Title Slide

Narrator: No audio.

Slide 2

Title: Three Primary Forms of Democratic Governments

Slide Content:

[Image of the British House of Parliament, as seen across Westminster Bridge]

Narrator: Let’s begin by addressing the three primary forms that democratic governments take, in terms of the relationship between the central government and the geographical subdivisions. There are three primary relationships. They are unitary, federal, and confederation.

Slide 3

Title: Unitary System

Slide Content:

[Graphic showing the Central Government directing towards individual Political Units]

Narrator: In a unitary system the central government is the final locus of power. Great Britain has a unitary form of government. The regional subdivisions of Great Britain can be manipulated at will by the central government.

Slide 4

Title: Federal System

Slide Content:

[Graphic showing the Central Government directing towards and receiving from individual Political Units]

Narrator: In a federal government, both the central government and the regional governments are empowered by the constitution. The single most important factor in identifying a federal system is that both the central and geographic subdivisions have an independent legal basis. In a federal system when laws conflict, the central system takes precedence.

Slide 5

Title: Confederation

Slide Content:
Narrator: In a confederation, both the central government and the regional governments are empowered by the constitution. Again, they both have an independent legal basis. The key difference is that in a confederation, when laws conflict, the regional system takes precedence.

In the case of the United States, the initial government formed was a confederation. The system proved to be unworkable and was replaced by the current federal system “in order to provide a more perfect union.” The constitutional convention was initially chartered to “fix” the confederation; they obviously chose to replace it. Confederations are very rare in today’s world.

The countries discussed in this module were selected to include at least one example of each of the three types of government organization. Please insure that you visit the linked country websites, as they will provide the bulk of the required information.

Slide 6
Title: British Government
Slide Content:
[Image of Buckingham Palace with an image of the Union Jack projected onto it]

Narrator: Great Britain is unitary, Germany is federal, and Switzerland is a confederation. It is important to note that the types of government organization used by democracies are rarely pure. Autocracies, by contrast, are almost always pure unitary systems.

We will spend a little extra time on Great Britain. It is known as the mother of parliaments. We will use the British Parliament as the standard for identifying variations among other parliamentary countries.

Great Britain does not have a single document constitution. Their constitution consists of a rather large set of documents beginning with the Magna Carta. Great Britain is a unitary state.

Slide 7
Title: British Government
Slide Content:
[Image of Queen Elizabeth II]

Narrator: There are two key governmental executive positions in every country. The two positions are normally separated by democratic governments and are both held by a single individual in autocratic systems. The United States is the obvious exception. The President is both the chief of state and the head of government.
Normally, the chief of state is a largely ceremonial position with minimal if any actual political power. In Great Britain, the position is held by the reigning monarch. The head of government is held by the prime minister. That is the person actually responsible for the correct and efficient operation of the government.

There are important terms that are helpful in comparing parliaments and legislative branches. If there is one house (example – the Israel Knesset) it is unicameral. If there are two houses it is referred to as bicameral. If both houses are elected in the same manner, it is called a single regime system. (Example: the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives are both elected by popular vote.) If the two chambers are elected by different electoral system, it is dual regime. (Example: the British House of Lords is based on aristocratic status, while the House of Commons members are elected by popular vote.)

Slide 8

Title: British Government

Slide Content:

[Image of the debating chamber of the British House of Commons]

Narrator: British Parliament is a bicameral dual regime system. The House of Lords consists of 96 aristocrats seated in the House of Lords. Membership is based on being the title holder within a given aristocratic family. The House of Lords is relatively weak, its most important power is the ability to delay the implementation of the law for relatively short period of time.

The House of Commons is composed of members of parliament elected by each of the districts for a single term. The term can be no longer than five years. Once a parliament is elected, if there is a majority party (enough members to represent 50% plus one), members of that party then elect the prime minister and all the other ministers.

Slide 9

Title: British Government

Slide Content:

[Image of David Cameron]

Narrator: If no party wins a clear majority, the largest party will normally form a coalition with another party to gather enough seats to hold a majority. Election of the prime minister and other ministers is then conducted. Do yourself a favor, never ask anyone, from a country with a parliamentary system, whom they voted for prime minister. In order to become prime minister, an individual must first be elected to parliament, and then elected by the members of parliament to become prime minister.

In addition to the five-year clock, a parliamentary session (sometimes called a “government”) can end in two ways. If the prime minister loses a no-confidence vote, Parliament is dissolved by the Queen and elections are scheduled usually in about 4 to 6 weeks. A caretaker government takes over during the campaign. A vote of no-confidence usually occurs when the prime minister attempts to use the majority
advantage to force an unpopular bill through the parliament. Everyone voting understands that failure of the bill will mean termination of the current session. Declaring a confidence vote sometimes preserves the majority.

In addition to a “no-confidence vote” a session can end with a “snap election.” In a snap election, the Prime Minister requests an end to the parliament, necessitating new elections. Under normal circumstances the prime minister would only request a snap election when the majority party enjoys high popularity and is very likely to maintain the majority. The prize is restarting the five-year clock.

**Slide 10**

**Title: German Government**

**Slide Content:**

*[Image of the German flag]*

**Narrator:** Germany has a bicameral, duel regime, parliamentary system. Germany is a federal republic with 16 geographical subdivisions called landers. The chief of state is called the president and serves a five-year term. The president is elected by a committee consisting of all of the members of the lower house (the Bundestag) and an equal number of delegates from the Landers.

The upper house (the Bundesrat) has 69 members elected by the Landers. The Landers control the timing and nature of the elections. The Bundesrat has less power than the Bundestag and is assumed to be more conservative than the lower house.

**Slide 11**

**Title: German Government**

**Slide Content:**

*[Image of the Reichstag building, as seen from the west]*

**Narrator:** The Bundestag or lower house has 622 members who are elected directly by popular vote. The term is four years. Seating in the Bundestag is based on a proportional basis as opposed to the British single member districts. Citizens vote for the party rather than a specific individual. If, for example, a party wins 20% of the vote, that party is then allowed to seat members of the party which constitutes 20% of the total Bundestag seats. Most countries with proportional representation have a minimum percentage in order to receive any seats. In the Bundestag, the requirement is 5% of the votes cast. Countries with a proportional vote system normally have a comparatively large number of political parties.

German taxation is centralized. The central government collects all of the taxes, which are then dispersed on a percentage basis between the federal government, the Landers, and the large cities.

The German Constitution, which was approved in 1949 by the WWII Allies, was designed to prevent a significant concentration of power in the central government. As you study the German government site
using the links in the module, you will note several other mechanisms to prevent too much power gravitating to a single individual.

Slide 12

Title: Swiss Government

Slide Content:

[Image of Lac des Dix, a large body of water surrounded by mountains]

Narrator: Switzerland is a confederation; with a central government and 26 cantons. The central government has only the power that it needs to accomplish specific tasks. Primary power is held by each of the cantons. There is a fairly wide variation in the government of the cantons.

So why would the Swiss elect to have a confederation-based government? The Swiss government was designed to allow four different languages and cultures to live together comfortably, within a single country. The central government has all of the powers typically allocated to a central government. Some examples include: foreign affairs, currency production and controls, armed forces, immigration and emigration, customs, etc. In addition it has other powers granted it by nationwide vote. The most recent was a national health insurance system.

The cantons (regional governments) are left on their own in terms of language, cultural preferences, and to some extent legal systems. Switzerland is one of the most conservative countries. Women were first allowed to vote in 1971.

Slide 13

Title: Canadian Government

Slide Content:

[Image of Parliament Hill in Ottawa]

Narrator: Canada has a central government, 10 provinces, and three territories. It has a bicameral, dual regime parliament. Canada has provided Québec with significant autonomy in terms of legal systems, cultural issues, and language.

Portions of the current Canadian Constitution are contained in the Constitution Act of 1982. Other portions extend into history back to the Magna Carta. The chief of state of Canada is the sitting British monarch. The monarch is represented by the governor general. The governor general is the ceremonial head of Canada with no significant political power. The Senate is made up of 105 senators appointed by the governor general, at the request of the prime minister. The appointees may serve until they are 75 years old. The House of Commons has 308 seats, which are filled with a direct popular election.

The parliamentary term is four years. Parliament can end with a snap election or a no-confidence vote. Canada was included to represent a typical commonwealth parliament. The identifying feature is, the chief of state is the British monarch.
This will conclude the discussion of parliamentary and commonwealth democracies. You will find additional information in the website links provided in the module. Finally, looking ahead, the next module will explore the U.S. government from a comparative perspective. It will also address mixed presidential-parliamentary democracies. There will be contrast! To paraphrase Dickens, “They are the best of governments, they are the worst of governments.”

**Slide 14**

End of Presentation