

Federalism vs. Centralism: Why Does It Matter?

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It is not conceived how a national representation, owing its origin to an existing fundamental pact, can have the power to reform or change it as it may think proper. Upon what principal of constitutional right can it be founded? . . . Therefore, the State of Coahuila and Texas, lawfully represented by its legislature, protests the solemn manner, that having joined in the confederacy by virtue of the fundamental pact, and on the basis therein established, it neither does, or ever will, recognize the acts and measures emanating from the general congress, should they not conform to the plain meaning of the aforementioned articles. It will admit no other amendments of the constitutions than those effected conformability to the steps and requisites provided by the same; on the contrary, it will regard any measure, transcending these legal provisions, as a violation of its sovereignty.

Legislature of Coahuila and Texas
Monclova, April 22, 1835

For many years the Texas Revolution has been portrayed as a conflict between Texans and Mexicans, an interpretation that automatically casts the conflict as racial in nature. True, racial animosity developed, however, a close examination indicates this was more of an outcome of the revolution than its specific origin. The same examination reveals that more than race, ideology played a larger role in the Texas Revolution than often acknowledged. The root cause of Mexico's ongoing civil war—a conflict of which the Texas Revolution was an episode—rests on changing attitudes towards government sparked by events in Europe and North America.

For most of history, the world's population had been ruled by various monarchs who went by such titles as king, emperor, czar, etc. Political authority, or sovereignty, rested in the hands of royal families that passed their wealth, status, and power on to their offspring. While wars might occasionally dethrone a family, royal dynasties once established could look forward to generations of ruling over their subjects. Intermarriage between royal families produced a system of strong alliances whose members supported and protected one another. Reinforcing royal power even further was the belief that monarchical societies were natural. Moreover,

monarchs routinely held the title of protector of the state's religion, making their positions seem preordained and backed by God. In this scenario, opposition to the monarch was not only a civil offense but a religious one as well.

One of the hallmarks of western civilization was a period of introspection as a means to make sense of the world. This era of questioning took place over several historical phases that are usually categorized as the Protestant Reformation, Renaissance, and Enlightenment. The first resulted in the death of the notion of the divine right of kings, the second focused attention on man and his existence on earth, and the third explored alternative forms of government intended to shift power away from the monarch to the individual. All three periods shaped the world in which we live today.

The American Revolution was a direct outgrowth of the European Enlightenment. Throughout the late 1600s and into the 1700s, intellectuals criticized the monarchy and the stratified society it produced, striving to identify a form of government to counter the existing system. The model they settled on was that of the republic as once practiced in the Greco-Roman world. The concept of a republic was simple. Unlike in a monarchy, where the inhabitants of a state belong to the monarch and all power flows downward from the king to his subjects, a republic centers around individuals, called citizens, who elect representatives to carry out their will. In a traditional monarchy, the ruler is sovereign, or the source of authority. In a republic, sovereignty resides with the citizens. While by today's standards the idea of the republic does not appear to be radical, the rise of republican ideology in the early nineteenth century threatened the existing world order as republicans began demanding to be heard. Their voices cried out in the former European colonies of the western hemisphere that were just then beginning to shake off centuries of monarchial rule.

The core issue of what became a struggle between the political concepts known as centralism and federalism centered on the issue of where authority (sovereignty) should rest. In a centralized system such as a monarchy, a small circle of elites (nobles, clergymen, and military officers) made laws, enforced laws, and judged lawbreakers. The majority of the population (i.e., subjects) in a centralized system lack the ability to challenge the system since it is so powerful. However, under federalism the power rests with the individual citizens who entrust a small number of their peers as representatives who, through elections, they endow with the power to govern for them. From an organizational standpoint, authority flows from the citizen to the state in which he resides and then on to the national government. The basic concept is that this authority, although it may temporarily rest elsewhere, ultimately belongs to the citizens and not the officials they elect. This simple fact is the basis of self-government as we understand it.

The struggle between centralism and federalism is one of the most important facets of Mexican history. In 1824 Mexico's adoption of a federal system represented a break from centuries of centralist rule under a succession of Spanish monarchs. The break, however, represented more than just a change of political systems—it fundamentally threatened to overturn Mexican society by eliminating the power of the elites. Clergymen, army officers, and landowners pushed back against Mexico's newly enfranchised masses that demanded a greater say in their own lives. This ideological struggle between Mexicans produced what some historians refer to as Mexico's Federalist Wars which spanned a period of nearly fifty years.

That takes us to the twin Mexican state of Coahuila and Texas which existed from 1824 until 1835. The two former Spanish provinces were combined into a single unit because neither by itself had the number of inhabitants required for statehood. Although joined together, important differences in the character of the two populations existed even though the people

living in each region were Mexican nationals. Proximity to Louisiana gave Tejanos access to foreign ideas, goods, and customs that Mexicans living further south lacked. Texas was also the site of numerous filibustering expeditions and a major rebellion against the Spanish crown during the decade of 1810 to 1820. Many of the leading Tejano families participated in these events as supporters of both independence and the establishment of republican government. Both Tejanos and colonists from the United States applauded Mexico's adoption of the Federal Constitution of 1824.

The issue of centralism vs. federalism erupted in Coahuila and Texas just as it did on the broader national scene. Located closer geographically to the center of Mexico, politicians from the state's capital of Saltillo tended to reflect the centralist opinion popular in Mexico City. Beginning in the late 1820s, a coalition between politicians from Monclova in northern Coahuila and San Antonio de Béxar in Texas worked to wrest control of the state from Saltillo's centralist faction. Ultimately, with the support of Texas' colonists, the federalist faction succeeded in relocating the capital north to the federalist stronghold of Monclova. Nationally, though, centralism was on the rise. The real importance of Santa Anna's revocation of the Constitution of 1824 was that it striped states of the power guaranteed to them under the federal system and shifted it to the centralist national government in Mexico City. Already at odds with one another over this and other issues, Coahuila and Texas took sides: Coahuila embraced Santa Anna and the supporters of centralism, while Texas pronounced for federalism. This struggle over the future of Mexico lay at the core of what became known as the Texas Revolution.