

Definition: **local government** from *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate(R) Dictionary*

(1817) : the government of a specific local area constituting a subdivision of a major political unit (as a nation or state); *also* : the body of persons constituting such a government

Summary Article: **LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

From *Political Encyclopedia of U.S. States and Regions*

Local governments are subdivisions of the states, and they provide governance for substate regions and localities. Local governments are often called the governments closest to the people, and they provide for most direct public services, including police and fire protection, emergency assistance, gas, electricity, water, sewers, sanitation, cable television, education, health care, cemeteries, roads, streets, bridges, public transportation, ports, courts, jails, social welfare, restaurant inspections, and weights and measures enforcement (e. g., gas pumps). Although local governments provide for such services, they rarely produce all these services. They may, for example, provide franchises for one or more cable TV companies to operate within their boundaries, and many municipalities contract with private firms to collect trash. Local governments are also arenas for citizen participation and direct contact with public officials.

Local government is not mentioned in the U. S. Constitution. The people of each state establish their own local government system through their state constitution. The legislature then enacts laws covering the details of local government and authorizing the creation of specific local governments. Local governments have no inherent powers, nor do citizens possess an inherent right of local self-government. Local governments obtain their forms of government and their powers from the states, which can reduce or revoke local powers, take over a local government, or even abolish specific local governments (although this rarely occurs). The state also mandates that local governments perform certain functions and provide certain services. Consequently, local governments differ across the 50 states, although many similarities exist as well.

**Basic Data on Local Governments**

The 2007 census of governments found 89, 476 local governments in the United States, with 3, 033 counties, 19, 492 municipalities, 16, 519 townships, 13, 051 independent school districts, and 37, 381 special districts. The states with the most local governments are Illinois (6, 994), Pennsylvania (4, 871), and Texas (4, 835). The states with the least are Hawai'i (19), Rhode Island (134), and Alaska (177). Local governments had some 11. 9 million full-time employees in 2006, compared to 4. 2 million for state governments and 2. 4 million for the federal government. Nevertheless, many municipalities and townships have no full-time employees, and many more have fewer than five. Most local government employees work for school districts (e. g., teachers), followed by counties, large cities, and special districts.

Local government revenues totaled \$1. 4 trillion in 2005–2006, compared to \$1. 7 trillion for state governments. Of the total local government revenue, 30 percent came in the form of intergovernmental transfers from state governments, 4 percent came from the federal government, and the balance came from local taxes and user fees.

Demographically, more than 83 percent of Americans live in metropolitan areas. A metropolitan area consists of a central city having at least 50,000 people and the contiguous counties that are socioeconomically integrated with the center city. There are 367 metropolitan areas in the United States. Only 50 (14%) have a population of 1 million or more. The largest is the New York City Metropolitan Area, with 18.7 million people. Within these areas, about 55 percent of Americans live in suburbs. Consequently, metropolitan areas have large numbers of local governments. For example, the Chicago Metropolitan Area (9.5 million people) has more than 1,200 local governments.

## Counties

County governments, derived from England's shires, exist in 48 states, though they are called "boroughs" in Alaska and "parishes" in Louisiana). Connecticut and Rhode Island are divided into geographic regions called counties, but they have no functioning governments as defined by the U. S. Census Bureau, and are therefore not technically counties. A county is both a decentralized arm of state government and a general-purpose instrument of local self-government. As a decentralized arm of the state, it administers and enforces state law and provides state services locally so that residents need not travel to the state capital. For example, pursuant to state law, counties register voters; conduct federal, state, and local elections; record births, marriages, divorces, and deaths; manage child custody and child support cases; operate courts and jails; register property deeds and other real-estate transactions; and provide health and welfare services.

As local self-governments, counties build, maintain, and plow some roads and bridges; operate public transportation, airports, hospitals, parks, and recreation programs; handle consumer protection, environmental protection, economic development, and land-use planning; and provide municipal services to unincorporated communities, among other things. About 38 states provide some type of home rule for some or all counties. Home rule gives residents more discretion to change their county government's organization, taxes, and services.

Counties are local self-governments with tax powers (mainly property taxes), and they are run by officials elected by county residents. The most common county government is an elected board of three to seven commissioners or supervisors. These boards perform legislative and executive functions. Most counties also have other independently elected officers, such as a county prosecutor (or district attorney), sheriff, clerk, treasurer or auditor, coroner, and tax assessor. Reform efforts have led some counties to install two other forms of government. One form features an elected county council and an independently elected county executive. This form exists in more than 400, mostly urban, counties. The other form, found in about 1,000 counties, consists of an elected council that hires a professional administrator to run the government.

County government has increased in importance because of population growth and suburbanization. In addition, crime is not confined to central cities, counties are the nation's healthcare providers of last resort, and counties have primary responsibility for the services needed by divorced parents and their children, as well as by senior citizens.

Because counties provide many state functions, they usually receive more state aid than municipalities and townships. Due to their health-care and social-welfare responsibilities (e. g., administering Medicaid), they also receive more federal money, which is funneled through their state. Between 1979 and 2002, counties reduced their dependence on property taxes from 63 percent to 39 percent of their ownsource revenues, but they also increased their reliance on user fees from 26 percent to 43

percent. User fees can take various forms, including charges to use parks or recreation facilities or to obtain copies of documents. Revenue from sales and gross-receipts taxes increased from 7 percent to 13 percent between 1979 and 2002.

## **Municipalities**

A municipality is a public corporation chartered by its state. A large city can be both a municipality and a county, as is the case with New York City, Philadelphia, and San Francisco, but this combination is rare.

Municipalities are general-purpose governments that perform a wide range of functions, such as police and fire protection; water and sewer systems; streets, roads, traffic signs and signals, and parking meters; public transportation; various public works; trash collection and recycling; public health and sanitation; public housing; port facilities; cemeteries; tree cutting and planting; zoning; economic development; fire and building code inspections; restaurant inspections; convention centers; and sports stadiums.

Residents petition their state for incorporation as a municipality. The area must meet certain criteria (e. g., at least 300 residents are needed to incorporate a city in Alabama), and residents must follow certain procedures, such as electing a commission of residents to select a charter from a state menu or design a city charter, and allowing residents to vote on the proposed charter. If residents approve incorporation, the state grants a charter, which specifies the municipality's form of government and its authority to elect officials, levy taxes, and provide services.

There are four forms of municipal government. One is the mayor-council form, which is used in more than half of U. S. cities with populations of 2, 500 or more. In the strong mayor-council form, residents elect a city council and an independent mayor who has substantial budget, personnel, and administration powers, and usually a veto power over ordinances passed by the council. Chicago, Illinois, is an example of a strong mayor-council city. In weak mayor-council cities, such as Tucson, Arizona, the mayor is mainly a figurehead with few administrative powers. Mayor-council systems exist in both large and small cities.

The second form is the council-manager form, in which the elected council hires a professional manager to run the city. This form exists in more than a third of all cities and is popular in medium-sized cities (25, 000 to 75, 000 residents), suburbs, and new Sunbelt cities. Only a few large cities (e. g., Dallas, Phoenix, and San Diego) have council-manager governments. The third form, the city commission, is used in less than 3 percent of cities (e. g., Portland, Oregon). The commission usually consists of five to nine members elected by the residents, and it performs both legislative and executive duties. The fourth form, used in about 7 percent of cities, is the direct or representative town meeting, which maximizes direct citizen governance.

Municipalities rely heavily on property taxes and user fees for revenue. However, some states, especially in the Northeast, allow some cities (e. g., New York City and Philadelphia) to levy some type of personal income tax. Some states allow cities to levy a sales tax that adds 1 percent (or a fraction of 1%) to the state sales tax. Municipalities reduced their reliance on property taxes from 47 percent of own-source revenues in 1972 to 29 percent in 2002, while also increasing revenue from user charges from 28 percent to 40 percent. Revenue from sales taxes increased from 14 percent to 18 percent, but revenue from income taxes remained stable at 8 percent. Federal aid, as a percentage of municipal revenue, reached a high point of 15 percent in the mid-1970s but it fell to less than 5 percent in 2008.

State aid to municipalities has remained fairly constant at about 22 percent of city revenues since the early 1970s.

Many cities desire more autonomy to make their own tax and policy decisions—a trend known as “home rule.” This gives a municipality the authority to do more than what is expressly granted in the city charter, so long as its actions do not violate state law. Although most states allow home rule for many cities, home rule gets eroded by state legislative and judicial actions. Reformers have long advocated the consolidation of local governments in metropolitan areas, but voters usually reject consolidation, and most states have made it nearly impossible for central cities to annex surrounding communities. Cooperation among local governments in metropolitan areas has increased, but there is also competition for economic development and affluent taxpayers among local governments.

## **Towns and Townships**

Town and township governments (as distinct from municipal governments) exist in only 20 states, mainly in the Northeast and Midwest. In New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, and New England, most of these local governments perform virtually the same functions as municipalities. In the Midwest—in states such as Illinois, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, and Ohio—townships are often rural governments that are 36 square miles in size and perform only one or two functions, usually roads and policing.

Some towns in New England are still governed by town meetings, where citizens gather regularly to make decisions. Usually, an elected part-time board of five to nine supervisors or trustees governs a township. Many hire a manager to run the township, while some larger urban townships have a mayor-council government. Townships get 73 percent of their own-source revenues from property taxes and 21 percent from user fees.

Many observers have long predicted the demise of towns and townships, especially in the Midwest. However, the number of towns and townships declined by only 683 from 1952 to 2007. Suburbanization has revived some, while many others have sought to strengthen themselves through economic development.

## **School Districts**

Independent school districts exist in 45 states. These are local governments established to provide public education from kindergarten through 12th grade. They are usually governed by a board of education made up of five to seven members elected in at-large, nonpartisan elections. The board decides the district's budget and the taxes to be levied to support the schools, hires a superintendent to manage the schools and their staffs, and decides various personnel, construction, renovation, curriculum, and policy matters. School districts receive 79 percent of their own-source revenue from property taxes and 18 percent from user fees. However, about 57 percent of school district monies come from state governments, while about 8 percent comes from the federal government.

Important trends include the declining number of school districts (e. g., from 108, 579 in 1942 to 13, 051 in 2007); their growing reliance on state funding; efforts by mayors in many big cities to take control of poorly performing districts; and state authorizations of charter schools outside the control of existing districts.

## **Special Districts**

Special districts are specific-purpose local governments that are typically established to perform only

one function, such as natural-resource management, fire protection, housing and community development, water and sewer services, transportation, or even running cemeteries. Between 1952 and 2007, the number of special districts increased from 12, 340 to 37, 381, or almost 303 percent. Most special districts are small, such as the South Park Ambulance District in Colorado, but a few are huge, such as the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey. Some districts support a major private enterprise, such as the Reedy Creek Improvement District, Florida, which encompasses Walt Disney World.

Special districts can be created by state governments, local governments, and citizens (usually by petition and referendum). Some districts can levy taxes, but most rely on user charges, grants, and revenue bonds. Taxing districts must usually have an elected governing board; nontaxing districts typically have an appointed governing board.

Special districts are created to meet needs and manage functions—such as transportation, flood control, and environmental protection— that crosscut municipal, county, or state boundaries. Districts also are created because debt and tax limits placed on state and local governments prevent them from meeting certain needs or managing certain functions. Special districts are also created to provide services that can be run like a business, such as transportation, water and sewer systems, and irrigation. In addition, most soil conservation and flood control districts were created as a result of federal mandates.

The leading criticism of special districts is that they are not very accountable to citizens, largely because most people are not aware of their existence and do not know which local governments provide which services. Critics also argue that special districts further fragment metropolitan areas, making it difficult to coordinate governments for comprehensive and region-wide policy action. Supporters argue that a multiplicity of local governments gives residents many service-and-tax choices and fosters competition that lowers prices and increases efficiency. In addition, region-wide special districts that manage cross-jurisdictional functions such as transportation, flood control, and natural resources provide coordination and comprehensive policy action for specific functions that would not likely be achieved by general-purpose governments.

Whatever one's view, special districts will probably proliferate for the foreseeable future, while the numbers of other local governments will remain fairly stable. But local governments as a whole will continue to play an integral part in American government, employing most government employees and delivering the bulk of public services.

John Kincaid

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