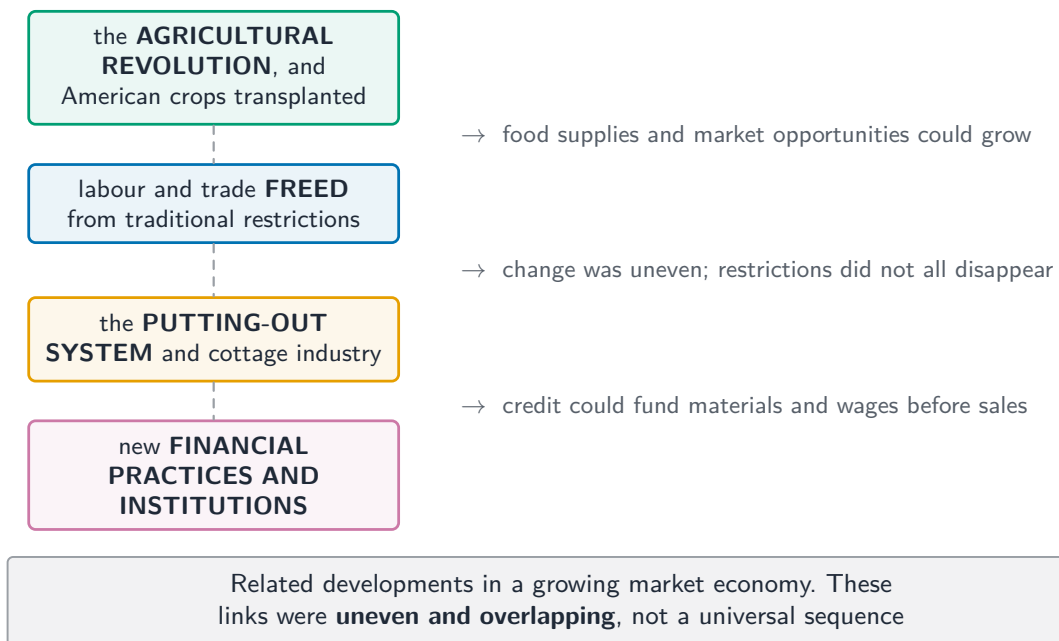
A **market economy** expanded as more goods and labour were exchanged through markets. Important developments included the **Agricultural Revolution**, American crops, changes to traditional restrictions, cottage production and new finance. These developments overlapped and varied by region; they were not an inevitable four-stage sequence.

Agricultural improvements raised productivity and food supply. Crops brought from the Americas added to European food supplies. Labour and trade were increasingly

freed from traditional restrictions in some settings, but guild rules, legal privileges and dependent labour did not disappear everywhere.

In the **putting-out system**, also called **cottage industry**, a merchant supplied materials to workers in homes or workshops, collected their output and sold it. This expanded production for markets outside the factory system. Banking, credit and insurance helped merchants fund production and manage risk. Rural work and older social hierarchies continued alongside these changes.

Worked mechanism: a cloth merchant supplies wool to households, pays for spinning and weaving, and sells the cloth. Credit helps pay workers before sales income arrives. This connects cottage production and finance without claiming that every household became a factory worker.



Economic Development and Mercantilism

Mercantilism describes policies through which states sought wealth and power by regulating trade, encouraging exports and drawing resources from colonies. Tariffs, navigation laws and chartered companies were possible tools. Policies varied; the label does not mean every government used every tool.

Overseas networks supplied raw materials, finished goods, labour and markets. Sugar, tea, coffee and tobacco contributed to European consumer culture. The expansion of plantation products also depended on the growing transatlantic **slave-labour system**. Enslaved people were forcibly transported and made to produce goods for overseas markets. Consumer growth must be explained together with coercion and unequal benefits.

Original practice: explain how European demand for plantation sugar could affect both colonial production and European consumption. **Check:** rising demand encouraged plantation expansion and exploitation of enslaved labour; imported sugar entered European consumption. This is a causal connection, not a claim that every European benefited equally.

The Dutch Golden Age

The **Dutch Republic** emerged from revolt against Habsburg rule. Its political system was an **oligarchy** dominated by urban gentry and rural landholders. It protected traditional rights and promoted trade. Commercial shipping, finance and merchant networks supported its economic role.

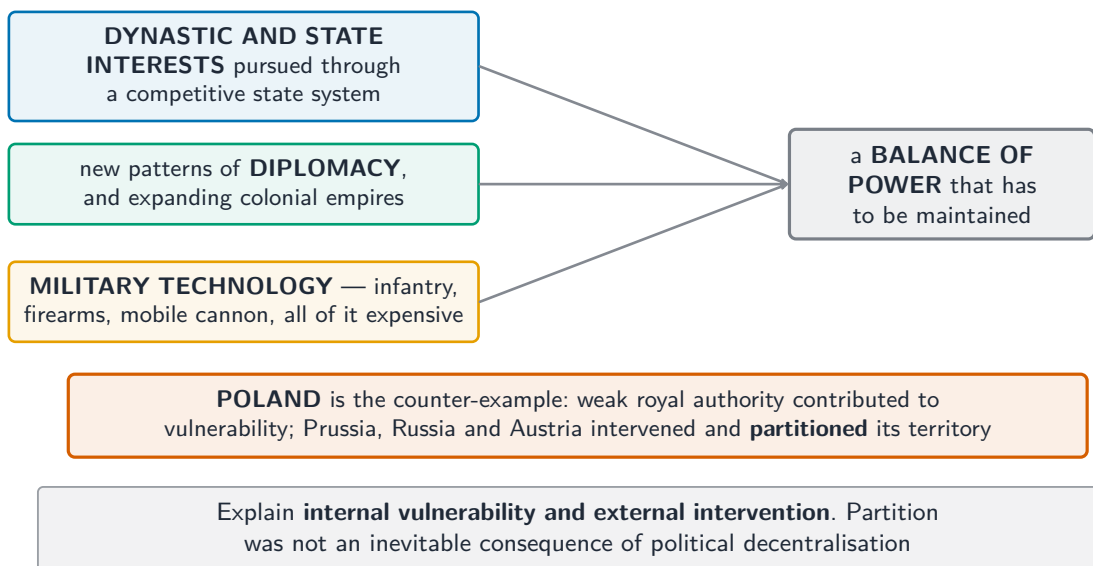
The republic is an alternative to royal absolutism, but a republic is not automatically a democracy. Power remained concentrated among elites. Religious toleration was comparatively broad in some settings, but it was not universal equality. Use this case to separate political form, social inclusion and commercial success.

Balance of Power

The **competitive state system** encouraged diplomacy, alliances and costly warfare. A **balance of power** means preventing one state from becoming dominant. Louis XIV's expansion and dynastic ambitions provoked opposing coalitions. After the Ottoman defeat at Vienna in 1683, Ottoman westward expansion ceased; this did not mean the Ottoman Empire disappeared.

Military changes included greater reliance on infantry, firearms, mobile cannon and elaborate fortifications. These required resources, heavier taxation and larger bureaucracies. States able to mobilise resources gained advantages; this was not a rule that only absolute monarchies could maintain armies.

Poland's monarchy struggled to consolidate authority over its nobility. This weakened its capacity to resist neighbouring powers. **Poland's partition** was carried out by Prussia, Russia and Austria. Explain both internal vulnerability and the intervention of those powers; partition was not an automatic punishment for failing to become absolutist.

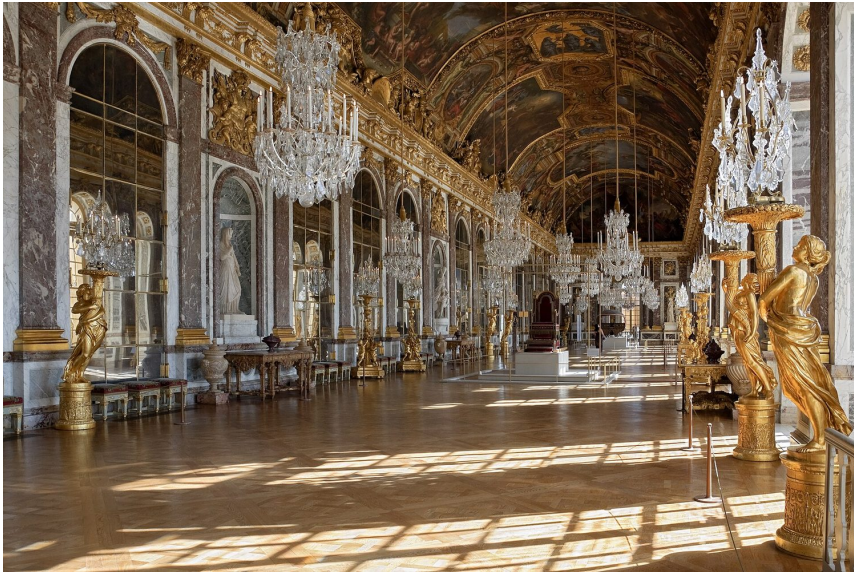


Absolutist Approaches to Power

Absolutism concentrated authority in the monarchy. **Louis XIV** and **Jean-Baptiste Colbert** extended the French state's administrative, financial, military and religious control. Royal agents, revenue policies, armed forces and court patronage helped make that authority effective.

Absolute monarchs limited independent noble participation in governance while preserving aristocratic social position and many legal privileges. Nobles could still hold offices and serve the monarchy. Absolutism therefore did not mean the complete removal of nobles from government or the elimination of every institutional limit.

Peter the Great transformed Russia's military, political, religious and cultural institutions through westernisation. **Catherine the Great** continued aspects of this process. Reform strengthened the state while elite privilege and dependent labour remained important.



ROYAL CONTROL — greater central authority

administrative, financial,
military and religious control
increasingly directed by the crown

Louis XIV, Peter the
Great, Catherine the Great

ELITE POSITION — rank and many privileges

social position
many legal privileges and exemptions
land, and the income from it

Limited independent noble power did not mean total exclusion.
Nobles could **serve the crown** while retaining privilege

Comparison in the Age of Absolutism

Compare cases using a shared question: who constrains the ruler, who participates in government, or how resources are raised? Give evidence for both cases and explain the relationship. A third case is useful only when it helps answer the prompt; there is no rule that every answer needs three states.

	Absolutism	Constitutionalism
Where does sovereignty sit?	claimed by the crown	in the crown together with Parliament
What of the nobility in government?	independent power limited; nobles still served the crown	represented, and its rights protected against the crown
The named cases	Louis XIV and Colbert; Peter and Catherine the Great	England after the Civil War and the Glorious Revolution
Elite status and many privileges remained important in both. Neither is popular government.		

Original practice, not an authentic past-paper question: explain one difference and one similarity between France under Louis XIV and England after 1689. Use these facts: Louis XIV extended central state control; the English crown required parliamentary grant for taxation; aristocratic privilege remained important in both societies.

Model reasoning: both governments retained elite social privilege, so stronger institutions did not necessarily mean wider equality. They differed in the constraints on the crown: Louis XIV extended royal control, whereas England's settlement strengthened Parliament's ability to limit royal taxation. The comparison uses the same institutional question for both cases. It is an illustrative response, not a guaranteed mark award.

Exam tips

Read the command and evidence supplied. Explain a mechanism rather than listing unrelated names. Distinguish royal authority from unlimited practical control, a republic from democracy, and a contributing cause from an inevitable outcome. When interpreting an image, state what is visible before explaining what it may suggest; architecture alone cannot prove that a ruler faced no limits.

Sources and practice provenance

Scope: local College Board AP European History Course and Exam Description, Unit 3 topics 3.1–3.8, PDF pages 86–96 (and the continuation of 3.8). Examples and practice above are authored teaching material, not reproduced exam items.

Historical checks: UK Parliament: Putney Debates; House of Commons Library: Bill of Rights; Palace of Versailles: places of power. Photograph: Myrabella, CC BY-SA 3.0, as recorded in the figure metadata.

Vocabulary card meanings

English Civil War: The mid-seventeenth-century conflict between king and Parliament in England. Glorious Revolution: The 1688 overthrow of James II that confirmed Parliament's limits on the crown. Parliament: England's law-making assembly, which came to check royal power. Agricultural Revolution: Changes in farming that raised output before and during industrialisation. freed from traditional restrictions: Labour and enterprise released from guild and feudal limits. Dutch Republic: The independent Protestant state that grew rich on trade in the seventeenth century. competitive state system: European powers rivalling one another rather than forming one empire. Poland's partition: The division of Poland among neighbouring powers in the late eighteenth century. Louis XIV: The French king who embodied absolute monarchy at Versailles. Jean-Baptiste Colbert: Louis XIV's minister who pursued mercantilist industry and trade. Peter the Great: The Russian tsar who forced westernising reforms and built a new capital. Catherine the Great: The Russian empress who expanded the empire and corresponded with Enlightenment writers. putting-out system: Merchants supplying materials for goods finished in rural households. balance of power: A diplomacy that stops any one state from dominating the others. slave-labour system: Production that depended on the forced work of enslaved people. political sovereignty: Supreme authority within a territory. absolutism: Rule in which the monarch claims unchecked central power.