

Political Patterns and Processes

AP Human Geography

Introduction to Political Geography

Political geography 政治地理学 studies how humans divide and control space. Its key units:

- A **state** 国家 (country) is an area with defined **borders**, a permanent population, a government, and **sovereignty** 主权 — full control over its own affairs.
- A **nation** 民族 is a group of people with a shared culture and identity; a **nation-state** 民族国家 is a state whose borders match one nation (Japan is close).
- A **multinational state** 多民族国家 contains several nations; a **stateless nation** 无国家民族 (like the Kurds) has no state of its own.

Worked example (a real AP exam question). “Define the concept of an independent state.” (2025) A full-mark answer: “A sovereign country that governs itself and its own territory, is not controlled by any outside power, and is recognised by other states.” The command word **Define** wants a short, precise meaning — one clear sentence is enough. You do **not** need examples or explanation here; save those for the “Describe” and “Explain” parts.



UN General Assembly: sovereignty and recognition among states

Political Power and Territoriality

Territoriality 领域性 is the attempt by a person or group to control people and things by controlling an area. Power is expressed geographically through control of land, people, and resources.

- **Colonialism** and **imperialism** built empires by taking control of distant territory; **neocolonialism** 新殖民主义 is continued economic control after formal independence.
- **Choke points** 咽喉要道 (narrow passages like the Suez Canal or the Strait of Malacca) and **shatterbelts** 破碎地带 (regions caught between competing powers) show how geography shapes political power.

Political Boundaries



A clear-cut landscape: political boundaries and land control shape resource use

A **boundary** 边界 is a line that marks the limit of a state's territory. Types by origin:



AP HuG · U4 · five shapes of states

States take different shapes; each shape affects how easily the state can be governed

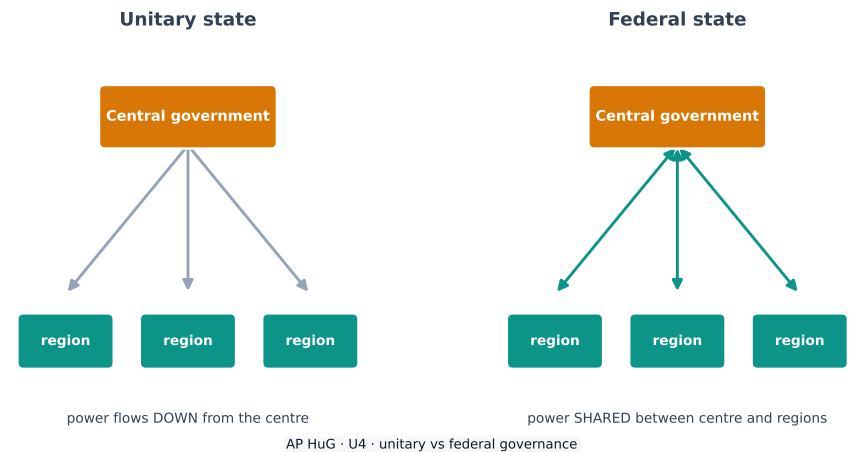
- **Antecedent** 先成边界 (drawn before dense settlement), **subsequent** 后成边界 (drawn as cultures develop), **superimposed** 叠加边界 (forced on by an outside power, ignoring local culture), and **relic** 残余边界 (no longer a border but still visible, like the Berlin Wall).
- **Definition, delimitation, and demarcation** are the steps of setting a boundary: agreeing wording, drawing it on a map, then marking it on the ground.
- At sea, the **UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)** 联合国海洋法公约 sets each coastal state's **territorial sea** and an **exclusive economic zone (EEZ)** 专属经济区, defining rights to fishing and seabed resources.
- The **shape of a state** matters: **compact** states are easy to govern; **elongated**, **fragmented**, **perforated**, and **prorupted** shapes create governing challenges.

Forms of Governance



A parliament building: political geography studies how power is organised over territory

States organise power between the centre and the regions in two main ways:



A unitary state keeps power central; a federal state shares power with regional governments

- A **unitary state** 单一制国家 keeps most power in the **central** government (France). It works best in small or culturally uniform countries.
- A **federal state** 联邦制国家 shares power between the centre and **regional** governments (USA, India). It suits large or diverse countries.
- **Gerrymandering** 选区划分不公 is redrawing voting district boundaries to favour one group — a political use of geography.

Devolution and Challenges to Sovereignty

Devolution 权力下放 is the transfer of power from a central government down to regional governments. It is driven by **devolutionary factors**: ethnic or religious differences, physical geography (islands, mountains), and economic inequality.

- Strong differences can lead to **autonomy** 自治 for a region, or even a movement for full independence.
- Sovereignty is also challenged from outside by **supranational organisations** 超国家组织 (the EU, UN), by globalisation, and by the internet, which crosses borders freely.



Hard borders and contested control: sovereignty challenges on the ground

Centrifugal and Centripetal Forces

Two opposing forces act on every state:

- **Centrifugal forces** 离心力 pull a state **apart** — ethnic conflict, uneven development, and weak identity can lead to **failed states** 失败国家 and separatist movements.
- **Centripetal forces** 向心力 hold a state **together** — a shared language, national symbols, fair infrastructure, and a strong national identity (**ethnonationalism** 族裔民族主义 when tied to one ethnic group).

Governments strengthen centripetal forces (national holidays, a common language) to keep the state unified. Balancing these forces is the central task of political geography.



Cities concentrate political and economic power across territory

Exam tips

- Keep **state** (territory + sovereignty), **nation** (a people), and **nation-state** clearly separate.
- Classify a boundary by history (**antecedent** / **subsequent** / **superimposed** / **relict**) and by stage (defined to administered).
- Name the boundary-dispute type: **definitional**, **locational**, **operational**, or **allocational**.
- Compare **unitary** and **federal** governance, and link the choice to managing diversity.
- Explain instability through **centrifugal** and **centripetal** forces and **devolution**; use neutral examples.