

# Federal and unitary systems of government essay sample

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Federal and unitary systems of government have many similar qualities therefore it becomes difficult to decipher between the two. In order to illustrate the difficulty in trying to distinguish between the two, I will first define what each system of government involves and then attempt to compare and contrast.

Federalism is the creation of two layers of government, the federal government and the constituent states, which equally share the legal sovereignty of a country. Each tier of government has its own specific functions. The central government is allocated with the external political issues i. e. Foreign affairs and national defence. The constituent states' main concern is with legislation and education although the intricacies of each depend on which state you are examining.

Unitary governments when a country's sovereignty lies solely with a central tier of government. Subnational authorities do exist alongside the centre and they may make their own individual policies, however this is only permissible if first approved by the central government. The authority of the country lies absolutely within the central government and the lower levels could be abolished if the centre so wished.

Although they appear very similar in operation federal and unitary systems of government immediately individualise themselves from one another in their definitions. Within federalism the constituent states have a shared responsibility with the central government and their existence is protected. The only way they could be removed or modified would be by amending the constitution. The lower levels of the unitary system, however, only exist

because they permitted to. The subnational authorities could be abolished almost immediately if the national government so demanded. Federal and unitary systems of government are classed as the two main solutions to the “territorial organisation of power<sup>1</sup>,” Federalism, with some 22 federations in existence today, is becoming increasingly more popular with larger countries seeking to unite a multiethnic and multinational population. Australia, Canada and the United States of America, four of the world’s largest countries, are federal. “Federalism seems to promise the military and economic advantages of size while maintaining, even encouraging, more local identities. Federalism, permits diversity within unity and is thus an important model for a world of strong national and ethnic identities. 2,” (Hague, Harrop and Breslin)

Unitary systems, however are usually found in smaller countries, such as Britain and Japan who do not have as much ethnic diversity. Nearly all countries in Latin America are made up of unitary systems of government as they strive towards a centralised presidential government.

Unitary government however is not completely centralised in its approach. Like federalism, unitary systems often look to the lower levels of government for assistance and to take on more responsibility. Although unitary government is, in definition, hierachal, there are often times when the two levels of government meet to bargain with political responsibility.

In the 1970s democratic Spain demonstrated to the world how federalism and unitary government could be united without disruption. After General

Franco's death in 1975 the country sought to marry a "centralised tradition with strong regional identities" associated with federalism. In order to create such an ideal, Spain's constitution-makers introduced a system whereby each region could comprise their own policies, in order to decide their own levels of autonomy. Hague, Harrop and Breslin describe this as system of "quasi-federalism within a frame of a unitary state<sup>3</sup>,"

In order to analyse the differences and similarities between federal and unitary systems of government we must look at the relationships that take place between central and state governments. Within federalism there are two crucial points that explain the dependence and interdependence that exists between central and state government. Dual federalism, no longer existing today, was a favourite with the Founding Fathers of the United States, whereby the central and the state government remain separate bodies. This system however, has long since been replaced in favour of "intergovernmental relations" where flexibility allows the federal and state government to interact freely in areas such as education, the environment and transport, although intergovernmental relations is most often found within federalism, it is also found in unitary states.

Unitary government, as mentioned above, often exhibits qualities of federalism when the central government shares some of its responsibilities with the state. There are three methods unitary states use in order to direct some of the authority away from the centre. The first is deconcentration, whereby employees execute government functions away from the capital. Deconcentration allows the work to be spread out and allows central

politicians to acquire more local knowledge. Deconcentration also helps the central departments to concentrate on policy-making. Decentralisation is the second method of dispersing central power. This is when state or subnational authorities execute government functions. One example of this is in Scandinavia where local authorities are dealing with welfare issues introduced by central government. Finally, devolution is where the national government allows some decision-making autonomy to be passed on to the lower levels.

#### 4, Method Definition Illustration

**Deconcentration** Central government functions are executed by staff “ in the field” Almost 90% of US federal civilian employees work away from Washington, D. C.

**Decentralisation** Central government functions are executed by subnational authorities Local governments administer national welfare programmes in Scandinavia

**Devolution** Central government grants some decision-making autonomy to new lower levels Regional governments in France, Italy and Spain

Hague, Harrop and Breslin describe the relationship between central and subnational authorities in unitary states as “ of interdependence rather than dominance<sup>5</sup>,” This can again be confusing when trying to distinguish between federal and unitary states, as a dominant central government was what initially separated unitary from federal systems. Therefore we must

learn that in order to discover the balance of power between levels of government we can't simply assume the result from the type of system; federal or unitary.

Within a unitary state there are two types of relationship between central and local government. The first is a dual system where the central government remains formally separated from the local government. The local government remains an internal organisation. Secondly, a fused system is where a prefect, acting as a central tier, oversees matters of the local government and reports back to the central. This system still implies unitary central dominance, in that the prefect is carrying out orders running from national government. Nowadays most of the existing unitary states have developed a central tier between national and local government. Three examples of this are France, Italy and Spain. Thus the unitary system becomes a multi-tier government, again reducing the contrast between federal and unitary government.

Although they have many differing qualities the line between federal and unitary systems of government is often blurred by their many similar functions and operations. Federalism overlaps with unitary states in the two-tier government system, in their national - local relations and in the constant bargaining that goes on between levels of government. Both systems are considered to be the solution to territorial organisation and have even joined forces to create an effective and efficient, original form of government in Spain in 1975. It is only the fixed, protected position the state government

holds within a federation that clearly distinguishes federalism from unitary government.