

# Ask about English

The USA is or are?



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## BBC Learning English – Ask about English

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**Francoise Maroy in Reunion Island asks:**

Is "The United States" considered as a singular or a plural noun?

**Karen Adams answers:**

Thank you for your question Francoise; this is a really interesting one. Basically in English, there is a group of nouns which can be either singular or plural depending on what you want to say about them. So for example, if we're looking at the United States the country we would normally use the singular verb so for example – "The United States is a very big country."

However, if we're thinking about the government in the United States we might want to use a plural noun - "The United States are a major power in the World." This singular plural difference is one that we see reflected in a number of other nouns in English. For example, when we're talking about the government we can say – "The government has won the election." Or we can say "The government have won the election." This depends if we see the government as a collection of individuals - "The government have won the election." – or if we see the government as one thing - "The government has won the election."

Another noun that works like this is team. "The team has won the trophy." It means we're looking at the team as one unified thing – as one thing. However, if the team have many difficulties, we could be talking about the individuals within the team. So this is a group of nouns that can be singular or plural depending on what you want to say about them.

It's quite a small group of nouns, and usually the nouns in this group refer to politics or the state – so for example when we are talking about the police, the army, the navy, we can use plural or singular.

The thing to remember, is when we look at them as a collection of individuals, we would normally use a plural noun, and if we want to look at them as a unified institution we use the singular.

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So in answer to your question Françoise, the United States can be singular or can be plural, depending on what you want to say about them. However, normally if you're talking about the country, use the singular verb.

I hope that helps.

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