

Federalism and Public Policy

Power Distribution in American Governance
POSC 315: Introduction to Public Policy
Lecture 3.2

Summer 2025

California State University, Fullerton

What is Federalism?

Federalism Defined

Definition

Federalism: The division of power between a central government and regional governments

The distribution of power and authority on a geographical basis.

Core Features

- A system of checks and balances between the national and state governments

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- The founders believed that federalism would protect liberty
- Protects against **factions**: groups of citizens who have a common interest in some proposal that would either violate the rights of other citizens or harm the nation

The Founders' View

Governance Benefits

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Democratic Benefits

Governance Benefits

- Prevents faction dominance
- State policy experimentation
- Government closer to people

The Founders' View

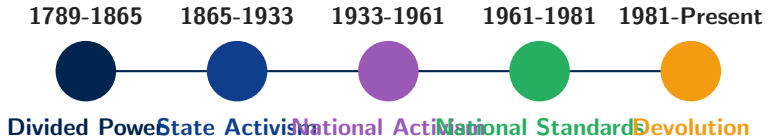
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Democratic Benefits

- Increases political participation
- More effective government
- More access points to government
- Increases policy innovation

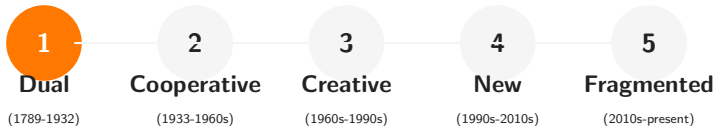
Eras of Federalism



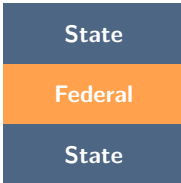
Models of Federalism

(from the Literature)

Five Models of Federalism



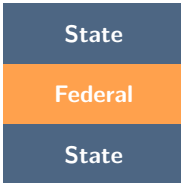
Dual Federalism (1789-1932)



**"Layer Cake"
Federalism**

- Clear division of authority

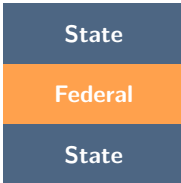
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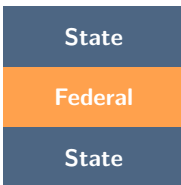
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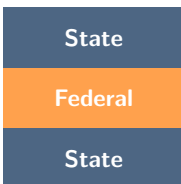
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- Overall: State-centered federalism

Cooperative Federalism (1933-1960s)



"Marble Cake"
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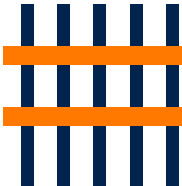
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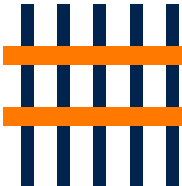
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"Picket Fence"
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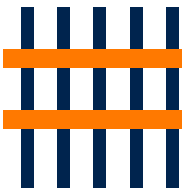
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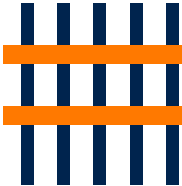
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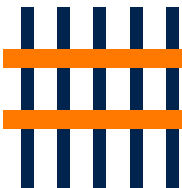
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"Pineapple Upside-Down"
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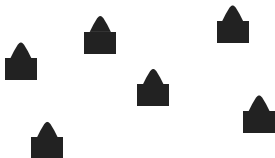
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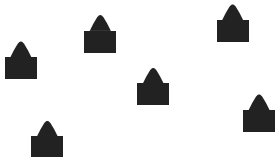
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Fragmented Federalism (2010s-present)



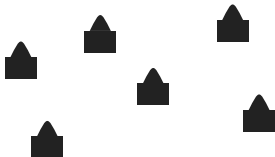
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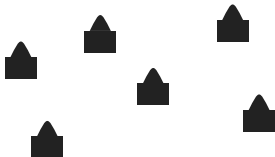
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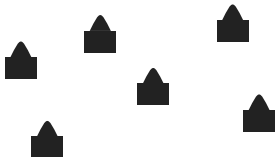
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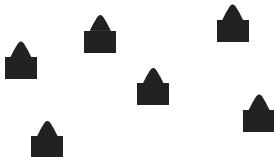
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- Federalism is fractured: dimensions of all previous models

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Federalism in Practice

Policy Implementation in a Federal System

“It is one of the happy incidents of the federal system that a single courageous State may, if its citizens choose, serve as a laboratory; and try novel social and economic experiments without risk to the rest of the country.”

— Justice Louis Brandeis (1932)

State Policy Innovation



State Laboratories

States experiment with
different policy
approaches



Policy Diffusion

Successful policies
spread across states



Comparative Analysis

Which approaches
work best?

Federal-State Coordination

Federal Tools

Federal-State Coordination

Federal Tools

- Categorical grants
- Block grants
- Mandates
- Regulatory frameworks

State Implementation

Federal-State Coordination

Federal Tools

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State Implementation

- Administrative adaptation
- Supplemental funding
- Waiver requests
- Local distribution

Understanding Federalism

Is Key to Understanding American Policy Design
and Implementation