

Federalism in action a study of hurricane katrina essay

[Business](#), [Management](#)



Federalism is defined as a type of government in which the tasks of governing are constitutionally divided between a central/national government and sub-national units. In the case of United States of America, these units are the fifty states in the country. Under Federalism, the powers to govern are shared between the national and the state government. The whole system of governance and the country involved is often referred to as a federation.

In the United States of America, Federalism has evolved constantly over the period through various amendments in the constitution. The current system of governance cannot be described as any single form but a mix of the many types of Federalism that have been identified by Political Scientist. The various forms of Federalism distinctly visible in United States system of governance and legislation include Dual, Cooperative and Picket-Fence Federalism. Dual Federalism existed in the country until the 1930's and worked on the principle that the national and the state governments are two distinct entities with mutually exclusive powers and duties. The two governments were also responsible for providing separate services to the citizens. Under this form, the power of the National government was limited to what was enumerated in the constitution.

Dual federalism later evolved to cooperative form in the late 1930's. This form adapts a more practical approach for the national and state governments to work together so as to be able to provide services more efficiently. The cooperative form has finally evolved into a picket fence form of federalism where the lines of authority are defined in a better way than that by the cooperative form. Division of responsibilities between the various

forms of government and the power each one has are the primary ideas that the federalism seeks to define. It has been seen that the power of the National governments in America has gradually increased over the decades.

The powers that are specified in the U. S constitution as that of being of the national government include the Enumerated Powers, Implied Powers and Inherent Powers. The Enumerated Powers of the federal government were defined in the Article 1, Section 8 of the U. S. Constitution. The powers that are included in the list are that the Congress has the power to lay and collect taxes, duties etc, to regulate commerce with foreign nations and among the states, to coin money, to declare war establish and maintain an army and navy, establish post offices and make laws to that are necessary to enforce the constitution. The implied powers are the powers of the national government not explicitly written in the constitution, but are necessary for its enforcement. These powers are justified by the clause in the Article 1, Section 8 which empowered the Congress to make laws that were necessary to enforce the constitution. The national government is thus responsible to make laws and amendments as and when necessary to ensure the general welfare of the public.

The powers that are exclusive to the state can be defined in terms of reserved by the 10th amendment. These included regulation of commerce within the borders, setting up of local policing and law and order regulation bodies and establishing local governments that are subordinates to the state government, issue license (marriage, drivers, gun). Other powers of the state

include conducting of elections, provide public health and safety and ensure interstate relations are maintained in good faith and credit.

In addition to the exclusive powers, the state and the national governments share many responsibilities like setting of courts, collection of taxes, building highways, enforcement of the laws, spending money to ensure the welfare of the public and carry out disaster management and response.

The disaster management, response and relief strategy falls under the realms of both the state and national governments. It has often created an environment of confusion resulting in pushing of responsibilities and blame in failed and inadequate measures in an event of disaster. The debate on which government body had the prime responsibility to lead a disaster response was highlighted in the events of Hurricane Katrina and the breakdown in the intergovernmental response that followed. As it was the responsibility of both the state and the federal government the slow and inadequate response was severely criticized by the public and the media and the opinion was divided as to who had the constitutional obligation towards leading the response and relief initiatives. The subject of this essay is to study the powers and responsibilities of the federal and the state governments and to conclude as to which government was principally responsible for the course of events. The advantages of federalism and its shortcomings shall also be looked into and how they helped or hindered the response efforts shall be observed.

The intergovernmental response mechanism to natural disasters adopts a bottom up design. It is the duty of the local government to initiate the response and it is then transmitted to state governments and subsequently the national government. The national government is brought into the disaster relief process only if the disaster is beyond the capability of the local and state bodies, often referred to as a pull system. Once brought in, the national government agencies are not to supersede or replace the local activities, but work in closely with the other levels while implementing the disaster-relief policies. It is common knowledge that the state must exhaust its resources before calling up the national government through a formal request.

However, following the events on September 11 2001, significant changes were made to the degree and extent of Federal-level involvement in disaster response. Department of Homeland Security was formed to change the nation's emergency management operations and defined that the role of federal governments would change in an event of severe and complex situation referred to as " Incidents of National Significance". This empowered the national government to establish a push system and initiate its own relief measures even before a disaster has occurred and without the advice of the state agencies.

There needs to be a proper understanding of the whole disaster management system among all the public officials involved. In the case of Hurricane Katrina, owing to the severity of the disaster, emergency management personnel were unable or unwilling to act and carry out their

pre-assigned duties. As a result, public officials failed to react in fitting ways and it led to a slow and haphazard response.

In case of Hurricane Katrina, the local efforts began before Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans. The state declared emergency and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) called a “ full alert” and also sent emergency supplies. It seemed that the three levels well understood each of their roles in the emergency management strategy. However, the severity of the storm struck the preparedness of all the three levels and the bottom-up process collapsed immediately. The local and state bodies were particularly overwhelmed by the storm. The governor of the state refused the declaration of martial law and Louisiana National Guards were unable to stabilize the local conditions and in fact vacated the areas where the crowds stranded people grew. The national government too acted slowly and delayed the declaration of Katrina as an Incident of National Significance. Thus the push system that could have been put to use in this case was delayed and the pull system had already been initiated by that time. The confused and unwilling reactions of local personnel and the time wasted in calling for federal help thus worsened the situation.

It is difficult to accurately put the blame on a single government, state or national for the misguided response and inadequate measures of relief. If we study it from the constitutional sense, the local bodies and the state government have the obligation to provide and lead the response to a disaster. It was the duty of the state government to accurately assess the oncoming calamity and draw suitable responses. It seemed that the local

and state authorities had the situation well assessed. However the severity of the storm was unprecedented and unforeseen. This resulted in a confusion and lack of clarity to prevail in the actions of the state agencies. It was thus the duty of the governor to quickly call for national government's help. The delay in calling for their help also worsened the conditions of the public. However the blame of the mess cannot be entirely placed on the state. If the national government did have an emergency response system in place and had the hurricane Katrina been declared Incident of National Significance, a more appropriate response effort based on the push system could have been implemented. Also the state has limited resources to fall back on to counter an emergency situation and if it is larger and more severe than it could handle, it is the obligation of the federal government to implement its own relief measures.

While there do exist certain advantages in the federalism form of governance, it does bring in many shortcomings into the system too. The advantages in the system include the more democratic and consultative system of administration. The federalism can adapt itself as per the local needs and desires and the conditions that might prevail in the region. Other advantages include political stability, encouraging pragmatism and prevention of autocracy among the governments.

The advantages are however overwhelmed by the pitfalls that it brings to the table in the events of national disaster like the Hurricane Katrina. It was here that the shortcomings of federalism were seriously exposed. It is the confusion and lack of clarity that can prevail in terms of governance.

Confusion can occur due to the existence of many levels at which the governance occurs. Public administrators and authorities involved are expected to be fully aware of the complete system and not just their own roles and responsibilities. The system thus can be inefficient at times due to the limitations it permits in terms of clarity in coordination policy. The system is also inequitable and it is rather easy to push the blame of mismanagement on to other authorities. Since in the case of Hurricane Katrina, it was the responsibility of both the governments, the reasons for slow and misguided response was pushed by the state on to the national government and vice-versa.

In the case of Hurricane Katrina, one could publically view the pushing of blame that ensued between the state and federal government. The state accused the federal government to ignore its plea for help and the federal government agencies in return refuted their claims. They did not openly state the inadequate measures that the national guards put up but it was largely implied. The media zeroed in on the efforts of FEMA in the whole crisis management strategy. The media accused the inaction of the FEMA as the primary reason for such calamity and devastation that followed. In spite of the federal claims of efforts and relief being in full flow and relief measures being carried out effectively, the ground reality as reported by the local government was vastly different. The reason for inadequate response of FEMA was cited as to its restructuring and curtailing of the budget by the George Bush Administration and his Homeland Security act. It was with this bill that FEMA moved from being an autonomous body to an agency under

the Department of Homeland Security. It was also relieved of its functions of disaster management planning and thus rendered largely ineffective in planning and reduced to a response agency.

Thus, as a concluding comment on the mess that the Hurricane Katrina ensued, one can see that meanwhile it was the constitutional obligation of the local and state government to lead the response which they did, the Federal government agencies should have been active much before. It was widely believed that the oncoming hurricane Katrina was beyond the capacity of the state government. Thus it was the duty of the national government and agencies to lead the response. At the end neither did take the lead to carry out the relief response and many innocent lives were lost and it ended up being the costliest natural disaster.