UNIT 5: FORMS OF GOVERNMENT

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5.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to:

- describe the Parliamentary and Presidential forms of government
- describe the Unitary and Federal forms of government
- list the merits and demerits of all the above mentioned forms of governments.

5.2 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit, we discussed the parliamentary and presidential forms of government. Governments can further be divided into Unitary and Federal forms based on division of powers. In this unit we shall discuss the unitary and federal forms of government.

5.3 UNITARY FORM OF GOVERNMENT

Division of powers is the criterion of classification of governments as the Unitary and Federal forms. Let us first discuss the Unitary form of government.

5.3.1 Meaning of Unitary form of Government

The form of government in which the constitution concentrates all powers in the single central government is known as a Unitary government. In the words of British political scientist Dr.Finer, a Unitary government is 'one in which all the authority and power are lodged in a single centre whose will and agents are legally omnipotent over the whole area.' Unitary government exists in the UK, France, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands and some other states. In a Unitary government, the central government, for the convenience of administration, may create certain political divisions but such divisions have no constitutional existence. The central government may abolish them at any time.

5.3.2 Characteristics of Unitary Government

The following are the characteristics of a Unitary government:

- **Single government :** In a Unitary government, there is only one integrated system of government. The central government consisting of a legislature and an executive exercises powers over the territory of the entire state. Accordingly, supreme power belongs to the central government alone.
- **Concentration of power :** Concentration of power in a single centre is the basis of a Unitary government. There is no constitutional division and distribution of powers.
- **Administrative units at the mercy of the centre :** The administrative units created under a Unitary government have no constitutional existence. Therefore, these can be abolished

or reorganized without amending the constitution.

- **Written or unwritten constitution :** The constitution of a Unitary state may be either written or unwritten. For example, the UK has a Unitary government with an unwritten constitution, but the Netherlands, another Unitary state, has a written constitution.
- **Flexibility of the Constitution :** In a Unitary govern-ment, the constitution may be rigid or flexible. But generally, the constitutions of Unitary governments are flexible.
- **Supremacy of Legislature :** In a Unitary system, there is one supreme legislature. It is the supreme law-making body in the land. Its actions are not subject to judicial review. For instance, theoretically, the British Constitution establishes supremacy of Parliament. There is no judicial review and no authority can declare the laws made by Parliament as unconstitutional.
- **Single citizenship :** In a Unitary government, there is only one citizenship-the citizenship of the whole country.

5.3.3 Merits and Demerits of Unitary form of Government

Merits of Unitary Government :

A Unitary government has certain advantages:

- A Unitary system has only one government which can maintain uniformity of laws, policy and administration in the whole country. It provides better scope for bringing about unity among the people.
- As the Unitary form of government is marked by a single executive and a single legislature, there can be no conflict regarding authority and responsibility for work. This accounts for administrative efficiency.
- In a Unitary government, the central government can follow a vigorous domestic and foreign policy. The government is known for its promptness of decision and firmness of action.
- This government is very much suitable during emergency. As

the government can take decisions promptly, it can face any situation quickly and with determination.

- The constitution in a Unitary government is relatively flexible. It can be more progressive and responsive to the people as the constitution can be amended without much difficulty to meet the demand of particular situations.

Demerits of Unitary Government :

The following are some of the demerits of a Unitary government:

- The greatest demerit of the Unitary form of government is its inapplicability in states with larger territory inhabited by people of different religions, cultures and languages, etc. In such a state different laws may be necessary for meeting the needs of different localities, or else some areas may be neglected.
- In a Unitary system, all powers are concentrated in the central government. As such, a Unitary state may be transformed into a totalitarian state.
- In a Unitary government, sometimes, local self-government is ignored. The central government has no time to devote attention to local matters. Thus, people may not take interest in local matters.
- In a Unitary government, people have to depend on only the central government for everything. As a result, the single government in a Unitary system has to bear the heavy burden and responsibility of all work.
- As there is no separate legislature in the states and there is less local self-government in a Unitary government, elections are also less frequently held. As such, the people and their representatives do not receive much political education in this form of government.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.1: Concentration of power in a single centre is the basis of a Unitary government. (True/False)

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Q.2: The constitution of a Unitary state may be either written or unwritten. (True/False)

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Q.3: In a Unitary government, there exists dual citizenship. (True/False)

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Q.4: The administrative units created under a Unitary government have constitutional existence. (True/False)

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Q.5: List out one merit and one demerit of Unitary Government.

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5.4 FEDERAL FORM OF GOVERNMENT

5.4.1 Meaning of Federal Form of Government

The idea of Federal government is a comparatively modern concept in Political Science. In fact, it may be said that it started with the establishment of the USA in 1787. In this form of government, a number of independent units combine to constitute a sovereign state keeping the autonomy of each unit intact in its internal administration.

According to political scientist and constitutional expert K. C. Wheare, in the federal system 'the powers of the government are divided between a government for the whole country and

governments for parts of the country in such a way that each government is legally independent in its own sphere.'

5.4.2 Characteristics of Federal Government

- **The co-existence of two sets of governments** is the most important feature of a Federal government. In every Federal state, there is a central government and one government in each of the constituent units. The units have their constitutional existence and are, therefore not subject to abolition by the central government.
- **Constitutional division of powers** between the central government and the governments of the units is another feature of a Federal government. Both the central and the state governments have the right to promulgate laws and run the administration. The division of powers is not similar in all cases. The United States and Australia follow one pattern but Canada and India follow another.



LET US KNOW

In India we have a federal structure of government with two sets of government-Central and state governments. The Constitution of India has provided for division of powers between the Centre and the states. The scheme established by the Constitution consists of three Lists, the Union List, the State List and the Concurrent List. The Central government makes laws on the items enlisted in the Union List which include matters of national importance such as defence, armed forces, foreign affairs, currency, etc. The state governments make laws on the items enlisted in the State List which include matters of local interest such as public order and police, education, forests, etc. With regard to the items enlisted in the Concurrent List, both the Union and the state governments can make laws. The Residuary Powers not mentioned in the Union, State and Concurrent

Lists are vested in the Lok Sabha. In the United States, the residuary powers are vested with the Federal government.

- **The Constitution of a Federal state should be written and rigid:** enumerating the powers of the central government and of the constituent units, so that there is no confusion regarding the same. Every federal constitution must be rigid to the extent that its federal character cannot be changed.
- **Supremacy of the Constitution:** The constitution of a federal state is the supreme law of the land. Both the centre and the units obey the constitution and have full faith in the same. Any act violating the Constitution is declared illegal.
- **Supremacy of Judiciary:** In a federation, there must be a supreme independent and impartial judiciary as the guardian and interpreter of the constitution. It is necessary for settling constitutional conflicts between the centre and the units.
- **Double Citizenship:** An ideal federation is characterized by double citizenship. A person is a citizen of the whole country as well as of the particular State in which he or she lives.
- **Equal representation of the units in the upper house:** Equal representation of the units in the upper house of the central legislature is considered to be a characteristic of a federation by some scholars.
- **Constituent units should have a share in the amendment of the constitution :** In a federation, the constituent units should have a share in the amendment of the constitution. No amendment is to be given effect without the consent of the Central legislature and the legislatures of the constituent units.

5.4.3 MERITS AND DEMERITS OF FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

Merits of Federal Government :

The following are the merits of Federal government:

- Federation provides an opportunity to small and weak states to

unite together and become part of a large and powerful state. This gives them better security and more prestige.

- In a Federal government, the federating units maintain their autonomy although they become parts of large and powerful state. Accordingly, both regional autonomy and national unity is possible.
- A Federal form of government is the most suitable one for vast states with heterogeneous populations. Under a federation, people with linguistic, cultural and religious diversities can have autonomy on affairs which particularly concern them.
- The Federal system prevents despotism. In such a state the autonomous units with constitutional powers can successfully prevent the central government from assuming despotic powers.
- The division of powers between the central government and the governments of the constituent units relieves the central government of the responsibilities of solving local issues and leaves it free to give more attention to matters of national importance.

Demerits of Federal Government :

The following are the demerits of Federal government:

- There is every possibility of conflict between the central government and the governments of the units as well as among the governments of the constituent units themselves regarding authority and responsibility for work.
- The Federal system is inconvenient for arriving at quick decisions. In certain matters, the central government requires the support of the state governments and in certain matters, the governments of the units require prior approval of the central government for taking decisions.
- A Federal government also involves more expenditure as the organization of the government is highly complex. Expenditure has to be incurred with regard to both the Central and provincial governments.

- As the Federal system is often characterized by a rigid constitution, it is very difficult on the part of a Federal government to cope with the changing needs of the people. Amendments to the constitution cannot be brought about easily.
- In the federations allowing dual citizenship, the allegiance of a citizen is divided between the whole country and the province in which he lives. This kind of mentality may be a source of regionalism and could weaken the federation.



ACTIVITY 2

Examine the chief characteristics of the Unitary and Federal governments. In India we have two sets of governments-the Central Government and the State governments. At the same time, the people of India have only one category of citizenship, namely, Indian Citizenship. Which one is a Federal and which one is a Unitary feature in the above cases.

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CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.6: In every Federal state, there is a central government and one government in each of the constituent units. (True/False)

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Q.7: In a Federal system, the constitution of the state need not be written and rigid. (True/False)

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Q.8: An ideal federation is characterized by ..... citizenship. (Fill in the blank)

Q.9: In a federation, the constituent units have no share in the amendment of the constitution. (True/False)

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Q.10: Explain any two characteristics of Federal Government ? (within 75 words)

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5.5 LET US SUM UP

- Governments are classified into Unitary and Federal forms based on division of powers.
- In the Unitary form of government, all powers are concentrated in the single central government.The political divisions created under such a government have no constitutional existence.
- The important characteristics of the Unitary form of government include the existence of single governmnet, concentration of power, administrative units at the mercy of the centre, written or unwritten

constituion, flexibility of the constitution, supremacy of legislature and single citizenship.

- In the Federal form of government, a number of independent units combine to constitute a sovereign state, with each unit being able to keep its autonomy intact in the matter of internal administration.
- The important characteristics of the Federal form of government include co-existence of two sets of governments (central and state), constitutional division of powers between the central and state governments, written and rigid constitution, supremacy of the constitution, supremacy of judiciary, double citizenship, equal representation of the units in the upper house of the central legistature and role of the constituent units in the amendment of the constitution.



5.6 FURTHER READING

1) Agarwal, R. C. (2006). *Political Theory-Principles of Political Science.* New Delhi: S. Chand and Company.

2) Asirvatham, Eddy & Misra, K. K.(2006): *Political Theory*. New Delhi: S. Chand and Company.

3) Kapur, A. C.(2006). *Principles of Political Science*. New Delhi:S. Chand and Company.

4) Mahajan V. D. (2006). *Political Theory*. New Delhi: S. Chand and Company.

5.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans. to Q. No. 1 : True

Ans. to Q. No. 2 : True

Ans. to Q. No. 3 : False

Ans. to Q. No. 4 : False

Ans. to Q. No. 5 :

Merit : As the Unitary form of government is marked by a single executive and a single legislature, there can be no conflict regarding authority and responsibility for work. This accounts for administrative efficiency.

Demerit : In a Unitary government, sometimes, local self-government is ignored. The central government has no time to devote attention to local matters. People may not take interest in local matters.

Ans. to Q. No. 6: True

Ans. to Q. No. 7 : False

Ans. to Q. No. 8 : double

Ans. to Q. No. 9 : False

Ans. to Q. No. 10 :

a) The co-existence of two sets of governments: It is the most important feature of a Federal government. In every Federal state, there is a central government and one government in each of the constituent units. The units have their constitutional existence and are, therefore not subject to abolition by the central government.

b) Supremacy of Judiciary : In a federation, there must be a supreme independent and impartial judiciary as the guardian and interpreter of the constitution. It is necessary for settling constitutional conflicts between the centre and the units.



5.8 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Very Short Questions

Q.1 : Mention any two characteristics of the Unitary form of government.

Q.2 : Mention any two merits of the Federal form of government.

B) Short Questions (Answer each question in about 150 words)

Q.1: Point out any four merits and any four demerits of the Unitary form of government.

Q.2: Point out any four characteristics of the Federal form of government.

C) Long Questions :

Q.1: Explain the characteristics of the the Federal form of government.Mention any two merits and any two demerits of the Parliamentary form of government.

Q.2: Distinguish between the Unitary and Federal forms of government. Mention any two merits of the Unitary form of government and any two merits of the Federal form of government.

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