

Local Government

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In the United States, local government is normally defined as the levels of government that exist below the state level and local governments are considered political subdivisions of the States. While federal and state governments each have delegated powers under the U.S. Constitution, local governments are granted powers by their state, with great variation across state constitutions.

There are two main levels of local government: county and municipality. Examples outside of these two levels include local district school boards and fire protection districts. Local governments are often funded by the collection of property taxes and sales tax.

County-Level Government

Counties are also known as parishes in Louisiana and boroughs in Alaska, and in some states, they are divided into townships. Counties are usually the largest subdivision of the state and act as the administrative arm of the state. Powers of county government can include tax collection, property assessment, enforcing the laws of the state, issuing licenses, and a variety of health and human service duties like parks, hospitals, and emergency services. Counties also provide local services in the unincorporated areas outside of municipalities including police, fire, roads, and zoning.

County governments usually are made up of three different types: commission system, council-administrator system, and council-elected executive. The commission system involves a set number of members elected as county commissioners who oversee most of the functions of the county including the budget, hiring of county personnel, and passing county resolutions. The commissioners act as the legislature and executive branches within the county. The council-administrator system involves the election of commissioners who then appoint an administrator to oversee the functions of government. The administrator is hired for a set period of time and serves under the direction of the commissioners. Under the council-elected executive system, voters elect both the commissioners and an executive, who has many of the same powers as the governor of a state, including veto powers and the drafting of a budget.

Municipalities

Through their constitutions, individual States provide the layout for municipalities and they can come in the form of cities, towns, villages, townships, and outside of Alaska can be boroughs. Populations of municipalities can vary greatly from large cities like New York to small townships and villages and are often located around a population center. Municipalities normally have responsibility for many of the daily needs of its citizens including water, sewer, garbage, law enforcement, parks and recreation and a myriad of other duties.

Municipalities often are governed by two systems, the mayor-council system, and the council-manager system. The mayor-council system consists of an elected mayor and council, both with delegated duties, with some systems having a strong mayor and others having a stronger council. In this system the mayor usually performs the executive duties while the council performs the legislative function for the municipality. The council-manager system consists of an elected council who appoints a city manager to oversee many of the administrative functions of the municipality. The city manager is hired at the discretion of the council for a set period and can be terminated by council.

Relationship to Civic/ Political Engagement:

Local government has a relationship to civic/political engagement because it is often the closest form of representation for the average citizen. Local government provides many of the services that help the quality of life for citizens. By being civically engaged with their local governments, citizens can be part of shaping local government. Civic engagement can help ensure that local government is transparent and open, and that it is listening to the needs of citizens. Educational opportunities, safety, and management of parks are examples of where citizens can be civically engaged in helping to shape the direction of their communities.

Key Ideas:

- Mayflower Compact – The Mayflower Compact was written during the voyage by English Settlers to North America in 1620. The 200-word document set up a government of consent that established rule of law in their new territory. This is an example of local government existing before the creation of states or a federal government.
- *Avery v. Midland County*, 390 U.S. 474 (1968) – The United States Supreme Court ruled that large population disparities between Commissioner Court Districts in Midland County, Texas violated the 14th Amendment's Equal Protection Clause. The Court ruled that while districts did not have to be equal, they could not be substantially unequal. This case represents that while States mostly control power of local government the Federal Government still can play a role in shaping local government.

Key People:

- Harvey Milk – Elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, Harvey Milk was one of the first openly gay elected officials in the United States.
- Carl Stokes – Elected mayor of Cleveland in 1967, Carl Stokes was one of the first African Americans elected to lead a major city in the United States.
- Susanna Madora Salter – In 1887, Susanna Madora Salter was elected mayor of Argonia, Kansas, becoming the first woman elected mayor in the United States.

Links:

Engaging Local Government Leaders (ELGL) - <https://elgl.org/>
National League of Cities (NLC) - <https://www.nlc.org/>
International City/County Management Association (ICMA) - <https://icma.org/>
National Association of Counties (NaCo) - <https://www.naco.org/>
National Governors Association – (NGA) - <https://www.nga.org/>
The Council of State Governments – (CSG) - <https://www.csg.org/>
The United States Conference of Mayors - <https://www.usmayors.org/>
Growing Democracy Podcast - <https://growingdemocracyoh.org/podcasts>

Developed in Collaboration with the Growing Democracy Project.

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