



2025-2026
Lincoln-Douglas Debate
Sourcebook Case 1

**A federal system of government is superior to a
unitary system of government.**

Affirmative Case: Individual Rights

"The rights of the individual should be the primary object of all governments." ("Mercy") It is because I agree with American revolutionary Mercy Otis Warren that I stand resolved:

A federalist system of government is superior to a unitary system of government

Before we go any further, let's establish what exactly we are going to be discussing today.

Def 1) Unitary Government

"A unitary state, or unitary government, is a political system where ultimate governing power is concentrated in a single national authority." ("Unitary")

Def 2) Federalist Government

"Unlike in a unitary state, sovereignty in federal political orders is non-centralized [...] between at least two levels so that units at each level have final authority and can be self-governing [...]. Citizens thus have political obligations to, or have their rights secured by, two authorities." ("Federalism")

In the course of this debate, we will be discussing these two systems of government and why you should value a federalist system over a unitary system. To accomplish this goal, I propose a universal value that we can use to weigh the two sides of the debate.

Value: Individual Rights

The Declaration of Independence states that men "are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights." It continues, "to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men." (Jefferson) The genius of the American revolution was that their new government's sole objective was the protection of the individual rights of the people. It is the affirmative position today that the protection of individual rights ought to continue to be the primary and only objective of government. Thus, whichever side of the debate best upholds this value deserves your ballot.

To demonstrate why the affirmative side best upholds individual rights, I am going to present three contentions:

1) Federalist systems uphold individual rights

There is a reason that the founding fathers of America, so focused on the protection of individual rights, established a federalist government. Because federalist governments spread power among different layers of government, individuals and communities are better protected from the abuse of power by any one body of government.

2) Unitary systems lack accountability

James Madison wrote in the Federalist Papers that “Complaints are everywhere heard [...] that our governments are too unstable, that the public good is disregarded in the conflicts of rival parties, and that measures are too often decided, not according to the rules of justice and the rights of the minor party, but by the superior force of an interested and overbearing majority.” (Madison)

The primary distinction between a federalist and unitary system is the number of authorities in the system. Because a unitary system only has one authoritative body, leaders of a unitary state are less accountable to the members of the state. If the central government makes a law, all are required to follow it. If the law happens to be unjust, the only recourse is to gather as individual citizens and publicly oppose it, hoping that the government listens to you and your band of dissidents. Your minority vote, as it were, has no power.

The protection of individual rights in a unitary system is entirely dependent on the benevolence of current political leaders.

This is why all authoritarian governments are, by definition, unitary. The unjust leaders must first remove the checks and balances inherent in a federalist system to consolidate power.

3) Unitary system risks outweigh rewards

My opponent is about to deliver a great speech about the benefits of a unitary system. There are many potential benefits to a unitary system, mostly involving a more streamlined government that can more effectively act in crisis situations. That is true. However, it is the affirmative stance that none of the potential benefits of a unitary system can outweigh the glaring risk: a lack of accountability on an institutional level allows for an abuse of power and a failure to uphold individual rights, the most important element of any political system.

Allow me to illustrate this concept. A failed state, according to The Economist, is “a state that can no longer perform the basic functions of government”. (“The A-Z”) Hallmarks of failed states are widespread corruption and criminality, refugees fleeing the country, sharp economic decline, and military intervention from both within and outside the state. These are states that have failed at the highest degree to uphold individual rights.

According to the Fund for Peace, a think tank that publishes the Fragile States Index, all of the 10 most fragile states in the world, those that could be considered completely failed states, have unitary governments or are recovering from a unitary dictatorship (“Global”).

When you don’t have the protections inherent in a federalist system of government, individual rights are at risk.

At the end of this debate round, you as the judge must ask yourself the question “why? Why should I value a federalist government over a unitary government?” The answer is that a federalist government best upholds the purpose of government – the protection of individual rights. I stand resolved that a federalist system of government is preferable to a unitary system. Stand with me to uphold federalism, the purpose of government, and the rights of every individual.

Works Cited

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