**9 How Is Power Shared in the American System?**

The United States is built on a system of **federalism**, a form of government where power is divided between a **national government** and **state governments**. Unlike a unitary system (where power is centralized), federalism allows different levels of government to coexist and share authority. This balance is meant to protect freedom, promote local control, and ensure that no one level becomes too powerful.

But federalism is not always simple. Some powers belong only to the national government (like declaring war), others only to the states (like running elections), and many are shared (like taxing and making laws). Over time, debates over who should do what, especially in areas like education, healthcare, and public safety, have shaped U.S. history.

The Constitution provides a framework, but interpreting the limits and overlap of powers is an ongoing challenge, and one of the most important features of American politics, past and present.

**Key Terms and Definitions**

| **Term** | **Definition** |
| --- | --- |
| **Federalism** | A system of government in which power is divided between national and state governments. |
| **Delegated Powers** | Powers specifically given to the national government by the Constitution. |
| **Reserved Powers** | Powers kept by the states under the Tenth Amendment. |
| **Concurrent Powers** | Powers shared by both national and state governments (e.g., taxing, lawmaking). |
| **Supremacy Clause** | Part of the Constitution that says federal law is the "supreme law of the land." |
| **Tenth Amendment** | Part of the Bill of Rights that limits federal power by reserving other powers to the states. |

**Active Learning Exercise: Who’s in Charge? – A Federalism Mapping Challenge**

**Orienting Question:**

*Who should make the rules? Your state or the federal government?*

**Objective:**

Students will identify which level of government is responsible for various public policies and explore the benefits and challenges of federalism.

**Instructions:**

1. **Categorize the Powers (10–15 minutes):**  
   Give students a list of government actions and have them sort each into one of three categories:
   * **National (Federal) Power**
   * **State Power**
   * **Concurrent (Shared) Power**

**Sample Powers to Sort:**

* + Coining money
  + Conducting elections
  + Building roads
  + Regulating immigration
  + Setting marriage laws
  + Establishing public schools
  + Declaring war
  + Enforcing criminal law
  + Issuing driver’s licenses
  + Making treaties

Students can work in pairs or small groups and defend their choices.

1. **Extension Activity – Federalism in Action (Optional, 10 minutes):**  
   Choose a modern issue (e.g., marijuana legalization, gun control, education standards, minimum wage laws).  
   Ask: *Who should decide this? States or the federal government? Why?*  
   Groups present their reasoning and consider the consequences of having different rules in different places.

**Review Questions**

1. What is federalism, and why did the framers choose it?
2. What are delegated, reserved, and concurrent powers? Give examples of each.
3. How does the Supremacy Clause affect the balance of power?
4. Why might a state want to pass a law different from the federal government’s?
5. What are some challenges of having two levels of government sharing power?