

The Merits and Demerits of Federalism

As a political system, federalism has had both its supporters and its detractors. In a famous political science treatise, James Bryce argued that the merits of federalism far outweighed its demerits (*The American Commonwealth*, 3rd ed., New York: Macmillan, 1897). He listed the following arguments on behalf of federalism.

1. Federalism promotes national unity while permitting local "diversities" to continue.
2. Federalism prevents the rise of a despotic central government and does not threaten "the private liberties of the citizen." The states are "bulwarks" against the encroachment of the federal government.
3. Federalism "stimulates" the interest of citizens in local affairs, thereby sensitizing the people to their civic duties.
4. Federalism encourages local "experimentation" and reforms in political life that might not be tried initially at the federal level. In short, new policies can filter up from the state to the federal level.

Detractors, on the other hand, argue that federalism has a number of disadvantages.

1. Federalism encourages wasteful duplication of services between the levels of government and at times slows the political process to a snail's pace (as in the lengthy appeals of the court system).
2. Diversity of state laws and procedures creates inequities from a national perspective. (For example, the average felony conviction leads to thirteen months in jail in South Dakota as opposed to fifty-eight months in Massachusetts.)
3. There is ample proof that dispensing more powers to the states may be an unwise decision because states run their respective governments no more efficiently than federal bureaucrats run the national government in Washington, D.C.
4. Federalism can result in unequal opportunities, because the wealthier states can provide better schools, more advanced medical care, and more effective services than the poorer states.
5. The fragmentation of authority under federalism permits unscrupulous interest groups concentrated in specific states to acquire undue influence and political power in those states.