

Section 2

Distribution of Power in Government

Below: The National Assembly Building in Seoul, South Korea, is the meeting place of the country's legislature, the Kuk Hoe.

As you read, look for

- ▶ the meaning of “distribution of power”;
- ▶ the three ways governments may distribute power;
- ▶ terms: **unitary government, confederation government, federal government.**



The Distribution of Power

People in each country must decide how to set up its government. Countries must decide how to organize and how to distribute power. Governments can have all the power held by one central government, or they can spread out the power to lower levels of government. Governments may be unitary, confederation, or federal. When trying to determine the type of distribution of power of a country, ask yourself this question: Which level or levels of government have the most power?

Levels of Government

In a **unitary government**, the central (national) government holds almost all the power. Local governments, like states or counties, have very little power. In fact, the central government has the power to change the way states or counties operate or even remove them altogether. Some unitary governments have elected officials who, once elected, may make or enforce laws without listening to the opinions of those at lower levels of the government. Examples of countries with unitary governments include China and Saudi Arabia.





In a **confederation government**, local governments hold all the power. The central government is weak, and it depends on the local governments for its existence. In other words, the central government only has as much power as the local governments are willing to give it. This is the least common type of distribution of power. Two examples of confederations are the United Nations and the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). The United Nations can only offer advice and assistance when the member nations agree to cooperate. OPEC can only advise countries on the amount of oil they are producing.

In a **federal government**, power is shared among different levels of government. Power is shared between the national (central) government and the local governments. The United States is an example of a country with a federal system. The national, or federal, government has elected leaders such as congresspersons and the United States president. However, states have their own elections. A governor of a state is elected by the people of the state and works for them. The governor does not work for the president, and the president has no direct control over how a state is operated. Laws related to divorce or family matters, wills, and injuries from car wrecks are examples of laws of the state, not the national government. In the same way, states do not pass laws related to the defense of the country or make budgets for the military. These are duties of the national government. Other countries with a federal system include Nigeria and India.



Top: The Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) has many members from Southwest Asia. The group's actions help determine world oil prices. **Above:** The Knesset is Israel's legislative branch of government. It meets in this building in Jerusalem.

Reviewing the Section

1. What does the phrase "distribution of power" mean in terms of government structure?
2. Explain the difference between a unitary and a federal government.
3. Which type of government has the weakest national government? Why is it considered weak?
4. Putting It All Together: Which type of distribution of power do you think is the best? Why?