

Structures of Government

In addition to the type, or form of government that exists in a society, there are other factors that play a role in the overall function of a government, including the geographic distribution of power, and the relationship between the legislative and executive branch.

Geographic Distribution of Power

In every system of government the power to govern is located in one or more places geographically. From this standpoint, three basic structures exist: unitary, federal, and confederate.

Unitary Government

A unitary government is often described as a centralized government. All powers held by the government belong to a single, central agency. The central (national) government creates local units of government for its convenience. Those local governments have only those powers that the central government chooses to give them.

Most governments in the world are unitary in form. Great Britain is a classic example. It has a single central organization, the Parliament, holding all of the government's power. Local governments exist solely to relieve Parliament of the tasks that would be difficult or burdensome to do. Though unlikely, Parliament could get rid of those agencies of local government at any time if it wanted to.

Be careful not to confuse a unitary government with a dictatorship. In the unitary government all forms of power are held by the central government, but that government can still be elected by the people, and if so, would only have the powers that the people allowed it to have. So, a government could be both unitary and democratic.

Federal Government

A federal government is one in which the powers of government are divided between a central government and several local governments. An authority superior to both the central and local governments makes this division of powers on a geographic basis, which cannot be changed by either the local or

national level alone. Both levels of government act directly on the behalf of the people through their own sets of laws, officials, and agencies.

In the United States, for example, the Federal Government has certain powers, and the 50 individual states have others. This division of powers is set out in the Constitution. The Constitution stands above both levels of government and cannot be changed unless the people agree to that change.

Australia, Switzerland, Canada, Mexico, Germany, India, and some 20 other states also have federal forms of government today. In the United States, the term 'Federal Government' is often used to refer to the National Government, but note that the 50 state governments are unitary in structure, not federal.

Confederate Government

A confederation is an alliance of independent states. A central organization, the confederate government, only handles those matters that the state assigns to it. Typically, confederate governments hold limited powers in such fields as defense and foreign commerce.

Most often, the confederacy has not had the power to make laws that apply directly to individuals, at least not without some further action by the member states. A confederate structure makes it possible for the several states to cooperate in matters of common concern and also retain their separate identities.

Confederations are very rare in today's world. The Confederate States of America (1861-1865) are one example in past times. A possible modern example is the European Union (EU), which is an assembly of 28 nations, mostly in Europe. Through its institutions, the EU has established free trade among its members, launched a common currency (the Euro), and coordinates the foreign trade and defense policies of its members. Recently in news, United Kingdom voted to remove itself, or exit, from the EU for more independence, a situation which was often referred to as "Brexit".

Relationship Between Legislative and Executive Branches

Governments are also classified based on the relationship between their legislative and executive agencies. From this standpoint, two basic structures exist: presidential and parliamentary.

Presidential Government

In a presidential government, the executive and legislative branches of government are separate, independent of one another, and co-equal. The chief executive (president) is chosen independently of the legislative branch, holds office for a fixed term, and has broad powers that are not subject to direct control of the legislative branch. The two branches regularly have several powers with which each can block actions by the other branch. Usually, as in the United States, a written constitution provides for the separation of power between the branches.

The United States is the world's leading example of a presidential government. In fact, the U.S. invented this form. Most of the other presidential structures of government are also found in the Western Hemisphere.

Parliamentary Government

In parliamentary government the executive and legislative branches are made up of the same elected officials. Once the legislative branch is elected, the leader of whichever political party earned the majority of votes becomes the executive leader, known as the prime minister. The prime minister then chooses the rest of executive team, known as the cabinet, from the other legislative branch members. Therefore, the prime minister and his cabinet are members of both the executive and the legislative branches. The executive branch is part of and subject to the control of the legislative branch, referred to as parliament. The prime minister and the cabinet remain in office only as long as their policies and administration have the confidence of a majority in parliament.

A parliamentary government avoids one of the major problems of the presidential structure: prolonged conflict and sometimes deadlock between the executive and legislative branches of government (like the President and Congress). On the other hand, it should be noted that the checks and balances in the presidential structure are not a part of the parliamentary system. Nevertheless, Britain, Canada, Japan, and a majority of all other governments today have a parliamentary system.

After reading, answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper

1. What is a unitary government? What is an example of a unitary government?
2. What is a federal government? What is an example of a federal government?
3. In a federal government, what is the relationship between the national and local governments?
4. What is a confederate government? What is an example of a confederate government?
5. What are two benefits for states in a confederate government?
6. What is a presidential government? What is an example of a presidential government?
7. In a presidential government, what separates the powers between the branches?
8. What is a parliamentary government? What is an example of a parliamentary government?
9. In a parliamentary government, how is the executive chosen?
10. What is one benefit of a parliamentary government over a presidential government?