

## **B. HOW CAN POWER BE DISTRIBUTED GEOGRAPHICALLY?**

### **Confederation, Federalist, and Unitary (Centralist) Systems**

Governments are often structured in ways that require different governmental bodies across a nation to share power. In the case of the United States, power is shared between the state governments and the federal (or central) government. During the framing of the Constitution, there was much debate about how much power should go to the central government and how much power should belong to the states. In determining how they could create a strong enough central government without losing the support of states' rights advocates in the vote to approve the constitution, the Founding Fathers considered three systems.

#### **1. Confederation**

The Articles of Confederation—drafted in 1777, ratified in 1781, and replaced by the Constitution in 1789—are an example of a confederation. They provided for a league of friends among the 13 states, which amounted to a very loose association with little power given to the central government. A confederation for the United States was favored by those who feared a strong central government similar to England. Under the articles:

- The central government was subordinate to the states and acted only through the states
- A federal law could not pass unless it was agreed to by every state
- The federal government could not levy taxes, regulate commerce, pay war debts, coin money, or regulate foreign affairs
- Advantages included a high degree of regional or local power

#### **2. Federalist**

This type of system provides for greater regional autonomy and balance between regional interests and national interests. In a federalist system:

- Neither the central government nor the state governments are subordinate and they cannot abolish each other
- The states and central government are independent in some areas
- Both the states and central government have powers over citizens and explicit rights as well as limitations
- Advantages include the ability to govern a large geographic area more effectively by dividing responsibilities among various levels or divisions of government

#### **3. Unitary or Centralist**

The Founding Fathers thought of England as a centralist system. It is the most common form of government, especially for small nations that do not have historically distinct regions/divisions with their own governments. In this system:

- All state and local governments are subordinate to the central government
- The central government can disband the states
- States are not sovereign and are not guaranteed a republican form of government by the central government
- Advantages include more efficiency and fewer levels of government

## **F. WHAT IS A PARLIAMENTARY SYSTEM?**

### **Parliamentary Democracies Around the World**

Parliamentary democracies, in contrast to presidential democracies, do not share power between the executive and legislative branches of government.

#### **Features of parliamentary systems:**

- Voters elect the legislature (parliament)
- The legislature elects the executive (usually called a prime minister)
- The executive is usually the leader of the majority party in the legislature, if a single party dominates the legislative branch; otherwise, the executive is chosen by a coalition of parties within the legislature
- The executive chooses a cabinet generally of the majority party leaders
- The executive and cabinet are responsible for drafting laws that are then voted on by the legislature
- The executive maintains his or her position unless unseated through an election by the legislature

#### **Parliamentary systems are characterized by:**

- Minimal conflict between the executive and the legislature, especially if there is a dominant party
- Less effective minority (views and wishes of the minority are often ignored due to the lack of inroads into power controlled by the majority party)
- Efficiency (parliamentary systems can accomplish more, and do so quickly, compared to presidential systems where the legislature may be dominated by an opposition party)
- Multiple parties (many parliamentary systems have several political parties rather than two major parties)
- Seats in the legislature are fragmented among several parties, none of which can claim a majority
- Multiple-party coalitions (smaller parties will often attempt to form a bloc to unseat the executive or stall legislation)
- When there is no clear majority, a coalition of political parties in the legislature is required to elect an executive
- Coalition governments are notoriously unstable since the executive can only rule as long as he or she retains the support of all members of the coalition (Japan is currently suffering through a series of unstable coalitions, and India did so in the 1980s and 1990s)

#### **Countries with parliamentary systems:**

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|----------------------------------|----------------|
| ■ United Kingdom (Great Britain) | ■ Germany      |
| ■ France                         | ■ Russia       |
| ■ Japan                          | ■ South Africa |
| ■ India                          | ■ Egypt        |

PROS and CONS of Different Types of Government Systems

name:

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Unitary

Federal

Confeder-  
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Presidential

Parlia-  
mentary

