

Forms of Local Government

There are several workable forms of local government. They usually depend upon the role of the central government, and the degree of home-rule powers given to cities in running the affairs of the communities. Typical types of local governments in the United States include: strong mayor; mayor-council; commission; and council-manager plans.

Strong Mayor

In many large cities of America, the mayor is elected to lead the city. This typically includes running the municipal organization through city employees, with the top management being selected by the mayor. A good political leader is sometimes not a good municipal administrator. Hiring trained administrators has served to overcome this shortcoming.

Mayor-Council

The mayor-council (council-elected executive counties) form of government is the form that most closely parallels the American federal government, with an elected legislature and a separately elected executive.

The mayor or elected executive is designated as the head of the city or county government. The extent of his or her authority can range from purely ceremonial to functions to full-scale responsibility for day-to-day operations. But the mayor's or elected executive's duties and powers generally include the following: hiring and firing department heads, preparation and administration of the budget, and veto power (which may be overridden) over acts of the legislature. The legislature has the following responsibilities: adoption of the budget, passage of resolutions with legislation, auditing the performance of the government, and adoption of general policy positions.

In some communities the mayor or executive may assume a larger policy-making role, and responsibility for the day-to-day operations is delegated to an administrator appointed by and responsible to the chief executive.

VOTERS----/
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MAYOR---/-----COUNCIL
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DEPARTMENT HEADS

Commission

The commission form of government, characterized by an elected governing board that holds both legislative and executive powers, is the oldest form of government in America. A descendent of the old English shire-moot, or county governing board, the board is usually composed of three to five members, although the number varies.

The board of commissioners is the county governing board, and serves as the head of the government. It has responsibility for adopting the budget, passing resolutions, and enacting ordinances and regulations. A number of other officials are also popularly elected, and serve as heads of some of the major county departments (although the number of these independently elected officials varies considerably, some of the most common are the sheriff, treasurer, and clerk).

Council-Manager

In the council-manager form of government, the council is the governing body of the city elected by the public, and the manager is hired by council to carry out the policies it establishes. The council usually consists of five to nine members including the mayor (or council president) who is either selected by the council or elected by the people as defined in the city charter. The size of the council is generally smaller than that of a mayor-council municipality, and council elections are usually nonpartisan.

The council provides legislative direction while the manager is responsible for day-to-day administrative operation of the city based on the council's recommendations. The mayor and council as a collegial body are responsible for setting policy, approving the budget, and determining the tax rate. The manager serves as the council's chief advisor. Managers also serve at the pleasure of the council and are responsible for preparing the budget, directing day-to-day operations, and hiring and firing personnel.

Typically, the mayor is recognized as the political head of the municipality, but is a member of the legislative body and does not have the power to veto legislative actions.



Town Meeting

All qualified voters of the town gather on a given day (usually once a year, but more often if necessary) to elect a board of officers (selectmen) and to make policy decisions. The board of selectmen has the responsibility for carrying out the policy set by the citizens. In some towns a manager or administrator is appointed to carry out the administrative operations of the town.

Representative Town Meeting

The representative town meeting form of government is structured in much the same way as the town meeting form, with the exception that a large number of citizens are chosen by the general electorate to represent them in voting. All citizens can attend the meetings and participate in debates, but only those chosen as representatives have a direct vote.