American Federalism

Federalism is a governance system that is based on overlapping, sharing and competing powers among different state levels. The system creates a division of authority as well as power governing between regional and central (national) government. Government powers in the United States of America are divided between states and central (federal) government that make up the state.

The system of government is therefore credited for making the US one of leading democracies and an economic powerhouse across the globe. This paper focuses on the state and nature of American federalism and it also offers examples of how the states federalism shaped political behavior in the country. The paper finally discusses the relationship between the states and US federal government as well as how it impacts creation of policies in the country.

Government powers in the American federalism are divided into states and central (federal government). Authority within federal government is then distributed among the different branches of the government. Authority distribution between the state and federal government also creates a connection that supplies balances and checks, thus allowing them to restrain them from each other and misusing powers bestowed on them by the United States constitution (Mattern, 2006 p. 70-71).

Through American federalism, state and local governments can also control activities of the federal government more especially in the use of power. The federal government additionally has power to prevent state and local governments from abusing their constitutional powers. Federalism at the national level offers checks and balances through the three arms of the government including the legislature, executive and the judiciary.

The executive branch is made up of the administration and the president. The legislative branch (Congress) is made up of two chambers including the Senate and House of Representatives. The judicial branch on the other hand comprises of the courts. Since the three branches share power, each of them can limit the powers of the other branches to some extent.

American federalism has grown considerably from its beginnings to the present political system. The balance of boundaries and powers between state and national government has also been changing over time since it was introduced. During the inception of this system of government, the states were not seen as administrative units for policy implementation made by central government.

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The states therefore fully operated as independent constitutional polities that were also tasked with different policies for their citizens. Framers of the US constitution aimed at making the states to be the central policy makers in the federal system, not the central (federal) government (Gerstone, 1997, p. 87). They also achieved this by granting limited powers to the central government that mainly focused on the nation’s national economic issue, military affairs and national economic issues, for instance free flow of commerce across the US boundaries.

The States were tasked with addressing many domestic policy issues in ways that were perceived excellent as it relates to their exceptional needs, history and culture. They dealt with matters of local importance including criminal law and economic regulation. Federal government presently is the key policy maker and the states have taken a lot of responsibility in federal policies implementation.

The 2010 Health Care Reform Act is an excellent example of an act created and passed by federal government even though its partial implementation was carried out by state governments. It is also clear that local and state governments are presently involved in many issues having ramifications, international aspects or consequences, a field that the federal government previously dominated.

Country, municipal and states governments have also been employing many nonbinding resolutions and referendums pertaining to foreign relations for example, creation of sister city relations as well as trade governments with foreign countries to encourage foreign direct investment and exports. Council of State Governments among other state and municipal associations held an annual meeting in 1999, Quebec City in Canada offering logistical and financial support for the conference (Michelmann et al., 2009, p. 307).

In the concept of New Federalism, attempts have also made to help reduce federal government power expansion and to revive powers and authority of state and local governments for example, those relating to environmental regulation at state and county levels (Sarat, 2008, p.47-49). American Civil War is among many factors that have enhanced the concept of federalism the American political trend.

Between 1790 and 1865, the nature of American federalism was also characterized by political and constitutional conflict regarding interpretation of federal authority. In nation centered expansive interpretation of federal authority thus, ultimate supremacy and sovereignty lies within the federal government.

Such interpretation offers federal government supremacy and rule over the state based on the fact that it has freedom and autonomy to create laws as long as they do not violate or conflict federal laws. State centered federalism interpretation is also based on the concept of double sovereignty where the states and federal government have equal sovereign powers in all areas that the government is not assigned.

The federal’s government’s political power increased significantly during and after the American Civil War between 1860 and 1865 fought over question over question of whether slavery and was a matter of federal and state policy. The victory of northern states over those of the south reduced powers of states in regards regarding liberties and civil rights such as rights to participate in political processes for example voting rights granted to women and African Americans in elections.

Between 1789 and 1930s, dual federalism was a prevalent political system because of considerable separation of national and state government functions. Economic crisis of the Great Depression that started in 1929 and late 1930s also expanded functions of federal government even further.

The federal government under New Deal program became more engaged in matters that were under jurisdiction of the states previously (Rusheky, 2013, p. 23). The deal also gave rise to unemployment reimbursement, social security and price stabilization programs that saw federal government get involved in matters relating to individuals even more. It is a move that marked the beginning of cooperative federalism, a federalism system that saw the federal government work closely in creation and implementation of various government policies with the states.

This also significantly impacted American political ideologies such as conservation and liberalism as the federal government focused more on ideology that supports increased involvement of government in issues that affect its citizens significantly especially extending services to the privileged in the society.

In 1950s and 1960s federal government grew to be a principal advocate of civil rights and liberties. It enacted laws changing the American political trend at state, local and national levels. Affirmative Action laws are also implemented by the federal government to ensure that the interests of minority groups are given consideration especially in low level elective positions.

The Electoral College determined by federal system has also ensured fairness and equity in national leaders selection for instance the vice presidents and presidents because they are chosen based on majority votes in regional support as opposed to the popular vote that can be quite disadvantageous to states and regions that are less populated (Grcic, 2011, p. 86-87).

The United States federal government and states relationship also influences creation of American policies in general. States are involved in creation of the overall policies because they do not affect personal incomes and state budgets at state levels. Therefore, the states are largely involved in development and passing of policies and laws that have financial implications to incomes of state governments and individuals through income taxation generating most of revenue for the federal government.

The two governments additionally share powers related to money spent on general welfare for example, approval of national budget and limits government borrowings. They are involved in creating policies that enhance interstate commerce such as building of road networks as well as other crucial infrastructure across the states.

It is therefore clear that the American federalism system of governance has contributed significantly to creation and passing of ideal policies overall, to the advantage of the American people.

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