local government

For four centuries Americans have remained devoted to grassroots rule and organs of local government. They have deemed that government closest to the people as most representative of the popular will and thus have jealously protected and perpetuated local power. In Canada and Great Britain as well as the continental European nations, central lawmakers have been able to revise and reform local government without submitting their measures to the veto of local referenda. In the United States, however, voters have repeatedly blocked the path to change, fearful that the destruction of inherited local units would diminish their political voice and open the door to dreaded centralization. Perhaps more than any other nation, the United States is a land of local charters, a prevailing fear of big, distant government preserving a complex structure of local rule. State governments have increasingly imposed a degree of supervision over localities. But local institutions persist as perceived bulwarks against central authority, and the defensive instincts of the local electorate remain strong.

Local Rule 1607–1900

During the colonial era, Americans fashioned the primary units of the future nation’s structure of local rule. In New England the town was the chief governing unit, exercising responsibility for schools, poor relief, and roads. Policy-making power rested with the town meeting, a conclave of all enfranchised townpeople, though popularly elected selectmen assumed primary authority for day-to-day governance. In the South the county court and parish vestry of the established Church of England were the chief units of local government. Dominated by the local gentry, the county courts served both judicial and administrative functions, hearing legal suits as well as maintaining county roads. The parish vestry was generally responsible for poor relief. The middle colonies of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York combined the governmental forms of New England and the South, assigning a large share of local responsibility to counties but also maintaining town or township governments. In this hybrid mix, counties were less powerful than in the South, but towns or townships exercised less authority than their New England counterparts.

To govern their emerging cities, the middle and southern colonies applied the institution of the municipal corporation inherited from Great Britain. Some municipalities such as Philadelphia, Williamsburg, and Norfolk were closed corporations in which the incumbent board of aldermen filled any vacancies in their governing body; the local citizenry had no voice in the selection of city officials. In Albany, New York City, and the municipal corporations of New Jersey, however, popular election of the governing aldermen prevailed. New England eschewed the institution of the municipal corporation, its more populous communities retaining the town form of rule and the town meeting.

The American Revolution wrought some changes in the system of local government. New municipal charters granted by state legislatures replaced the closed corporations ruled by a self-chosen elite, with government by popularly elected city councils. The disestablishment of the Church of England also deprived the parish vestry of its responsibility for poor relief; henceforth, secular overseers of the poor assumed charge of the least fortunate members of society. Yet there was also great continuity in the forms of local rule. The town remained the principal unit of local government in New England, though in the 1780s five communities in Connecticut, including Hartford and New Haven as well as Newport in Rhode Island, accepted city charters. Not until 1822 did Boston finally abandon town rule and the town meeting, accepting a city form of government with a mayor and municipal legislature. In the middle states, counties and towns continued to exercise local authority, and the county courts remained supreme in the South.

The new western states adopted the established forms of their eastern neighbors. Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin embraced the hybrid form of county-township rule characteristic of Pennsylvania and New York, whereas in the new southern states of Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, and Mississippi the county was the focus of local authority. The town or township never took root in the South. During the late nineteenth century, the states west of the Rockies also found diminutive township units unsuited for their sparsely settled rural areas. Consequently, the town or township remained primarily a northeastern and midwestern unit. In these regions, it administered local roads, cemeteries, and poor relief while township justices of the peace handled minor offenses and disputes.

One new unit of local government that proliferated during the nineteenth century was the school district. Elected school boards administered education in miniscule districts across America. For example, the number of school districts in Michigan rose from 3,097 in 1850 to 7,168 in 1890. By the latter date, there was one school district for every 60 pupils enrolled in the state. Over 1,000 districts could claim less than 25 pupils. In many areas of the nation, there was a unit of school government for every one-room schoolhouse, each a diminutive educational republic charged with bringing reading, writing, and arithmetic to its youth.

Meanwhile, municipal corporations had to adapt to burgeoning centers of urban population. As New
York City, Philadelphia, Chicago, and scores of lesser metropolises attracted millions of migrants from Europe and rural America, their city governments assumed new and expanded duties. In the mid-nineteenth century professional fire departments supplanted the volunteer forces of the past, and a professional police bureaucracy developed to preserve the urban peace. An emerging corps of professional engineers applied their expertise to water supply and sewerage, constructing elaborate systems of aqueducts, reservoirs, and drainage tunnels. A body of pioneering landscape architects led by Frederick Law Olmsted laid out great urban parks, the most notable being New York City’s Central Park.

The adoption of universal manhood suffrage in the early nineteenth century shifted the political advantage to plebeian leaders who cultivated the loyalty of the immigrant masses flooding the cities. Tammany Hall, New York City’s Democratic organization, became known for its steadfast support among Irish immigrants who benefited from the public jobs and favors that Tammany could bestow. Sober citizens who deemed themselves the respectable class grew increasingly troubled by the rising power of such partisan organizations and launched repeated campaigns to reform the structure of municipal rule. Consequently, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, city councils dominated by neighborhood leaders, some of them local saloonkeepers, lost power to mayors who were generally respected businessmen.

Twentieth-Century Reform

Reform demands mounted in the early twentieth century, resulting in a major restructuring of many city governments. In 1901 Galveston, Texas, pioneered the commission form of government, which lodged all executive and legislative authority in a small board of elected commissioners, each commissioner charged with responsibility for one area of municipal administration. This city commission plan eliminated the ward-based councils deemed the source of much local corruption; by carefully defining the responsibilities of each commissioner, the plan also heightened official accountability. By the end of 1913, 337 American municipalities had adopted the commission plan.

The commission scheme, however, did not ensure professional, expert administration of municipal services. Consequently, during the second decade of the twentieth century reformers increasingly turned to another alternative, the city manager plan. First adopted in Staunton, Virginia, in 1908, the city manager plan lodged policy-making authority in an elected city council, but the execution of policy and administration of the city was the job of an appointed city manager. Expected to be nonpartisan professional administrators, city managers were supposed to apply their expertise and guarantee optimal efficiency in the operation of their municipalities. By the close of 1923, 269 cities employed city managers, and the number would increase throughout the twentieth century, as the manager plan supplanted commission rule as the preferred reform alternative.

Meanwhile, some reformers were also turning their attention to the antiquated structure of county government. Traditionally, elected boards of supervisors or county commissioners had exercised both executive and legislative authority at the county level, and a long list of elected officials such as county treasurer, auditor, clerk of courts, and sheriff had performed specific administrative functions. The concept of separation of powers did not exist at the county level, and popularity at the polls rather than professional credentials determined who would administer these local units. Proponents of the manager plan proposed extending it to counties, but not until 1927 did Iredell County, North Carolina, appoint the nation’s first county manager. By 1930 only 16 of the nation’s more than 3,000 counties had hired administrators with duties akin to those of the city manager. In the 1930s two populous New York counties, Nassau and Westchester, sought to rationalize local rule by creating the elected office of county executive to serve basically as mayor of the county. Not until the late twentieth century, however, did large numbers of counties create the post of elected executive or hire a professional administrator charged with broad managerial supervision of county affairs.

Structural reformers also targeted New England’s venerable town meetings. By the early twentieth century, only a small proportion of those eligible actually attended the meetings in New England’s largest towns. Consequently, an unrepresentative and self-interested minority appeared to be determining town policies. To correct this problem, in 1915 reformers in the populous suburban town of Brookline, Massachusetts, secured adoption of the representative town meeting form of government. Henceforth, Brookline voters would elect 240 town meeting members who were to represent them at the meetings. Every town voter could attend the meetings and participate in discussion, but only the elected members could vote. By 1930, 18 Massachusetts towns had opted for the representative town meeting form.

Local Rule in Metropolitan America

Rationalization of local government attracted increasing attention from the 1920s onward, as rapid suburbanization produced a bewildering array of new governmental units in metropolitan areas throughout the nation. During the nineteenth century, states had adopted permissive incorporation procedures, allowing virtually any community to become an independent municipality. As Americans moved to the suburbs, they took advantage of this to create a mass of new municipalities tailor-made to serve the interests of their residents. In the 1920s American municipalities acquired zoning powers in order to protect the interests of homeowners and upscale-housing developers. Now municipalities not only could provide...
traditional policing, ensure street maintenance, and offer water and sewer services, they could also restrict who and what moved into a community. For the growing corps of home-owning suburbanites, this constituted a strong incentive to incorporate. In suburbanizing Nassau County on Long Island, the number of municipalities soared from 20 in 1920 to 65 in 1940, and in suburban Saint Louis County, Missouri, the municipal head count rose from 20 in 1930 to 84 in 1950.

Meanwhile, Americans organized thousands of special district governments to provide certain services. Unlike multipurpose municipalities or townships, special districts usually provided only a single service. From 1920 to 1933, the number of such units in Nassau County climbed from 87 to 173; this latter figure included 38 districts charged with water supply, 52 fire protection districts, and 53 lighting districts responsible for the provision of street lights. Each special district had separate taxing powers, and their proliferation markedly augmented the number of hands reaching into taxpayers’ pockets.

Some metropolitan residents deplored the confusion and fragmentation of authority resulting from this multitude of counties, townships, municipalities, and special districts. But in the 1920s and early 1930s campaigns for the consolidation or federation of local units failed in the seriously divided Pittsburgh, Cleveland, and Saint Louis metropolitan areas. Localism posed a formidable barrier to unification, and a renewal of metropolitan government crusades in the 1950s again produced no significant results. Any consolidation or federation of units in the United States required voter approval, and this was not forthcoming. Repackaged as the new regionalism, in the 1990s metropolitan cooperation stirred renewed interest among scholars and civic reformers but yielded few results. During the latter half of the twentieth century in a few metropolitan areas such as Jacksonville, Nashville, and Indianapolis, civic leaders secured a consolidation of city and county governments, thereby attempting to streamline local administration and achieve some unity in policy making. But consolidation was the exception, not the rule. A myriad of township, village, and city governments survived, and the number of special districts soared.

In contrast, states were successful in reducing the number of school districts. Whereas village and township governments could adapt and provide minimal services for twentieth-century small towns and rural areas, school districts designed to govern one-room schools were outmoded in a nation where a good education was perceived as necessary to personal success. Claiming that consolidation of districts would improve schooling and offer rural residents advantages formerly enjoyed only in city schools, state departments of education coerced or cajoled Americans to eschew the miniscule districts of the past. The number of school districts in the United States thus dropped from 127,531 in 1932 to 15,781 in 1972.

By the last decades of the twentieth century, states were also forced to intervene and prop up some faltering central-city municipal regimes as well as distressed inner-city school governments. As business investment abandoned aging central cities for the suburbs, tax bases shrank; at the same time, the expense of providing services for the remaining impoverished residents increased. In 1975, New York State took charge of the finances of a virtually bankrupt New York City, and, until the mid-1980s, the state carefully monitored fiscal decision making in the nation’s largest city. Cleveland, Philadelphia, Buffalo, and Pittsburgh also became fiscal wards of their state governments. Financial difficulties as well as poor academic performance resulted in state takeovers of some city school systems, with state-appointed administrators superseding the authority of locally elected school board members.

Yet such heavy-handed state intervention was not the norm. Americans continued to place their faith in local elected officials, preferring grassroots rule to centralized dictation. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, there were 87,849 units of local government in the United States. In the late twentieth century the number of counties remained stable, whereas the figure for municipalities increased slowly. For decades so-called experts had criticized townships as unnecessary relics of the horse-and-buggy era, yet there remained 16,506 of these units in 2002, the number falling only 2 percent in the previous quarter-century. The traditional New England town meeting survived, with only 38 of the 300 Massachusetts towns opting for the representative town meeting. The last half of the twentieth century also witnessed a sharp rise in special districts, their number almost tripling from 12,340 in 1952 to 35,356 in 2002. Owing to innovations in transportation and communication, the lives of most Americans were no longer confined to the narrow boundaries of localities. In this increasingly cosmopolitan nation, however, the government of the village and town remained a jealously guarded political legacy.

See also cities and politics; suburbs and politics.


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