CHAPTER 11

Local Government: Structure and Leadership

CHAPTER SUMMARY
American local governments sprouted in response to a combination of citizen demand, interest group pressure, and state government acquiescence. As a consequence, five distinct types of local governments emerged.

General-purpose local governments perform a wide variety of governmental functions, and counties, municipalities, and towns and townships all fall into this category. Special-purpose local governments generally focus on a specific purpose and one function. Best known of these are the school districts. Regardless of name, it is state government that gives local governments of all types their legal life.

Counties were created to function as appendages of the state, but modernization and population growth have put pressures on counties to expand their service offerings beyond property tax assessment and collection, law enforcement, elections, record keeping, and road maintenance. Increasingly they have become independent policymaking units of local government, and many handle health care, pollution control, mass transit, industrial development, social services, and consumer protection. Home rule provisions in at least thirty-seven states award the county with greater decision making authority and flexibility. There are 3,034 counties in the United States.

The typical county government has a board of commissioners or supervisors and a number of other elected officials forming a plural executive structure. Criticisms of this form of government have led to two alternatives—the county council-elected executive and the council-administrator forms. Three quarters of all counties are organized in the plural executive format, but the two alternatives are widely used and experimentation continues. Meanwhile, county-state relations are strained as state-imposed mandates for new programs send county government costs spiraling.

Like counties, cities are general-purpose governments, but their origins and the role they have played differ. They begin as concentrations of people within a county who petition the state for a charter of incorporation. When incorporation is successful, citizens vote on name and form of government. Typically cities have greater authority and discretion than counties, and they offer a wider variety of services. City or municipal governments operate with one of three structures: a mayor-council form, a city commission form, or a council-manager form. Experts disagree over which is best, but generally find those forms without a strong executive officer less preferable than others. Experimentation continues as voters consider and often make changes in the basic structure of city government even as they face pressing problems related to planning and land use, annexation, finances, and determining how to provide fair representation. Currently, there are more than 19,000 cities in the United States. In some cases, cities and counties have merged into city-county consolidations. There were predictions back in the 1960s that counties would become relics of the past but this has yet to occur. As of 2007, there were thirty-two city-county consolidations. These consolidations are intended to enhance efficiency and eliminate service duplication, but to date they have not been a popular. The oldest consolidation is New Orleans/Orleans Parish, Louisiana (1805) and the newest consolidation is Hartsville/Trousdale County, Tennessee (2000).
Towns, or townships, are also general-purpose units of government, but are generally smaller than cities and counties. They are often rural in nature and their services are limited, but where they are located near populous areas they generally offer an expanded set of services. Many observers feel that townships have a dim future and that without federal General Revenue Sharing (GRS) they will soon cease to exist, but townships have been remarkably resilient. Currently, there are more than 16,500 towns and townships in the United States.

The fourth type of local government—the single-purpose or special district—is supposed to do what local governments cannot or will not do. There are more than 35,000 special districts around the country, and their number is growing. They overlay existing general-purpose governments and differ in their organization—they are minuscule to mammoth. They continue to exist because of technical and practical limits on the general-purpose local government, the special debt and tax advantages under which the special district operates, and the political power that they accrue. They accrue this political power because of restrictive annexation laws faced by cities and the limits on county government authority. Once created, the special-district interests fight encroachment by general-purpose governments. Supporters argue they are efficient in providing a service and are responsive to constituents whose needs were not met by general-purpose government. However, many scholars look at them with a jaundiced eye because they feel that they operate without enough political accountability and that well-placed groups are their special beneficiaries. Some states are taking action to give general-purpose local governments more input into the creation of new special districts.

School districts are a unique breed of single-purpose district. Prior to World War II there were 100,000 school districts that were often rural and expensive to maintain. Despite local pride in these institutions, they have been consolidated. The number of school districts dropped to about 13,500.

Central cities, suburban town governments, and urban counties are increasingly joining efforts to forge areawide solutions to contemporary problems. The movement is modest, but growing. In recognition of the costs of providing duplicate services and the realization that interjurisdictional cooperative approaches may be more effective than individual ones. These “intercommunity partnerships” involve local governments and area businesses, civic organizations, the academic community, and citizen leagues.

Who runs local governments? When this question arises proponents of elite theory and pluralist theory provide different answers. Elite theory holds that a small group of parochial economic insiders dominate the community to enhance their business and professional interests. Conversely, pluralist theory views the community decision making process as one of bargaining, accommodation, and compromise among multiple groups with decisions made by fragmented authority, but the legitimacy of this process hinges on the ability of the larger community to revoke the right of such limited groups to make decisions. The latter theory is a more hopeful interpretation of community power.

To understand the dynamics of power in a community one must look to the regime—the informal arrangements that surround and complement the formal workings of government authority. Concepts like “systemic power” and “strategic advantage” may explain why upper strata interests so often win the day, but electoral accountability may sway elected officials to decide against these narrow interests. In other instances, hyperpluralism—a situation in which competing groups are unable to form coalitions—allows public policy to become incoherent and increasingly ineffective. The question of who is in charge has no final answer.

Mayors occupy the center of attention in city government. Occasionally city council members with aspirations to the mayor’s job try to fill that role. “Strong” mayors enjoy structural arrangements of the office that afford greater formal powers. Those without this leadership-
inducing structure are referred to as “weak” mayors. In the weak-mayor structure, the mayor shares much of his power with the council. Most American cities display a preference for weak mayors, but reformers believe complex problems are best resolved by a structure with a strong mayor. Opponents fear such individuals will build a political machine based on an exchange of benefits. But structure simply creates opportunities for leadership, and true leaders are those who can transform a structurally weak position into a strong one by dint of strong leadership. The reform movement elevated city managers to a prominent leadership position in many cities. Originally, administration and politics were considered independent of each other, but such separation has proven impossible—particularly for city managers, who are involved in the initiation and formulation of policy.

Local legislative bodies are much changed from the days when they were exclusive clubs. Council members considered themselves to be volunteers. But today city councils are less white, less male, and less passive. They are less likely to have been elected at-large. Racial and ethnic minorities are making inroads in elected city and county offices across the country, but the percentages remain relatively low. The possibility exists that with more groups seeking representation minority groups will build coalitions. That appears not to be the case since there is evidence that inter-minority group competition is on the rise.

Leaders display a penchant for action. This focus on leadership of individuals in local government does not deny the existence of unofficial power and the significant role played by the private sector in these governments. Local governments seek the right mix of politics and professionalism as the players change, issues shift, structures adapt, and communities endure.

How do we know when a community is well governed? Although there are no universally accepted criteria by which to assess the quality of governance, attempts to provide criteria by which to judge communities have included such measures as tranquility among officials, continuity in office, use of analytical budgeting and planning, participative management, innovativeness, public-private partnerships, and citizen input. Governments continue to tinker with their structure and experiment with new jurisdictional partnerships in an effort to find a balance between efficiency and responsiveness.