

# Political Patterns and Processes

## AP Human Geography

### Introduction to Political Geography

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**Political geography** studies how people organise and control space. A **state** is a political unit with territory, a permanent population, a government and **sovereignty** : authority to govern itself rather than being governed by another state. Borders may be disputed; sovereignty does not mean unlimited practical freedom from treaties or economic pressures.

A **nation** is a community with a shared identity, often linked to history, language or culture. It is not identical to citizenship or necessarily one uniform ethnic group. A **nation-state** describes a close match between a nation's territory and a state's borders. Japan is often taught as an approximation, not a claim that everyone shares one identity: Japan also recognises the indigenous Ainu people.

A **multinational state** includes more than one national community. Canada's 2006 parliamentary recognition of the Québécois as a nation within Canada illustrates that nationhood need not mean independent statehood. A **stateless nation** lacks an independent state of its own; the Kurds are a commonly taught example. This does not mean all its members lack legal citizenship. A **multistate nation** extends across more than one state; it can overlap with stateless nationhood. Autonomous or semiautonomous regions exercise specified self-government within a larger state. Scotland's devolved legislature is an example of powers below the state level, not a separate independent state.

**Original classification task.** Country A governs its own territory and includes two communities identifying as separate nations. One has an elected regional legislature but no independent foreign policy. Identify the state, the national communities and the regional unit. **Check:** Country A is a multinational state; national identity and regional self-government do not by themselves establish another sovereign country.

**Exam connection – 2025 AP Human Geography, Set 1, Q1(A).** The question asks for a definition of an independent state. A possible response is “a political entity with an independent government that governs its own territory.” The official scheme accepts several formulations; it does not require every answer to list recognition, sovereignty and territory as three separate marks. Apply each question's actual command and scheme.



*UN General Assembly hall: international cooperation between member states does not erase their separate governments*

## Political Power and Territoriality

**Territoriality** concerns connections between people, culture, economic activity and land, and attempts to influence or control an area. Authority over land can affect resource access, movement and livelihoods. **Self-determination** means a people's ability to determine its political status; it does not make every national community an independent state automatically.

Colonialism involves external control of territory and people, sometimes with settlement. Imperialism is the wider extension of power over other societies. Independence movements and negotiated changes can alter political boundaries. **Neocolonialism** describes continuing unequal influence, especially economic influence, after formal independence; foreign trade or investment alone does not prove it.

**Choke points** are narrow strategic passages, such as the Suez Canal or Strait of Malacca. Disruption can increase shipping costs and give particular routes strategic importance. Geography does not establish unrestricted legal control over all passing ships. **Shatterbelts** are regions where internal divisions interact with competition between external powers; conflict is not an inevitable consequence of ethnic diversity.

**Original explanation task.** Country B depends on one overseas buyer for most export revenue. Explain how this could constrain policy without formal foreign government of its territory. **Check:** a threat to withdraw purchases may put pressure on domestic decisions. To establish neocolonial influence, investigate unequal bargaining power and actual control, not merely the existence of trade.

## Political Boundaries

A **boundary** marks a territorial division, internationally or within a state. Classify its history separately from its shape or current function.

- **Antecedent** boundaries precede the later development of the cultural landscape or intensive settlement. “Before settlement” must not imply that Indigenous inhabitants were absent.
- **Subsequent** boundaries develop after settlement and cultural landscapes. **Consequent** boundaries are drawn to reflect divisions such as language or religion; they are often treated as a kind of subsequent boundary.
- **Superimposed** boundaries are imposed with little regard for existing cultural patterns, often by an external power. They need not be straight.
- **Relic** (also “relict”) boundaries no longer function politically but remain evident in landscapes or patterns, as with surviving traces of the Berlin Wall.
- **Geometric** boundaries follow straight lines or geometric rules. Their geometry alone does not establish when, why or by whom they were created.

**Original classification task.** A treaty draws a straight line across two existing language communities without consulting them. Later the border disappears, but old checkpoints remain. At creation it is geometric and superimposed; later its traces are relic. These labels answer different questions and can overlap.



*Logging changes land cover; this photograph alone does not identify a political boundary or prove who governs the land*

Boundary establishment has related activities: **definition** agrees the wording; **delimitation** maps the line; **demarcation** marks it physically; **administration** manages crossings and enforcement. A legal boundary need not have a continuous fence. Disputes can concern the wording (**definitional**), the line's position (**locational**), cross-

ing rules (**operational**) or resources (**allocational**). A resource extending across a border can produce competing claims even where the line itself is agreed.

Political agreements can also establish buffer areas and rules for territorial claims. The 1953 Korean Armistice established a military demarcation line and a demilitarized zone separating opposing forces; a buffer zone is not simply another name for every international boundary. The 1884–1885 Berlin Conference established rules for colonial claims in Africa. It must not be described as one meeting drawing every modern African border. These examples illustrate different political processes, not one universal boundary history.

**Original dispute task.** Two states agree on a river boundary but disagree over shared irrigation withdrawals. Identify the main issue and explain a mechanism. **Check:** this is principally allocational: upstream withdrawal can reduce downstream supply. It is not necessarily a failed attempt to mark the boundary.

The **UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)** distinguishes maritime rights. A territorial sea can extend up to 12 nautical miles from the relevant baseline; sovereignty there is subject to passage rules. An **exclusive economic zone (EEZ)** can extend up to 200 nautical miles from the baseline and gives specified resource rights, not complete sovereignty over all movement. Other states retain navigation and overflight freedoms under the Convention. Facing or adjacent coasts can produce overlapping claims requiring delimitation; neither distance is an automatic exclusive entitlement regardless of neighbours.

The shape of a state can influence travel and communication, but does not determine governance quality.



AP HuG · U4 · five shapes of states

*State shapes suggest possible access problems; transport, terrain, institutions and capital location also matter*

Compact means relatively concentrated; elongated means long and narrow; fragmented means separated parts; perforated means surrounding another state; prorupted means a projecting extension. An elongated state may face long travel distances, while a fragmented state may depend on sea or air links. A compact state can still have poor access if mountains or weak infrastructure interrupt routes.

■ Internal boundaries and voting

Internal boundaries organise jurisdictions, services, representation and data collection.

**Redistricting** redraws electoral districts. **Gerrymandering** manipulates district boundaries to advantage a political group; not every redistricting is gerrymandering. **Packing** concentrates opponents in fewer districts; **cracking** splits them among districts where they are outvoted.

**Original voting model.** Twenty adjacent cells form a four-row, five-column town. Each cell contains one voter. Every row reads A, A, A, B, B. There are 12 A voters and 8 B voters. Make four contiguous districts of five voters each, with one seat per district and simple majority voting.

Plan R uses each complete row as one district: A wins all four seats. Plan P uses the following district numbers, with the voters unchanged:

| Row | Cell 1 | Cell 2 | Cell 3 | Cell 4 | Cell 5 |
|-----|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| 1   | 1      | 1      | 3      | 3      | 3      |
| 2   | 1      | 1      | 1      | 3      | 3      |
| 3   | 2      | 2      | 2      | 4      | 4      |
| 4   | 2      | 2      | 4      | 4      | 4      |

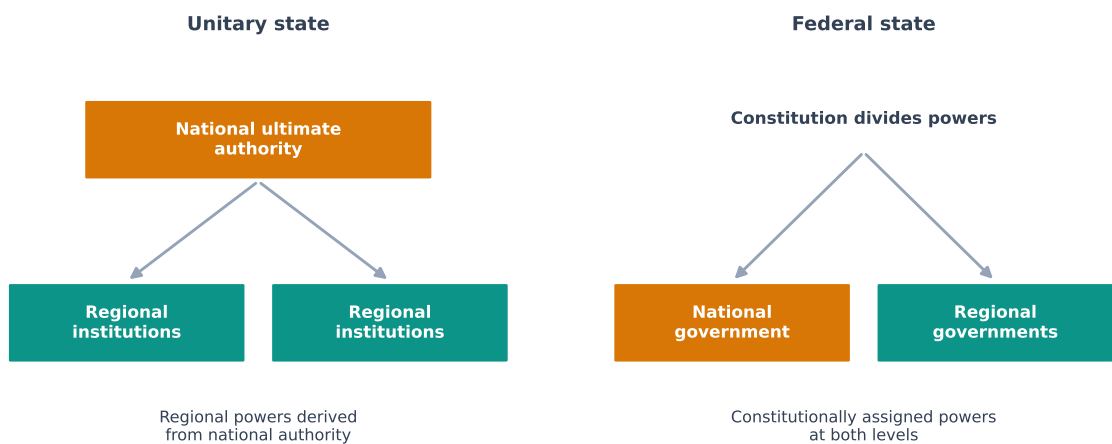
**Try it:** count each party in every district before checking. **Worked check:** Plan P packs A into districts 1 and 2 (5 A each), while districts 3 and 4 each contain 1 A and 4 B. A receives 60% of votes but only two of four seats under P, compared with four under R. The original model isolates boundary effects: all voters participate and all districts are equal and contiguous. Real evaluations also require evidence about intent, legal criteria and the geography of voters; unequal vote and seat shares alone do not prove unlawful manipulation.

Forms of Governance

A **unitary state** has ultimate authority concentrated nationally; regional bodies can still exercise delegated or devolved powers. A **federal state** constitutionally divides powers between national and regional governments. Canada’s federal and provincial legislatures have assigned powers; the United Kingdom illustrates devolution within a system where Parliament retains legislative supremacy. Federal and unitary describe the territorial organisation of authority, not whether a state is democratic.



*A parliament building does not by itself reveal the constitutional division of power*



*Compare the source of regional powers, not simply the presence of regional offices*

**Original comparison.** In State U, the national legislature can alter powers delegated to provincial offices. In State F, a constitution assigns regional legislatures authority over specified policy areas. Both have regional capitals. Identify the arrangements and explain a spatial consequence. **Check:** U is unitary and F federal. In F, regional capitals can become policy-making centres, allowing some local variation. Federalism can accommodate diversity but may also complicate coordination; neither arrangement automatically suits one size or culture.

# Devolution and Challenges to Sovereignty

**Devolution** transfers or disperses power from the centre to subnational units. In broad AP usage, it also covers fragmentation that can end in state disintegration. **Autonomy** is a degree of self-government; it is not identical to independence. Devolution can respond to regional demands and sometimes maintain a state rather than destroy it.

Physical separation, economic inequality, ethnic separatism and political exclusion can encourage demands for regional power. **Irredentism** seeks to incorporate territory in another state on grounds such as shared national identity. Ethnic cleansing forcibly removes a group from an area; terrorism uses violence or threats for political purposes. These can destabilise territorial control, but regional differences and violent acts do not mechanically produce devolution. Explain the actors, demands and government response.



*An international border fence illustrates boundary administration; it is not direct evidence of power being devolved within a state*

**Supranational organisations** coordinate action above the state scale, for example on trade, security or environmental problems. The AP framework groups the EU, UN, NATO, ASEAN, African Union and Arctic Council here, although their decision powers differ. Common rules can limit individual member choices while helping states achieve shared aims. UN General Assembly recommendations must not be treated as identical to binding Security Council decisions or EU rules in transferred policy areas.

Communication technology can help movements organise across regions or borders and help institutions monitor agreements. It can also strengthen state monitoring and coordination. States can regulate networks and capital flows; “the internet crosses every border freely” is not a reliable rule.

**Original sovereignty task.** States agree to a common river-pollution standard and joint monitoring. Explain a benefit and a limit on national action. **Check:** shared monitoring can reduce pollution spilling across borders, but each member's freedom to choose weaker standards is constrained by its commitment. The effect depends on the agreement and enforcement, not simply membership in any organisation.

## Centrifugal and Centripetal Forces

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**Centrifugal forces** weaken cohesion at a specified scale. Unequal public investment or exclusion can produce resentment and separatist demands. Severe losses of authority and services can contribute to what textbooks call **failed states**

; this is a broad description, not a single inevitable outcome or a neutral measure without criteria.

**Centripetal forces** strengthen cohesion, for example inclusive institutions, equitable infrastructure and shared civic symbols. **Ethnonationalism** links nationhood to ethnic identity. It can unite an ethnic community while excluding others or weakening wider state cohesion. There is no universally strongest force independent of context.

**Original scale task.** A new rail network connects previously underserved regions; a national language policy gives services only in one group's language. Explain why one may build cohesion and the other may have different effects across groups. **Check:** improved access can reduce isolation and inequality; an exclusive language rule can strengthen one group's identity but alienate others. Examine participation and access rather than classifying every language policy or national symbol as automatically unifying.



*A skyline shows built form, not whether residents share political loyalties or whether state cohesion is increasing*

## Exam tips

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Define the entity and scale. Classify boundary history, geometry and function separately. Compare governance using constitutional powers. Explain who is affected, using a mechanism supported by evidence; one feature alone cannot establish conflict, independence or unity.