

enhance the country's military power, political control, and prestige.

Geographic Distribution of Power

In every system of government, the power to govern is located in one or more places geographically. From this standpoint, three basic forms of government exist: unitary, federal, and confederate.

Unitary Government A **unitary government** is often described as a centralized government. All powers held by the government belong to a single, central agency. The central (national) government creates local units of government for its own convenience. Those local governments have only those powers that the central government chooses to give them.

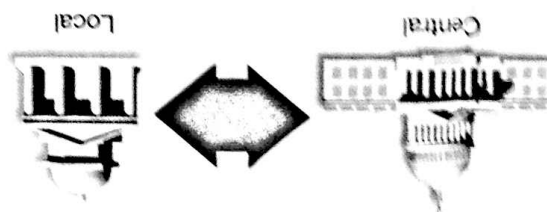
Most governments in the world are unitary in form. Great Britain is a classic illustration. A single central organization, the Parliament, holds all of the government's power. Local governments do exist—but solely to relieve Parliament of burdens it could perform only with much difficulty and inconvenience. Though unlikely, Parliament could do away with all local government in Britain at any time.

Be careful not to confuse the unitary form of government with a dictatorship. In the unitary form, all of the powers held by the government are concentrated in the central government.

Distribution of Power

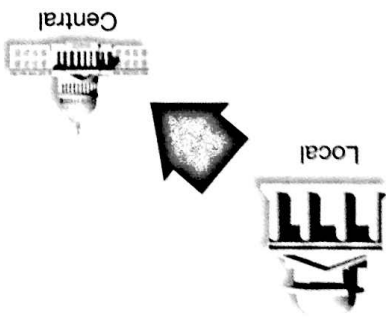
Power can be distributed between central (national) and local governments in three different ways. Which diagram best describes the distribution of power in the United States?

Federal Government



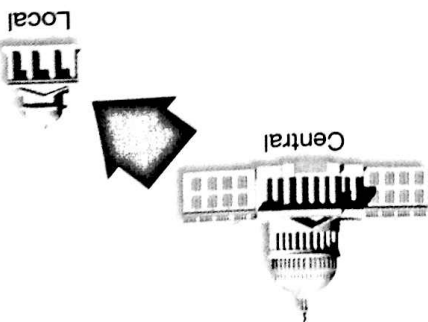
The National Government and the States are co-equal partners.

Confederate Government



Most power belongs to the local (regional) governments. The central government has only limited power.

Unitary Government



Power resides with the central government. Local government is secondary.

That government might not have all power, however. In Great Britain, for example, the powers held by the government are limited. British government is unitary and, at the same time, democratic.

Federal Government A federal government is one in which the powers of government are divided between a central government and several local governments.

An authority superior to both the central and local governments makes this **division of powers** on a geographic basis; and that division cannot be changed by either the local or national level acting alone. Both levels of government act directly on the people through their own sets of laws, officials, and agencies.

In the United States, for example, the National Government has certain powers and the 50 States have others. This division of powers is set out in the Constitution of the United States. The Constitution stands above both levels of government; and it cannot be changed unless the people, acting through both the National Government and the States, agree to the change.

Australia, Canada, Mexico, Switzerland, Germany, India, and some 20 other states also have federal forms of government today. In the United States, the phrase "the Federal Government" is often used to identify the National Government, the government headquartered in Washington, D.C. Note, however, that each of the 50 State governments in this country is unitary, not federal, in form.

Confederate Government A confederation is an alliance of independent states. A central organization, the confederate government has the power to handle only those matters that the member states have assigned to it. Typically, confederate governments have had limited powers and only in such fields as defense and foreign affairs.

Most often, confederate governments have not had the power to make laws that apply directly to individuals, at least not without some further action by the member states. A confederate structure of government makes it possible for the several states to cooperate in matters of common concern and, at the same time, retain their separate identities.

Confederations have been rare in the modern world. The European Union (EU) is the closest approach to one today. The EU, formed by 12 countries in 1993, has established free trade among its now 27 member-nations, launched a common currency, and seeks to coordinate its members' foreign and defense policies.

In our own history, the United States under the Articles of Confederation (1781–1789) and the Confederate States of America (1861–1865) also provide examples of this form of government.

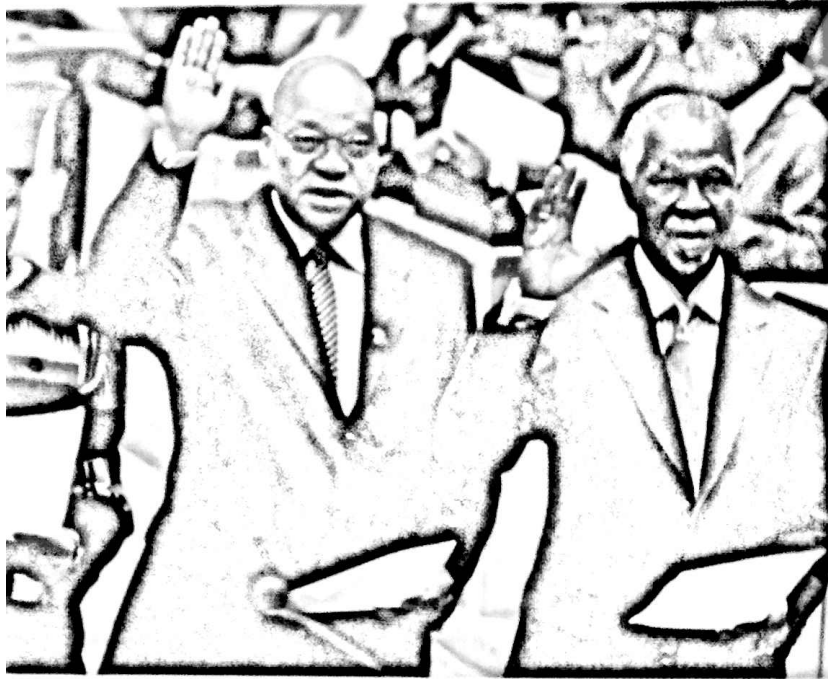
Legislative and Executive Branches

Political scientists also classify governments based on the relationship between their legislative and executive agencies. This grouping

yields two basic forms of government: presidential and parliamentary.

Presidential Government A **presidential government** features a separation of powers between the executive and the legislative branches of the government. The two branches are independent of one another and coequal. The chief executive (the president) is chosen by the people, independently of the legislature. He or she holds office for a fixed term, and has a number of significant powers that are not subject to the direct control of the legislative branch.

The details of this separation of the powers of these two branches are almost always spelled out in a written constitution—as they are in the United States. Each of the branches is regularly given several powers with which it can block actions of the other branch.



Two members of the South African parliament are sworn into office.

The United States is the world's leading example of presidential government. In fact, the United States invented the form. Nearly all of the other presidential systems in the world today are also found in the Western Hemisphere.

Parliamentary Government In a **parliamentary government**, the executive branch is made up of the prime minister or premier, and that official's cabinet. The prime minister and cabinet are themselves members of the legislative branch, the parliament. The prime minister is the leader of the majority party or

of a like-minded group of parties (a coalition) in parliament and is chosen by that body. With parliament's approval, the prime minister selects the members of the cabinet from among the members of parliament. The executive is thus chosen by the legislature, is a part of it, and is subject to its direct control.

The prime minister and the cabinet (often called "the government") remain in office only as long as their policies and administration have the support of a majority in parliament. If the parliament defeats the prime minister and cabinet on an important matter, the government may receive a "vote of no confidence," and the prime minister and his cabinet must resign from office. Then a new government must be formed. Either parliament chooses a new prime minister or, as often happens, all the seats in parliament go before the voters in a general election.

A majority of the governmental systems in the world today are parliamentary, not presidential, in form—and they are by a wide margin. Parliamentary government avoids one of the major problems of the presidential form: prolonged conflict and sometimes deadlock between the executive and legislative branches. However, the protections against arbitrary government found in the checks and balances of presidential government are not a part of the parliamentary system.