**Unitary and Federal States:**

States fall into two broad categories with respect to how control of their territory is organized (see Figure 4-2). In **unitary states**, the central government holds all major political authority. Branch offices may exist across the state’s territory to administer policies, but they report to the central organization or related entities that the center tolerates. People in the center can reorganize or disband these branch offices if they wish. This arrangement, in which no organization besides the central government has distinct authority of its own, is also known as political centralization. In **federal states**, on the other hand, both a central government and lower levels of government have distinct authority and responsibilities.

Federal states are relatively decentralized.

Unitary states have often arisen in unified nation-states like Japan, where long historical processes suppressed or erased competing identities. The powers of Japan’s forty-seven regions, known as prefectures, are defined and can be changed by national legislation. Prefectures’ elected governors have some autonomy, but they receive most funding and policy guidance from the central government. A unitary structure is even more pronounced in the English part of Great Britain—the core of one of the very first states. Also known as the United Kingdom, Britain is not entirely unitary overall: it has exceptional regional arrangements for its outlying regions of Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

Yet in its original heartland of England, which today is home to over 80 percent of the United Kingdom’s population, the center holds all political power. There is no regional level of government. Central government simply establishes branch offices of its central-state departments (like for Agriculture, Commerce, Justice, and other policy areas) in several locations. At times, the center creates regional offices to coordinate particular problems, but it also erases them when this is convenient. When Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher found herself in political conflict with the city government of London in 1986, for example, she simply abolished it and shifted its powers to other entities.

Federal states can have powerful central governments, too, but other levels of government have authority that the center cannot take away. Federal states tend to arise in places where the formation of a state grouped together multiple identities. Two levels of government authority allow for some central coordination while also giving different groups some **autonomy**, or power of their own, to develop distinctive policies. Switzerland, for example, developed federalism to allow its German-speaking, French-speaking, and Italian-speaking regions some internal autonomy. It remains one of the most decentralized countries in the world. Many federations are very large countries that stretch across diverse populations: India, Brazil, Nigeria, Germany, Australia, Canada, and of course the United States. The U.S. federal government has offices across the territory— distributed across the landscape are federal courthouses, offices for the Department of the Interior, national forests and parks, military bases, and other federal organizations—but there are also state governments in each of the fifty states with extensive powers enshrined in the U.S. Constitution. A deep American constitutional rule is that any power not assigned specifically in the Constitution to the federal government is left to the subnational state level.

For most of U.S. history, the federal government did not dominate its territory, and even today, it has nothing like the direct authority of most unitary states. The early U.S. central government was so weak that the German philosopher Hegel (1770–1831) dismissed it as “not a real state.” Even in 1900, the federal budget was smaller than spending by towns and counties alone, without counting spending by the forty-five (later fifty) states! Not until the mid-twentieth century did the federal level surpass the others. With the emergence of a huge industrial economy, federal regulation and social programs became much more important. War also continued to “make the state”: the World Wars and later the Cold War competition with the Soviet Union massively increased both the powers and reach of the federal government.

Still, American politics remains anchored in a decentralized mind-set, with a pervasive suspicion of central-state power in general.

Just as U.S. federalism originally arose to accommodate the demands of the thirteen colonies to retain some separate powers, unitary states may shift their territorial structure toward federalism in order to cope with internal identity conflicts. For example, in the 1990s Britain undertook a **devolution** of powers, or decentralization, in its ethnic regions of Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

A few countries have shifted categories altogether. Spain was once a unitary state, but in response to nationalist movements in several regions (most importantly the powerful region of Catalonia), it has devolved enough powers to the regions to be seen today as a federal state. Federalism was also designed into Iraq’s new constitution in 2005, since it was seen as one way to recognize different groups’ identities. In particular, the Kurdish minority demanded a federal structure that allowed them to construct a largely autonomous region in the north. In Afghanistan, on the other hand, the central state was perceived as being so weak that the new 2004 constitution opted for a unitary structure.

Because the country was already so fragmented, many felt that new institutions must focus on encouraging the emergence of central authority.

In unitary and federal arrangements, then, we can see some echoes of how states and nations aligned—or did not align—to form countries. States that are supported by a strong national identity tend toward centralization and unitary government. States that unite different peoples very often develop decentralization and a federal government. These relations are dynamic, as many states attempt to integrate, or at least balance, state control and national identities.