Post

Municipal and County Governments

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Very Good

Municipal and County Governments. Americans inherited both the institution of the municipal corporation and the county form of government from seventeenth-century England, but over the course of four centuries these units of local rule have changed markedly.

1600's

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Colonial Era.

During the Colonial Era, the county was the principal unit of local government in the South with county courts, composed of local gentry, acting both as judicial and administrative bodies. These courts settled legal disputes and supervised the construction and maintenance of roads. In the middle colonies, counties and townships shared authority, whereas in New England the town was the most significant local unit, though county justices were authorized to preside over civil and criminal cases, license taverns, and order the construction of roads and bridges.

Operating under royal charters, municipal corporations ruled the emerging commercial centers of the middle and southern colonies. During the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, these corporations dedicated themselves primarily to promoting and regulating commerce and managing the municipal corporations' property. They fixed bread prices, licensed carters, guaranteed standard weights and measures, and oversaw corporation-owned ferries, wharves, and markets. By the mid–eighteenth century, however, the municipal corporations were devoting increased attention to such services as fire protection and street lighting. Some of these colonial municipalities, such as Philadelphia, Williamsburg, and Norfolk, were closed corporations with incumbent aldermen filling all vacancies on the governing boards and the general populace having no voice in the selection of their municipal rulers. In New York City and Albany, as well as other less prominent municipal corporations in the middle colonies, the municipal charters provided for popular elections of city councils. Devoted to their town governments, colonial New Englanders eschewed the municipal corporation, and none of the commercial centers of New England operated under a municipal charter.

1600's to 1700's

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Revolutionary Era to Late Nineteenth Century.

The half century following the Revolutionary War brought notable changes in local government. The closed corporation disappeared, and in all municipalities the electorate chose the members of the governing council. New Englanders finally accepted the municipal corporation, with six communities in Connecticut and Rhode Island securing municipal charters in the 1780s and Boston becoming a chartered city in 1822. Whereas during the Colonial Era a municipal charter was a privilege granted by the royal governors to a selected group of communities, by the 1820s and 1830s the state legislatures rubber-stamped charters for every village or town aspiring to corporate status. During the course of the nineteenth century, thousands of communities, including many with only a few hundred residents, became municipal corporations and enjoyed the right of local self-government.

Key

Meanwhile, the new states west of the Appalachians were creating county governments modeled on those in the East. Those north of the Mason-Dixon line opted for a county and township governance structure similar to that in Pennsylvania or New York. In some northern states the legislature vested responsibility for county government in boards of supervisors, composed of at least one supervisor from each township, but other states adopted the commission form of rule, with a small panel of officials elected at large overseeing each county's business. New southern states, however, followed the examples of Virginia and North Carolina, assigning responsibility for rural government to county courts and rejecting the township unit.

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During the second half of the nineteenth century, county governments generally underwent little change, but in the fast-growing cities, municipal governments expanded their role. The larger municipalities invested in expansive parks, state-of-the-art water and sewer systems, and professional fire and police departments. New York City boasted of such magnificent municipal enterprises as Central Park, the Croton Aqueduct, and the Brooklyn Bridge, whereas Boston's public library and intercepting sewer system won plaudits from domestic and foreign observers.

Yet many criticized American city government. The police forces were too often corrupt, ignoring prostitution and the illegal sale of liquor in exchange for bribes. Some urban political leaders grew rich by exploiting their influence and winning lucrative contracts from the city. Streetcar and public-utility companies paid off aldermen to secure valuable franchises. Wardheelers of questionable competence obtained jobs in city hall simply through loyal service to the political party in power. During the early 1870s, New York City's Democratic party leader William M. ("Boss") Tweed won nationwide notoriety for his peculations and those of his cronies, and many late nineteenth-century Americans claimed that minor-league Tweeds were operating in municipalities throughout the nation. To a growing number of Protestant, upper middle-class moralists, municipal governments were compromising their honor by welcoming Irish-Catholic ward bosses and tolerating the infractions of saloonkeepers, prostitutes, dishonest aldermen, and venal police officers.

Progressive Era Municipal Reforms.

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To clean up city government, municipal reformers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries suggested a long list of remedies. Seeking to keep party hacks off the public payrolls, they urged the adoption of civil service rules that provided for the selection of municipal workers by competitive examinations. Municipal legislatures appeared especially prone to corruption, and consequently reformers proposed a shift in authority from the board of aldermen or city council to the mayor. Moreover, they sought to weaken the clout of party ward bosses through the creation of nonpartisan city councils elected at large. This reform would supposedly shift control of city government from neighborhood party potentates to upright citizens of citywide repute. Yet another highly touted remedy was home rule, which enabled municipalities to draft and adopt their own charters. No longer would cities have to seek state legislative approval for their structures of government or bargain with party bosses and special interests at the state capital. Instead, a municipality could tailor its charter to its needs and the local electorate would have the final say whether to accept a proposed charter. Not every state or locality adopted all these reforms, but by the early twentieth century the tendency nationwide was toward enhanced mayoral authority, smaller at-large councils, nonpartisan administration, and home rule.

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Some reformers sought even more radical changes. Advocates of the commission plan of municipal government jettisoned the traditional mayor-council structure and placed all executive and legislative authority in the hands of a small body of commissioners. Each commissioner was elected at large and responsible for a certain branch of administration. Thus the commissioner of public works met with the commissioners of finance, public safety, parks, and sanitation, and together they governed the city just as a board of directors governed a business corporation. First adopted in Galveston, Texas, in 1901, after a devastating hurricane and flood, the commission plan swept the nation; by 1922 over five hundred cities had converted to this scheme of government.

Meanwhile, another reform plan was also attracting adherents. In 1908 Staunton, Virginia, introduced city-manager government; Dayton, Ohio, followed suit after a terrible flood in 1913, and by 1920 164 American cities had embraced this plan. Under the city-manager scheme, the city council retained legislative authority but an appointed, professional manager was put in charge of municipal administration. Thus elected officials determined basic policy questions, yet the implementation of policy and the overall operation of the city was the responsibility of an expert administrator. The administration of a city was supposedly too complex to assign a mere politician fortunate enough to be elected mayor.

As the twentieth century wore on, the commission plan waned in popularity, and by 1987 only 364 American municipalities still adhered to it, whereas nearly 2,500 cities employed managers, and over 13,000 municipalities retained traditional mayor-council government. Large, heterogeneous cities that needed political leadership as well as technical expertise were most often in the mayor-council column, but many homogeneous suburban municipalities and smaller cities favored the manager plan.

Reforms in County Government.

As municipalities shifted to manager rule, good-government reformers and public-administration experts also found county governments wanting. In 1917 H.S. Gilbertson exposed the previously unexplored shortcomings of county rule in The County: The "Dark Continent" of American Politics. Characterizing the irrational county structure as a jungle, Gilbertson called for reform. Others were suggesting changes as well. Some proposed a county-manager scheme to ensure professional, expert administration. The county-manager idea only slowly gained momentum, however, with Iredell County, North Carolina, appointing the first in 1927. As of 1950, only sixteen of the more than three thousand American ~~counties had hired such~~ professional chieftains. In 1911 California contributed to the county-reform movement when it authorized county home rule. The following year, Los Angeles County became the first in the United States to adopt a locally drafted charter and eschew the general scheme for county government authorized by the state legislature. The county home-rule idea did not initially spread rapidly, and prior to 1930, only California and Maryland had incorporated this reform in their constitutions.

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Gradually, however, the traditional structure of county rule came under assault, especially in fast-growing suburban areas where county authorities needed to assume new responsibilities that the myriad miniature suburban municipalities could not adequately perform. From 1920 to 1940, the number of municipalities in Long Island's Nassau County soared from twenty to sixty-five. Believing that an overarching county government could impose needed order and unity on Nassau's fragmented governmental structure, Long Islanders voted in 1936 to adopt a county charter that enhanced the county's planning powers and transferred responsibility for welfare, public health, and tax assessment from the townships and municipalities to the county. Moreover, the charter provided for the nation's first elected county executive, comparable to a big-city mayor, to preside over the new governance structure. This represented a marked deviation from the traditional reliance on county boards to exercise both legislative and executive authority. Other counties followed Nassau's example, but as late as 1960 only eight could boast of elected executives. During the following quarter century, the number of converts to this reform scheme rose markedly, and by 1987, nearly four hundred counties had elected executives comparable to mayors, while another four hundred had adopted the county-manager plan, hiring administrators comparable to city managers. These reforms became possible in part because of a growing willingness to grant home rule to counties. By 1987, eighty-five counties had framed and approved ~~their~~ own blueprints for government.

Post–1950 Developments.

Tools

As the number of municipal governments in metropolitan areas soared in the mid–twentieth century, pressure for more centralized governance mounted. Political scientists and good-government leagues proposed plans to shift governing power from cities and villages to metropolitanwide authorities. As older central cities lost population, businesses, and tax revenues to outlying municipalities, proponents of metropolitan reform argued that new schemes of regional cooperation or consolidation would correct the growing inequities between cities and their suburbs. For example, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, two proposals to promote metropolitan unity among ninety-eight suburban municipalities and the city of Saint Louis appeared on the ballot. Voters resoundingly rejected both proposals, however, and residents of small municipalities elsewhere proved equally wedded to local self-government. Nevertheless, county governments gradually succeeded in imposing some coordination upon smaller local units, and many municipalities agreed to join special-function metropolitan districts providing such services as water or sewerage. But wholesale consolidation remained elusive. As the twentieth century ended, the United States had almost twenty thousand municipalities, and there seemed little likelihood that the number would decline.

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[See also City Planning; Civil Service Reform; Galveston Hurricane and Flood; Muckrakers; Municipal Judicial Systems; Prostitution and Antiprostitution; Suburbanization; Urbanization.]

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