**Federalism**

Have you ever noticed how many laws we have in the United States? We have laws from our federal government, our state governments and our local governments. How do we know who's in charge?

The United States government is based on **federalism**. Federalism is a method of government that allows two or more entities to share control over the same geographic region. Each person in the United States is subject to the laws of that city, county, state and our federal government.

In a federalist government, the power is divided between the national government and other governmental units. In the U.S., this means the power is divided between our federal government and our state and local governments.

This is different from a unitary government, where one unit holds the power. It's also different from a confederation, which is an association of independent governmental units. The Articles of Confederationoriginally established the United States as a confederation, where each of the states operated separately and independently from one another.

The Constitution recognizes the federal government as the highest governmental power, though it also acknowledges that the American people are subject to several different powers including those belonging to the state, county and city.

The pros and cons of federalism have been debated since the creation of the republic. Proponents argue that federalism does the following:

* **Fosters state loyalties:** Many Americans feel close ties to their home state, and federalism maintains that connection by giving power to the states.
* **Practices pragmatism:** Running a country the size of the United States, with such a diverse population, is much easier to do if power is given to local officials. Likewise, state and local officials are closer to the problems of their areas, so it makes sense for them to choose policies to solve those problems.
* **Creates laboratories of democracy:**State governments can experiment with policies, and other states (and the federal government) can learn from their successes and failures.

***Example:****California has frequently led the nation in environmental regulations: Many measures adopted by California are subsequently adopted by other states. And during the 1990s, Wisconsin governor Tommy Thompson experimented with welfare policy, and those experiments influenced federal welfare reform.*

* **Leads to political stability:** By removing the national government from some contentious issue areas, federalism allowed the early U.S. government to achieve and maintain stability.
* **Encourages pluralism:**Federal systems expand government on national, state, and local levels, giving people more access to leaders and opportunities to get involved in their government.
* **Ensures the separation of powers and prevents tyranny:**Even if one person or group took control of all three branches of the federal government, federalism ensures that state governments would still function independently. Federalism, therefore, fulfills the framers’ vision of a governmental structure that ensures liberty.

Critics argue that federalism falls short in two ways:

* **Prevents the creation of a national policy:** The United States does not have a single policy on issues; instead, it has fifty-one policies, which often leads to confusion.
* **Leads to a lack of accountability:**The overlap of the boundaries among national and state governments makes it tricky to assign blame for failed policies.

Critics argue that federalism cannot function well due to ignorance. Most Americans know little about their state and local governments, and turnout in state and local elections is often less than 25 percent. Citizens consequently often ignore state and local governments, even though these governments have a lot of power to affect people’s lives.