

“Using UK/US examples to illustrate outline the difference between a “federal system” and a “unitary system.”

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The UK and the USA have very different systems of governing their countries. The diversity, geographically and culturally, is the main reason for these varying styles. The UK is a small Country; with relatively similar cultural ideals that are seen to gain more from a unitary system of government, whereby the national government allocates powers to the local governments. The USA, far larger on a geographical scale as well as a cultural one, thrives best under the federal system of government that the Founding Fathers established in 1787, whereby state laws exist independently of those of the federal government.

Both unitary and federal systems work for the countries that employ them but there are extensive strengths and weaknesses that exist with the frameworks and executions of them both. It is essential to see these strengths and weaknesses in order to define the real difference between two forms of government that seem as good as each other, but with these vastly ingrained differences cannot possibly be.

A unitary system: unity, consistency and identity.

In the UK we have a unitary system of government. The national government has absolute power over us and allocates powers to the local and provincial governments as needed. Individual counties all adhere to the same laws and the country falls under one banner of absolute control: the law. If a citizen of the UK cannot live under these rules another countries is the only real option.

Put in its simplest terms a unitary government seems antiquated and controlling. There does not seem to be much room for change or experimentation. To its fullest effect this is true, as most of the tried and tested laws of the UK have been in place for so long to change they now would seem unnecessary.

Ultimately what a unitary system promotes is unity. A country with defined and indifferent rules and regulations makes everyone in the UK feel as though they are from the UK, not from a particular county or constituency. A unitary system of government works the best in a small country where cultural and regional diversity is not as obvious as it is in larger places. The UK, as a significant but small country, thrives considerably under a unitary rule.

The rules and regulations of a unitary system of government are consistent throughout the country and do not differ from one place to another. Whatever is illegal somewhere in the land is illegal everywhere else. In a unitary system the citizens know where they stand and know that there is no way of getting around particular enforcements, such as the national drinking age, by going to another area of the country. This makes the

laws mean more to the citizens as well as to the people who make them and act to give the country a clearer consistency than it would have if laws within the land differed significantly.

A federal system: diversity, democracy and choice.

As the USA is so much larger than the UK it needed a strong but decentralised form of government to ensure that the countries laws were enforced evenly and fairly all over its vast landscape. These specific needs lead the Founding Fathers to form a federal government in 1787. It allowed federal law to sweep the entire land, but allowed individual states to moderate and enforce their own laws according to their own cultural and regional diversity.

A federal system of government allows individuals a lot more freedom to live where they are best represented by the law and by the people. If a citizen of the USA does not agree with certain laws of a particular state they can move to another that better suits them. For example if a citizen lives in a state where the death penalty is used and they do not agree with that form of punishment they can move to another state, within their same country, where that law does not apply.

The distribution of powers between state and federal governments means that power is not centralised in one place. A basic principle of a federal government is that it makes sure, by its very nature that a dictatorship cannot arise. It also counters elitism by allowing individual states to make their own laws therefore allowing an eclectic mix of ideals into the process of forming law.

It also gives citizens a sense of independent identity that is far stronger than the regional identity of other countries. People take as much pride in being a New Yorker or a Californian as they do in being an American. This sense of independence also makes it easier for ethnic minorities and immigrants to feel welcomed into the Country as it is so culturally diverse.

United we stand underrepresented we fall

Although a unitary government breeds pride and a strong sense of national identity this power through unity can result in a need to force others to share the “enthusiasm” you feel for your country. For the UK this resulted in Imperialism, whereby most of Europe had to at some point swallow our ideals for threat of complete abolition. Imperialism in today’s world is a problem many are not willing to face, but the UK to a large extent still expects the rest of the world to acknowledge them whether they want to or not.

Using this reasoning to understand the concept of Imperialism, the unitary system of government only really works in small countries or regions where a centralised government is strong and not tyrannical. If the USA were to employ a unitary government it is almost

impossible to comprehend such a small group of people primarily based in one place to run the country with any ease or efficiency.

In a unitary government rules and regulations are made on the basis of everyone within that country more or less sharing the same views. In a country as small as the UK cultural diversity has never detracted from core British beliefs that most other cultures embrace as full heartedly as they are willing to. However in recent years the influx of new cultures treading British soil raises another question next to the idea of this “united Britain”. Now with such a culturally diverse Britain, is it time to consider a more representative form of government?

Federalism: who am I?

Although many aspects of federalism move to promote patriotism, there is a split balance of love for your country and love for your state. In the UK most people would say they are from a particular area but are proud to be British. In America however if someone is from New York, they are proud to be a New Yorker, by logical means. This does not apply all over the states of course but it must be understood that in America your state is your country as much as your homeland actually is.

Federalism is also limited with inconsistency especially for young people growing up in its boundaries. The ease with which they can break state law is almost shocking to someone raised in a country with one national drinking age etc. In the states it is easy to hop the state line at eighteen and drink in another state the legally serves alcohol at that age even if back in your home state under twenty one drinking is illegal.

Also eliminating a strong central government because of size and population does make sense in a country so vast but does not help with the feeling of national identity. The way federalism counters elitism also has holes in it as many politicians in American government do not have time to hold their positions and establish a real connection with the area of politics they are involved in as it is so easy to change their position at any time. Political knowledge is often compensated for popularity. For example Ronald Regan and Arnold Schwarzenegger, although whilst in their positions relatively politically acute, both came from acting backgrounds. How much can you trust your president or governor when they are qualified actors?

So many shades of grey

Both unitary systems of government and federal systems of government are strong and work well for the countries they are employed in. The UK’s unitary government works in a small culturally similar country and has worked relatively well for a lot longer than the USA’s federal system. It promotes unity and self identity, keeping strong political ideologies at the centre of its powerful national government. Federalism works for a vast country such

as the USA and promotes diversity and in many ways a more acute sense of democracy as people feel more involved and more individual, in belonging to a state that has its own laws.

Whether you live in the “land of the free” or the “home of the brave” it is a privilege to live a country with a moderate form of government. Both are not subject to absolute tyranny and both employ democracy of every possible level. In a world where there are so many shades of grey such as the political world neither can be seen as right or wrong, both share core values of cooperation and contentment and both work equally as well as each other given the right circumstances.