

## 4. The Distribution of Power in Governments Today

In almost all nation-states, government power is exercised at a minimum of two levels: national and regional. In the United States, each region is called a state. In other countries, regions have names such as canton, province, prefecture, land, and *département*. Just how power is distributed between these two levels depends on which system of government a country has: unitary, federal, or confederal.

### Unitary Systems Centralize Power

In a **unitary system of government**, the constitution concentrates power in the national, or central, government. The national government may choose to create regional governments to carry out its policies. However, regional governments exercise only those powers given to them by the national government. The national government may also appoint the officials who run the regional governments.

Most nation-states have unitary systems. The main advantage of this system is that it promotes national unity by having all parts of a country follow the same laws and policies. However, most unitary nations have discovered that too much centralization is not good in practice. Policies that fit one region of the country may not work as well in another. Also, officials working at the national level cannot know the needs of every town and village. As a result, most unitary states have decentralized to a certain degree, allowing regions some powers of their own.

In Japan, for example, the central government has the constitutional power to control its 47 regions, which are called prefectures. It makes national laws that the regional governments must carry out. It also provides funds without which the prefectures could not operate. Yet the prefectures—along with Japan's cities, towns, and villages—have a significant amount of control over local affairs.

### Federal Systems Divide Power

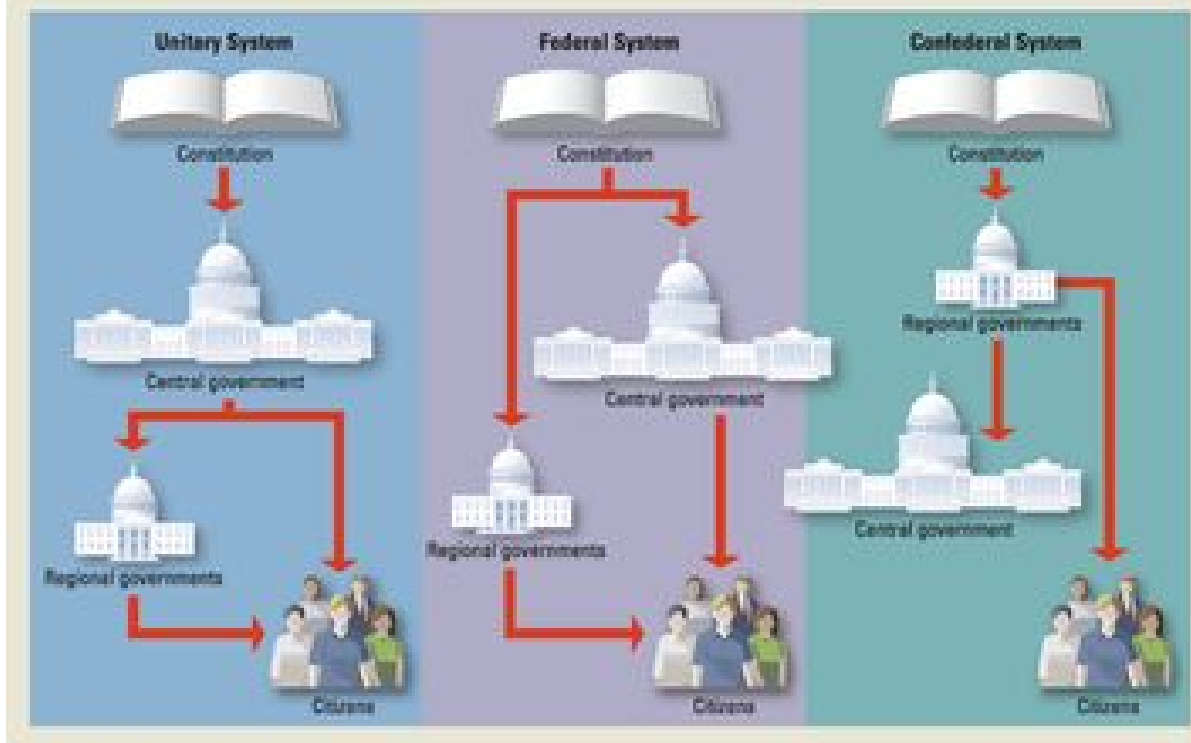
In a **federal system of government**, the constitution divides power between the national government and the regional governments. The national government has some fixed responsibilities, such as protecting the nation. The regional government has other responsibilities, such as setting up schools.

A federal system of government is most likely to be adopted in large countries with diverse populations. The main advantage of such a system is the flexibility it gives regional governments in meeting the needs of different language and ethnic groups. The downside of this flexibility can be a patchwork of competing laws from region to region. In addition, conflicts may arise between the central government and regional governments.

India, whose people speak more than 1,000 languages and dialects, adopted a federal system after gaining independence in 1947. Its constitution clearly specifies how powers are to be divided between the national government and the 28 Indian states.

## How Power Flows in Three Systems of Government

Power is highly centralized in a unitary system, divided in a federal system, and decentralized in a confederal system. Most nations today have a unitary system. None has a confederal system. Federal systems are more likely to be found in large nations with diverse populations.



### Confederal Systems Decentralize Power

The United States was the first modern country to adopt a federal system of government. However, it did not always have a federal system. The first American constitution, the Articles of Confederation, created a **confederal system of government**. In such a system, power resides in the regions, which are independent states. The regions grant only as much power to the national government as needed to maintain security and to coordinate activities among the regions.

The American states first chose a confederal system because it offered two important advantages. It allowed the states to unite for some purposes without giving up the power to run their own affairs. This allowed for greater flexibility in meeting local needs. And, by limiting the powers of the central government, a confederal system reduced the likelihood that it would become an authoritarian regime.

Within a few years, however, the states reconsidered their choice. The central government, they realized, was too weak to meet the needs of the nation as a whole. It also lacked the power to end quarreling among the states. The result was an unworkable system that threatened the very survival of the nation.

No nation-state is organized as a confederation today. However, some **supranational organizations**, such as the European Union (EU), are modeled on confederal systems. The member nations of the EU give some power to the EU government, such as control over cross-border trade. But they remain sovereign nations and can leave the EU at any time. Thus far, its members have found the benefits of union worth the cost of sharing some power with the EU.