



2025-2026
Lincoln-Douglas Debate
Sourcebook Case 3

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

Affirmative Case: Liberty

Introduction

“The government is us; we are the government, you and I.” It is because I agree with the words of President Theodore Roosevelt that I stand resolved: a federal system of government is superior to a unitary system of government.

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

Definitions

To begin this round, allow me to define a few key terms. First, the Cornell Law School Legal Information Institute defines federalism as “...a system of government in which the same territory is controlled by two levels of government...an overarching national government is responsible for broader governance of larger..., areas, while the smaller subdivisions, states, and cities govern the issues of local concern.” Britannica defines a unitary state as “a system of political organization in which most or all of the governing power resides in a centralized government,”

To simplify: in a unitary country, the power to make decisions belongs to the national government. This is the structure of government in Great Britain and China. In a federal country, that power is divided between the national government and the governments of provinces or states. This is the system in Canada and the United States.

Value

In today’s round, we’ll discuss many important ideas. However, there is one value that I believe is most important: liberty. To have complete liberty, people ought to be both free from oppression and afforded the right to have their voice heard. The best forms of government protect liberty, and as such, it is the most important value to discuss today.

Contention One: Federalism Ensures True Democracy

In the wake of the revolutionary war, the framers of the constitution were committed to establishing a government that allowed the people to participate in the process of governance. Based on the failure of the Articles of Confederation, the founders knew that having a central government was important. In order to collect taxes, manage conflicts with other countries, and enforce basic national laws, there had to be a national government. However, the founders also knew that the needs and desires of Virginians and New Yorkers were different. A single national government could not implement laws that balanced the needs of the diverse people groups in

the country. With this in mind, they established a federal government system— one that gave states the right to decide for themselves on most issues. In Article 10 of the Constitution, they wrote “The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.” This system put greater power in the hands of each voting American to determine what the laws in their state would look like. Initially, this meant only landowning men had a say. But now, all Americans have an equal right to participate in the law-making process of their state as well as the country at large.

A perfect example of the liberty this system provides can be seen in state policies on the death penalty. At a national level, the death penalty is not forbidden (though it is used rarely). However, Americans have varied views on whether the government should be able to execute criminals. If the United States was a unitary country, all states would have to follow the same rules. But because of the additional liberty afforded by a federal system, each state is free to choose whether or not it will use the death penalty. In Utah— where most people favor capital punishment, the government is permitted to use the death penalty. In Michigan, where most people oppose it, the death penalty is illegal. A federal system allows for greater liberty by allowing each state to choose for itself what it will and will not permit.

Contention Two: AFF Protects from Tyranny

In 1798, the French government began taking American ships and sailors prisoner. As a result, the fledgling US and its former ally were on the brink of war. The national House of Representatives and Senate drafted two acts, called the Alien and Sedition Acts. They were signed into law by John Adams. These acts permitted the government the power to deport people without due process, as well as the ability to censor and punish anyone who spoke ill of the government. Both of these acts were controversial, as they seemed to violate articles of the Constitution. If the US had been under a unitary system of government, the states wouldn't have had a legal way to fight back against the national government's overreach of power. But because of the legal power each state possessed, they were able to defy the unjust laws. Virginia and Kentucky each passed resolutions at the state level that challenged the legality of the acts. These resolutions stand as enduring testaments to the important role played by state's rights in the fight for liberty. The National Constitution Center wrote in 2024, *“The Virginia Resolution's invocation of the fundamental rights of speech and press continues to inform the modern Supreme Court's interpretation of the First Amendment.”*

The Alien and Sedition Acts exemplify the value of federalist government systems. By dispersing power between states and the national government, unjust laws can be challenged more effectively, thereby protecting the liberty of citizens. The US was founded because of a colonial desire to challenge tyranny from the king. Absolute power corrupts absolutely, as the saying goes. Federalism ensures that no one governmental body possesses absolute power, thereby

protecting citizens from unjust uses of power and giving them a legitimate way to resist if needed.

Contention Three: AFF Ensures Liberty for All

Federal systems of government are superior to unitary ones because they ensure liberty for all the citizens of a country. By giving power to states to make decisions for themselves, citizens can play a greater role in determining the laws of the place in which they live. The federal government allows for everyone to have a voice. Federal government systems also give states the power necessary to resist unjust laws or tyranny from the national government. This protects democracy and provides balance, ensuring that countries stay fair and free. Because federal systems of government best ensure liberty for their people, they are superior to unitary systems of government. “We are the government, you and I,” and a federal system allows us to stay that way.

Examples

No Explicit Standard

Kelo v. New London

<https://www.oyez.org/cases/2004/04-108>

As recorded by Oyez Supreme Court Center, “New London, a city in Connecticut, used its eminent domain authority to seize private property to sell to private developers. The city said developing the land would create jobs and increase tax revenues.” However, according to the Institute of Justice, that plant has closed, and none of the complementary businesses intended to bring in revenue to the city ever opened. “The very land where Susette Kelo’s home once stood remains barren—home to nothing but feral cats, seagulls and weeds.”

But what about taxes?

Taxes are a general framework every member of the community is expected to pay— think of it like a membership to a gym. I have to pay to remain a part of the facility, and everyone who goes there, regardless of income or experience has to pay the same flat fee. In contrast, a principle like eminent domain allows for the government to take away ONE individual’s rights for the community. This is the principle we’re debating today— the idea that the government has the ability to target the individual property rights of one specific person for the interests of a group. (i.e Kelo v. New London)