7.4: Sub-National Governments

Learning Objectives

In this section you will learn about:

1. The role and function of subnational governments in modern governments.
2. How, in the United States, power is apportioned from state to local governments.

In the United States and other countries with federal systems of government, another important piece of the political pie are state and local governments, also sometimes called sub-national governments. In most countries, these are governments in some way below the national government, whatever form it takes. In all systems, to some extent, but especially in federal systems, state and local governments are closest to the citizens, and frequently are the parts of government that deliver services and enforce laws in your city, town or neighborhood. In the U.S., voter turnout for elections for this level of government tends to be the lowest among all elections, which is probably unfortunate. This is the level of government closest to citizens, and the one most likely to have an immediate impact on your life.

Remember that the status of sub-national or local depends on whether the nation operates under a federal or under a unitary system. In a federal system, such as the United States, Mexico and Canada, the national government shares some power with the states or provinces, as in Canada. While particularly in the area of foreign affairs, states are subservient to the national government, they may have quite a bit of leeway to set their own laws within the boundaries established by a national constitution. In unitary governments, all power comes from the national government, which delegates some of that power to local governments to carry out the local business of governing.

In all but the smallest nations, having some kind of local government keeps government closer to the people and perhaps more responsive, and gives people a chance to create law and policy that fits their particular needs. State and local governments therefore are often responsible for things such as local transportation needs, law enforcement, and...
public schools, and sometimes have a role in broader issues such as environmental protection and health care.

U.S. State and Local Governments

The 50 U.S. states are in some ways like 50 mini-republics, each with its own executive, legislative and judicial branches. The governor is the chief executive, although states often have separately elected statewide officials such as the state attorney general or the state treasurer. In 49 states, voters choose a two-chambered legislature, such as a house and a Senate. Only Nebraska has a unicameral legislature, with one non-partisan chamber to do the state’s legislative business.

States have substantial leeway to order their own affairs—to create and maintain laws particular to the people of that state. So, for example, self-service gasoline remains illegal in Oregon, while the drinking age in Louisiana is 19.

In addition to creating policies that might fit more with the desires and conditions of local citizens, states deliver services directly to citizens. So, federally funded programs such as welfare and Medicare/Medicaid will be funneled through state offices, with the states and the federal government sharing funding responsibility. Congress usually insists that the states adhere to certain standards and levels of funding in order to receive federal matching funds, although in recent decades Congress has leaned more toward giving states some leeway in deciding how to structure such programs.

U.S. states typically have much more authority over education than does the federal government. There is a U.S. Department of Education, and the federal government provides some funding for both K-12 and for higher education, but the great majority of funding for education, and hence the standards to be applied, the level of tuition, and the location of schools, colleges and universities, is the work of state and sometimes local governments. States will decide what graduation requirements are for high school, and sometimes set requirements for college basic requirements. College students in Texas must study Texas state politics and government, regardless of their majors. That was a decision of the state government.

States have a major say in transportation issues, aside from the interstate freeway system, which was created by the federal government. States will often set speed limits on state highways. Wyoming once had no speed limit on freeways outside of urban areas, a nod to the travel time between its somewhat far-flung towns and cities. Congress, which was concerned about energy issues, wanted states to set lower speed limits to encourage fuel conservation, and threatened to take away Wyoming’s federal highway funds if it did not comply. Wyoming got to the letter if not the spirit of the law by having state troopers issue tickets for wasting resources for drivers who treated state highways like the German Autobahn (where there often is no speed limit). States and provinces, and the local governments inside of them, often find themselves dependent on the governments above them for revenues. Nations and states have broader revenue bases, which allows them to collect more money than any state or city can. So even as they try to create law and policy that appeals to local residents, they find themselves under pressure from governments above them to spend the money in a particular way, as dictated by state or national governments.

States manage park systems, regional economic development efforts, and state legislatures set tax rates and create budgets that direct state spending. States may create more or less stringent environmental laws; expand or contract marriage rights; and regulate business and commerce within their own borders.
Local Governments: Cities

States are unitary governments—for the most part, they lend power to local governments. In some states, large cities and counties have received what’s called a limited home-rule charter, by which they have a little more authority to decide their own affairs. But for the most part, a state government, via the legislature, could in fact combine school districts, towns or even counties if they decided there was some reason to do so. When this happens, it’s usually because one of these local governments is too small to support itself.

There are more than 87,000 local governments in the United States. These range from counties to cities to special purpose districts, local governments designed to provide and manage a particular kind of service.

Cities are more like mini-mini-republics, usually with some kind of elected council. In a strong-mayor form of government, the city council and the mayor are elected separately, and relate to each other in a way similar to how the president and Congress, or a governor and a state legislature, deal with each other. The council makes law; the mayor is the chief executive of city government. This system is more common in large cities. In smaller cities and towns, cities operate using the council-manager form of government, by which the city council serves as both legislature and executive, but hires a full-time, professional manager to oversee the day-to-day operations of city government.

Cities may provide police and fire protection, local transportation planning and improvement, and laws relating to the conduct of life within city limits. It is city government that sets local speed limits, puts in a stoplight, or takes out a traffic camera from your neighborhood. Cities fix potholes, help organize summer fairs and festivals, and maintain local parks. Many cities engage in zoning, laws by which rules are set about what can be built where. So, if an area is zoned retail, a developer can put in a store. If an area is zoned residential, the only thing that can be built there is housing. Like anything government does, zoning helps some people and hurts others. It can protect homeowners’ home values, because you’re going to have a harder time selling your home if somebody builds a Wal-Mart or other large store around the corner. On the other hand, zoning, by limiting the supply of available land, can make housing and other construction more expensive. Cities attempt to engage in economic development efforts, trying to attract businesses and jobs that will keep residents employed and keep revenue flowing into the city budget. In large cities in particular, city governments often face a balancing act in promoting economic development while trying to maintain quality of life for existing residents.

Counties

Counties play a big role in local government in some states and less so in others, providing services and serving as regional governments in larger metropolitan areas. There are more than 3,000 counties in the United States, ranging from the 25 square miles of Arlington County, Virginia to the 330,000 square miles of the Unorganized Borough of Alaska. They range in population from around 10 million in Los Angeles County to less than 100 in Loving County, Texas. In Connecticut and Rhode Island, there are counties, but no county governments. In Louisiana, counties are called parishes, and in Alaska they are boroughs. Like cities, county governments may have either an executive and a council, separately elected, or, in the case of smaller counties, an elected board of 3–5 commissioners who have both executive and legislative power. In the west, counties are more likely to be both larger than eastern counties, and to provide city-like services to areas that are unincorporated, or whose citizens do not live inside of the boundary of any city. In Maryland, counties run school systems; in North Carolina, counties do not maintain local roads as they do...
elsewhere. Counties often maintain vital statistics records, such as marriages, births and deaths. Counties also often are responsible for local election and voter registration. In the northeastern U.S., counties may be divided into townships, establishing local governments which then have responsibility for a particular area within a county.

### Special Purpose Districts

Special purpose districts, as we noted earlier, are created to provide one kind of service. The most common special purpose district are school districts, which manage K-12 school systems in most parts of the country. While much of the money for schools comes from state governments, school districts manage how the money is spent. School districts usually have regularly elected boards of directors and a hired superintendent to manage the everyday operations of the district. Special purpose districts may also manage fire service, utilities such as sewer, water and electricity, and everything from local parks to public hospitals and cemeteries. In rural areas, special purpose districts may be created to manage pest control and irrigation, allowing local farmers to pool their resources and provide common service to a wider number of people. In some states, port districts are charged with encouraging economic development and managing sea and airports to encourage commerce and foster job creation.

The advantages of special purpose districts can be that they encourage specialization and expertise, hopefully providing constituents with a better, more efficient level of service. In theory, with elected boards in charge, they are not immune to popular control. If citizens are unhappy, they can throw the rascals out and elect a new board. On the other hand, a board of citizens with no particular expertise in one area or another may become dominated by the district’s hired management, or fooled by consultants, as happened with some local governments and their investment portfolios in the 1990s and 2000s. So, like all levels of government, they are by no means perfect. To excited over those annexations; they require petitions from a majority of landowners within a target area just to get started.

**KEY TAKEAWAYS**

- Sub-national governments manage local affairs on behalf of national governments.
- U.S. states often delegate local responsibility and authority to cities, counties, townships and special purpose districts.
- The autonomy of states or provinces will depend if the overall system of government is federal or unitary.

**EXERCISE**

1. Look up the local government where you live. What services does it provide? What is the structure of its government? How does it fund those operations—what are its sources of revenue? How much of that money comes from the state government? Contact a local elected official and ask how much they are required to adhere to state guidelines on spending the money.