State and Local Governments

Inquire: What are the Roles of the Various Officials in the State and Local Governments?

Overview

State, county, and city governments make up important components of the overall structure of the government. Not only do they affect citizens more directly, it is also easier for citizens to interact with state and local government officials because their offices, such as the community’s school board or city council meetings, are often close by. While there are similarities across the country, there are also a large number of significant differences in the various state and local governments.

Big Question: What are the different forms of state and local governments?

Watch: Political Power and Participation in State and Local Governments

One national government, 50 state governments, and 85,000 local governments.

The vast majority of government employees work for local and state governments, not the federal government. This seems to confirm the general notion that government is in fact "closer to the people," and therefore more democratic. But, the real evidence is contradictory.

Who Holds State and Local Power?

Governors, legislators, and many other elected officials lead state governments, and judges sit on both state and local courts. Local officials include mayors, city council members, city planning commissioners, and school board members. Many local officials are nonpartisan. In other words, they do not run for election to office with a party label, but on their own good name.

Social scientists have studied power in communities and have found some contradictory evidence. Some have found evidence that power is held by a relatively small and stable group of top policy makers, many of whom are local businesspeople. Other studies have concluded there was no permanent "power class" in local politics.

Participation in State and Local Politics

What about citizen participation — voting, attending meetings, phoning officials, and keeping up with local politics? Even though local governments have a much greater impact on the daily lives of citizens, the
people generally take less interest in and are less informed about their local governments than they are about the national government. While 50-60% of eligible voters voted in the recent presidential elections, local elections drew far fewer voters. Some school board and city council members are often elected by 10-15 percent of the eligible voters, or less. Why the dramatic difference, if they are so close to the people?

Some of the reasons are understandable. After all, local governments in particular are preoccupied with relatively non-controversial routines, such as providing fire and police service, attracting businesses that can create more jobs, and keeping the roads in shape. People tend to let them do their jobs and participation rates tend to bear out the fact that most people have very little interest in local politics, until something happens that directly affects their lives.

So many of the burning issues of modern times are also state and local concerns. Drugs, gangs, racism, and poverty confront governments on every level. Education, preservation and protection of the environment, and health care delivery all cry out for active participants to solve their problems. Unfortunately, most citizens simply leave the work to the few who seem to care, until policy implementation begins to impact them negatively. Then, it is often too late.

Read: Governors and Legislators: The Yin and Yang of State Governments

Governors in Charge

Anyone elected to the office of governor assumes tremendous responsibility overnight. He or she becomes the spokesperson for an entire state as well as their political party, accepts blame or praise for handling decision-making in times of crisis, oversees the implementation of public policy, and helps shepherd legislation through the lawmaking process. These tasks require a great deal of skill and demand that governors exhibit different strengths and personality traits. Governors must learn to work well with other lawmakers, bureaucrats, cabinet officials, and with the citizens who elected them to office in the first place.

Governors have tremendous power over the legislative branch because they serve year-round and hold office alone. Three of the governor’s chief functions are to influence the legislative process through an executive budget proposal, a policy agenda, and vetoes. Just as the president gives a State of the Union address once a year, governors give an annual State of the State address before the state legislature. In this speech, they discuss economic and political achievements, cite data that support their accomplishments, and overview the major items on their legislative agenda.

Once legislation has made its way through the lawmaking process, it comes to the governor’s desk for signature. If a governor signs a bill, it becomes law. If the governor does not like the terms of the legislation, he or she can veto, or reject, the entire bill. The bill can then become law only if a supermajority of legislators overrides the veto by voting in favor of the bill. In most states, a two-thirds supermajority of both chambers is required. However, in some states (e.g., Illinois, Maryland, and North Carolina), only a three-fifths supermajority is required, while in West Virginia only a normal majority is needed. Since it is difficult for a supermajority of state legislators to come together to override a veto (it often requires many members of the governor’s own party to vote against him or her), the simple act of threatening to veto can be enough to get legislators to make concessions to the governor before he or she will pass the legislation.
Governors are also responsible for managing the resources necessary to prepare the state for, and respond to, natural disasters. As the chief spokesperson, they take all the blame or all the credit for their actions.

Governors of most states have the power to spare or enhance the lives of individuals convicted of crimes in their state by granting **pardons** or commuting sentences. Although they may choose to exercise this formal power only during the closing days of their term, if at all, most governors have the authority to grant pardons just as U.S. presidents do.

Despite the tremendous formal powers that go with the job, being governor is still personally and professionally challenging. The demands of the job are likely to restrict time with family and require forgoing privacy.

In addition, governors will often face circumstances beyond their control. For example, the national government can mandate that states perform some function without giving them any funds to do so. All-in-all, it is a taxing, yet often exhilarating job.

**The Functions of State Legislatures**

State legislatures serve three primary functions. They perform a lawmaking function by researching, writing, and passing legislation. Members represent their districts and work to meet requests for help from citizens within it. Finally, legislatures perform an oversight function for the executive branch.

The number of bills introduced in any given session varies. Legislators get ideas for bills from lobbyists of various types of interest groups, ranging from corporate groups to labor unions to advocacy organizations. Ideas for bills also come from laws passed in other state legislatures, from policy that diffuses from the federal government, from constituents or citizens in the office holder's district who approach them with problems they would like to see addressed, and from their own personal policy agenda, which they brought to office with them. Finally, legislators also work with the governor's agenda in the course of each legislative session, and they must pass a budget for their state either every year or every two years.

Representatives all see it as their duty to address the concerns and needs of the people they represent. Typically, this will entail helping members in the district who need assistance or have problems with the government they want addressed.

Legislators also try to bring particular benefits back to their district. These benefits might include money that can be spent on infrastructure improvements or grants for research. Members also accept requests to attend parades and ribbon-cutting ceremonies and work with teachers and faculty to visit classes or meet with students on field trips to the state capitol.

The last primary function of state legislators is to oversee the bureaucracy's implementation of public policy, ensuring it occurs in the manner the legislature intended. State legislatures may request that agency heads provide testimony about spending in hearings, or they may investigate particular bureaucratic agencies to ensure that funds are being disbursed as desired.

**The Composition of State Legislatures**

In most states, the legislative function is divided between two bodies: a state house and a state senate. The only exception is Nebraska, which has a unicameral state senate of 49 members.
State legislatures vary a great deal in terms of the number of legislators in the house and senate, the range of diversity across the membership, the partisan composition of the chamber relative to the governor’s party affiliation, and the degree of legislative professionalism (whether the members are “full-time professional state legislators” or only part-time). This variation can lead to differences in the type of policies passed, and the amount of power legislatures wield relative to that of the governor.

Members of professional or full-time legislatures tend to consider legislative service their full-time occupation, and they are paid enough not to require a second occupation. They also have larger staffs to assist with their work, and they tend to be in session for much of the year.

On the other end of the spectrum are citizen, or part-time, legislatures. Representatives and senators in these legislatures do not enjoy the same perks as their counterparts in professional legislatures. Generally, salary is much lower and so is staff assistance. Members typically need to seek outside employment to supplement their income from legislative work, and the legislature will meet for only a brief period of time during the year.

This issue of part- vs. full-time legislators leads to another difference. In the states with professional legislatures, the members can easily come from any background or profession. Part-time legislatures tend to be populated with lawyers and others whose occupations, or personal wealth, allow them to miss a large period of time every year or two as a representative.

Reflect Poll: Would You Rather...

Having learned about the various roles on the state and local governments, would you rather be a:

- U.S. representative in Washington?
- state legislator representing your constituents in your state capital?
- city council member in your hometown?

Expand: Local Governments - The Counties and the Municipalities

County Government

County governments serve a larger geographical area than cities and towns but a smaller area than states. They are created by the state government and typically operate under provisions set out in the state constitution. As such, they are essentially administrative units of the state. Census estimates from 2012 indicate that there are just over 3,000 counties in the United States.

County systems usually take one of three basic forms: the commission system, the council-administrator system, and the council-elected executive system.

The most common form of county government is the commission system. Under this structure, an elected commission, which generally consists of a small number of commissioners, serves as the governing body within the county, performing all legislative and executive functions. These include adopting a budget, passing county resolutions, and hiring and firing county officials.
Under the council-administrator system, the voters elect council members to serve for a specified period of time, and the council in turn appoints an administrator to oversee the operation of the government. The administrator serves at the directive of the council and can be terminated by the council. The goal of this arrangement is to divide administrative and policy making responsibilities between the elected council and the appointed administrator.

Under a council-elected executive system, the voters elect both the members of the council and the executive. The executive performs functions similar to those of the state governor.

Most counties have a courthouse that houses county officials such as the sheriff, the county clerk, the assessor, the treasurer, the coroner, and the engineer. These officials carry out a variety of important functions and oversee the responsibilities of running a county government. For instance, the county coroner investigates the cause of death in suspicious cases, and the county clerk oversees the registration of voters and also certifies election results for the county. In addition, this officeholder typically keeps official birth, death, and marriage records.

The county treasurer oversees the collection and distribution of funds within the county, while the county assessor conducts property tax evaluations and informs individual citizens or business owners of their right to contest the appraised value of their property. Finally, a county engineer will oversee the maintenance and construction of county infrastructure.

In short, counties help to maintain roads and bridges, courthouses and jails, parks and pools, public libraries, hospitals, and clinics.

To provide these services, county governments typically rely on property tax revenue, a portion of sales tax receipts, and funds from intergovernmental transfers by way of federal or state grants.

**City Government**

Municipal governments oversee the operation and functions of cities and towns. Census estimates for 2012 show just over 19,500 municipal governments and nearly 16,500 township governments in the United States.

The vast majority of municipal governments operate on one of two governing models: a **mayor-council system** or a **council-manager system**.

Under the mayor-council system, voters elect both a mayor and members of the city council. The city council performs legislative functions and the mayor the executive functions. Under this system, the mayor may be given a great deal of authority or only limited powers.

Under a strong mayor system, the mayor will be able to veto the actions of the council, appoint and fire the heads of city departments, and produce a budget. Under a weak mayor system, the mayor has little authority compared to the council and acts in a ceremonial capacity as a spokesperson for the city.

In a council-manager system of government, either the members of the city council are elected by voters along with a mayor who presides over the council, or the voters elect members of the city council and the mayor is chosen from among them. In either case, the city council will then appoint a city manager to carry out the administrative functions of the municipal government. This frees the city council to address political functions such as setting policy and formulating the budget.
Municipal governments are responsible for providing clean water as well as sewage and garbage disposal. They must maintain city facilities, such as parks, streetlights, and stadiums. In addition, they address zoning and building regulations, promote the city’s economic development, and provide law enforcement, public transportation, and fire protection.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

A video from Texas Counties demonstrating the differences between city, state, and county governments
- Link to resource: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K7us7syDw88

A video providing a review about how power is divided between the national government and the 50 state governments
- Link to resource: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J0gosGXSgsI

Another resource with information on state and local governments
- Link to resource: https://www.whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/state-local-government/

Lesson Glossary

- **pardons**: a government decision to allow a person to be absolved of guilt for an alleged crime or other legal offense, as if the act never occurred; the pardon may be granted before or after conviction for the crime, depending on the laws of the jurisdiction
- **commission system**: an elected commission that serves as the governing body within a given county
- **council-administrator system**: an elected council that appoints an administrator to oversee the operation of the county government
- **council-elected executive system**: a county government in which voters elect both the members of the council and the executive
- **mayor-council system**: a structure of government in which both city council members and the mayor are elected by voters
- **council-manager system**: a structure of government in which elected members of the city council appoint a city manager to carry out administrative functions

Check Your Knowledge

1. Just as the president of the United States gives a State of the Union address once a year, governors give an annual State of the State address before the state legislature.
   a. True
   b. False

2. The most common form of county government is the council-administrator system.
   a. True
   b. False

3. Under a strong mayor system, the mayor has little authority and acts in ceremonial capacity as the spokesperson for the city.
   a. True
   b. False
Answer Key:

Citations

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