

CIVICS

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Series - Article 5

IN THE CLASSROOM

» Why do we have a federal type government in the United States rather than a single centralized one like most other Western democracies?

» What accounts for the general anti-government feeling that has prevailed in the United States throughout its history?

» Why is government employment in the United States not considered the prestigious and sought-after career path as it is in most other countries?

These are subjects we are now ready to consider based on the preceding four articles in this series, i. e.:

In our country the term "government" has little meaning unless one specifies the *level* to which reference is being made: local, state or federal/national.

In addition, it is necessary to make it clear which government *branch* one is talking about: executive, legislative or judicial--or all three.

Thus the terms "government work" or "government job" carry a false implication, i.e. that all public sector employment is similar--when in truth the positions range from elected and appointed executives and judges, elected legislators, and millions of professional/technical/managerial/administrative/clerical employees in hundreds of different occupations.

A Federal Government

There are multiple reasons why

our country's government was established in 1789 on the federal principle and has operated thereon ever since. The thirteen colonies differed widely in many respects, and all were antipathetic to a single powerful central authority having just rebelled against what they considered such a government in England. In addition, the new country was very large and spread out; contained a wide variety of religious and economic groups among the colonies; and consisted of a very heterogeneous, individualistic and anti-elitist people.

So what homogeneity existed consisted of just this desire to be as free as possible from distant, superior authority--to enjoy local/regional autonomy combined with a national government of specified, limited powers. And that is exactly what our constitution written in 1789 established. It was the genius of the Founding Fathers to create a government based on federalism (as to level) and separation of powers (as to branch) which has been flexible enough to exist and flourish for the same 210 years ever since.

An Anti-Government Feeling

The major factor in breeding and sustaining a general anti-government feeling throughout American history was the immense geographic size of the country as it expanded ever westward. During the 19th century and into the 20th, the United States attracted people wanting to get away from the political, religious and social strictures of the Old World--for here there was room and space to develop new lives and livelihoods. And one could always move onwards/westward if government rules and regulations interfered with one's

freedom of action.

Local, territorial and state authorities were far more significant and present in the lives of the average citizen than the distant national government in Washington. What that national government *was* good for was to dole out land after having helped to take that land from native peoples--and then come to the settlers aid in case of human and natural disasters. While the Civil War and the increasing industrialization of the country provided a counter influence to this state of dispersed governmental power, antipathy towards government in general did not lessen but seemed actually to grow as the central national role became more expansive and necessary due to new technologies and national security issues.

These two aspects of American history--a government based on federalism rather than centralization and a continuing popular antipathy towards government in general--provide significant parts of the answer to the question regarding why government/public sector employment has a comparatively low prestige in the United States. However, a number of other factors in this regard must be brought to bear on this question before one can start thinking of ways in which this situation might be changed.

Hence the topic of our next article.

(Professor Paul Lorentzen, Public Employees Roundtable Program Committee Chair provides a bi-monthly article.)