**Glorious Revolution: Definition, History, and Significance**

**Short History:** The Landing of William of Orange, 1688, also known as the Glorious Revolution. William of Orange, later William III of England and William II of Scotland (1650-1702), a protestant, landed in England in 1688 to take the throne after an invitation from the English protestant nobility, dissatisfied with the catholic James II.

**Introduction:** The Glorious Revolution was a bloodless coup that took place from 1688-1689, in which the Catholic King James II of England was deposed and succeeded by his Protestant daughter Mary II and her Dutch husband, Prince William III of Orange. Motivated by both politics and religion, the revolution led to the adoption of the [English Bill of Rights of 1689](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/england.asp) and changed how England was governed. As the [Parliament](https://www.thoughtco.com/how-parliamentary-government-works-4160918) gained more control over the previously absolute authority of the [royal monarchy](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-a-monarchy-1221597), the seeds of modern [political democracy](https://www.thoughtco.com/representative-democracy-definition-pros-cons-4589561) were sown.

**King James II's Reign**

When James II took the throne of England in 1685, already tense relations between Protestants and Catholics were growing worse. A devout Catholic himself, James expanded freedom of worship for Catholics and favored Catholics in appointing military officers. James’ apparent religious favoritism, along with his close diplomatic ties with France, angered many of the English people and drove a dangerous political wedge between the monarchy and the British Parliament.

In March 1687, James issued a controversial Royal Declaration of Indulgence suspending all laws punishing Protestants who rejected the Church of England. Later the same year, James II dissolved Parliament and tried to create a new Parliament that would agree never to oppose or question his rule according to the “[divine right of kings](https://www.britannica.com/failedlogin)” doctrine of [absolutism](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-was-absolutism-1221593).

James’ Protestant daughter, Mary II, remained the only rightful heir to the English throne until 1688, when James had a son, whom he vowed to raise as a Catholic. Fear soon arose that this change in the line of royal succession would result in a Catholic dynasty in England.

In Parliament, James’ stiffest opposition came from the Whigs, an influential political party whose members favored a [constitutional monarchy](https://www.thoughtco.com/constitutional-monarchy-definition-examples-4582648) over James’ absolute monarchy. Having failed in an attempt to pass a bill to exclude James from the throne between 1679 and 1681, the Whigs were especially outraged by the potential long line of Catholic succession to the throne posed by his reign.

James’ continued efforts to advance Catholic emancipation, his unpopular friendly relationship with France, his conflict with the Whigs in Parliament, and uncertainty over his successor to the throne fanned the flame of revolution.

**Invasion of William III**

In 1677, James II’s Protestant daughter, Mary II, had married her first cousin William III, then the Prince of Orange, a sovereign principality now part of Southern France. William had long planned to invade England in an effort to oust James and prevent the Catholic emancipation. However, William decided not to invade without some level of support within England itself. In April 1688, seven of King James’ peers wrote to William pledging their allegiance if he invaded England. In their letter, “The Seven” stated that “much the greatest part of the [English] nobility and gentry” were unhappy with James II’s reign and would align with William and his invading forces.

Emboldened by the pledge of support from dissatisfied English noblemen and prominent Protestant clergy, William assembled an impressive naval armada and invaded England, landing in Torbay, Devon, in November 1688.

James II had anticipated the attack and had personally led his army from London to meet William’s invading armada. However, several of James’ soldiers and family members turned on him and pledged their allegiance to William. With both his support and his health failing, James retreated back to London on November 23, 1688.

In what appeared to be an attempt to retain the throne, James offered to agree to a freely elected Parliament and to grant a general amnesty to all who had rebelled against him. In reality, however, James was stalling for time, having already decided to flee England. James feared that his Protestant and Whig enemies would demand that he be executed and that William would refuse to pardon him. In early December 1688, James II officially disbanded his army. On December 18, James II safely fled England, effectively abdicating the throne. William III of Orange, greeted by cheering crowds, entered London the same day.

**English Bill of Rights**

In January 1689, a deeply divided English Convention Parliament met to transfer the crowns of England, Scotland, and Ireland. Radical Whigs argued that William should reign as an elected king, meaning his power would be derived from the people. Tories wanted to acclaim Mary as queen, with William as her regent. When William threatened to leave England if he was not made the king, the Parliament compromised on a joint monarchy, with William III as king, and James’ daughter Mary II, as queen.

Part of Parliament’s compromise agreement required that both William and Mary sign “An Act Declaring the Rights and Liberties of the Subject and Settling the Succession of the Crown.” Popularly known as the English Bill of Rights, the act specified constitutional and civil rights of the people and gave Parliament far more power over the monarchy. Proving more willing to accept restrictions from Parliament than any previous monarchs, both William III and Mary II signed the English Bill of Rights in February 1689.

Among other constitutional principles, the English Bill of Rights acknowledged the right for regular meetings of Parliaments, free elections, and freedom of speech in Parliament. Speaking to the nexus of the Glorious Revolution, it also prohibited the monarchy from ever coming under Catholic control.

Today, many historians believe the English Bill of rights was the first step in England’s conversion from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy and served as the model for the [United States Bill of Rights](https://www.thoughtco.com/bill-of-rights-in-the-constitution-3368311).

**Significance of the Glorious Revolution**

English Catholics suffered both socially and politically from the Glorious Revolution. For over a century, Catholics were not allowed to vote, sit in Parliament, or serve as commissioned military officers. Until 2015, the sitting monarch of England was forbidden to be Catholic or to marry a Catholic. The English Bill of Rights of 1689 began the age of English parliamentary democracy. Not since its enactment has an English king or queen held absolute political power.

The Glorious Revolution also played a significant role in the history of the United States. The Revolution freed the Protestant [Puritans](https://www.thoughtco.com/puritanism-definition-4146602) living in the [American colonies](https://www.thoughtco.com/the-original-13-us-states-3322392) of several of the harsh laws imposed on them by Catholic King James II. News of the Revolution spurred hopes of independence among the American colonists, leading to several protests and uprisings against English rule.

Perhaps the most important result of the Glorious Revolution served as the basis for [constitutional law](https://www.justia.com/constitutional-law/) establishing and defining governmental power, as well as the granting and limitation of rights. These principles regarding the division of powers and functions among well-defined executive, legislative, and judiciary branches of government have been incorporated into the constitutions of England, the United States, and many other Western countries.

**Key points: The Glorious Revolution**

* The Glorious Revolution refers to the events of 1688–89 that led to Catholic King James II of England being deposed and replaced on the throne by his Protestant daughter Mary II and her husband William III, Prince of Orange.
* The Glorious Revolution arose from James II’s attempts to expand freedom of worship for Catholics in opposition to the desires of the Protestant majority.
* The Glorious Revolution resulted in the English Bill of Rights that established England as a constitutional rather than absolute monarchy and served as the model for the U.S. Bill of Rights.