

Distribution of Power

Effective government in any form requires a method for distributing authority, or power, within the country.

Federal Systems

A federal system of government exists when power is “layered” or shared among different levels. The United States government is an example of a federal system. There is a central government with an executive branch, a legislative branch, and a judicial branch. The head of the executive branch is the president. There are also state governments with executive, legislative, and judicial branches. The head of the executive branch of a state government is the governor. The state legislatures pass laws concerning state affairs, the state executive carries them out, and state judiciaries interpret them.

Federal systems also include independent local governments such as county and city governments. The citizens elect many of the public officials in counties and cities.

Unitary Systems

With a unitary system, all government power is held at the center. The central government performs all of the governmental functions and has the ability to legislate everything within that country. Things like taxes, agriculture, and transportation all fall under the central government to control. Local governments (often called divisions) within this system manage issues within their area, but all their powers are determined and assigned by the national government for everyone in the country to follow. Examples of this system would be France and the United Kingdom.

Confederal Systems

Independent states sometimes join together to create a system of government known as a confederation. In this system, the central government only exists to provide specific services determined by independent members. The central government of a confederation is the weakest of all of the government systems. Member states in a confederation maintain their own individual power and delegate to the central government only those powers that are essential for its maintenance. The individual states or countries making up the confederations have the power to tax and make their own laws. The central government serves as a coordinator to protect the interests of all its members. It also represents the confederation in matters with outside governments, but the states review and approve its actions.

No modern nation is organized as a confederation; some historical examples would be the Iroquois Confederacy of Native Americans since 1451 or the New England Confederation of the British colonies of Massachusetts, Plymouth, Connecticut, and New Haven from 1643–1684.