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## THE STATE OF LOCAL DEMOCRACY IN THE UNITED STATES

### *AN EXPLORATION*



Working Paper

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# **THE STATE OF LOCAL DEMOCRACY IN THE UNITED STATES: AN EXPLORATION**

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# THE STATE OF LOCAL DEMOCRACY IN THE UNITED STATES: AN EXPLORATION

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The state of local democracy in the United States is an important yet understudied aspect of the American experiment of federalism and self-government. While extensive high-quality research is produced that studies different aspects of local governance in the United States, less attention seems to have been paid in recent years on questions surrounding the role of local governments in the wider system of intergovernmental relations.<sup>1</sup> Little systematic data has been gathered over the past twenty years regarding local popularly elected officials in the United States, making it difficult to assess whether the current political structures, governance systems and intergovernmental arrangements at the local level ensure an optimally inclusive and representative democratic local governance system.

As a “big picture” exploration of the current state of local democratic representation in the United States, the analysis considers four different measures of local democracy:

- First, the analysis considers the size of an (average) local government’s population, as the jurisdiction’s population size reflects the “distance” between the constituent/voter and the local government jurisdiction: after all, the bigger (or more populous) each local government jurisdiction is, the smaller the voice of each individual or household. An initial assessment of the available evidence on the structure and size of local governments suggests that local government jurisdiction sizes in the United States generally strike a balance between being sufficiently large in scale to be efficient, while at the same time being sufficiently small in size to be responsive and accountable to the people.
- Second, the analysis considers the number of elected representatives within each local government that together comprise the board or council that deliberates on matters of importance and that has authoritative decision-making power. It is expected that the larger the number of elected representatives on the local government board or council, all else equal, the more informed and representative the local government’s decisions will be. The analysis reveals that a typical local government board in the United States has only five members, while the average county board has 5.7 members. This means that county decisions—affecting the lives of a hundred thousand residents, on average—can typically be made by a board majority of three individuals. The small size of county boards appears to facilitate majority-rule with little need for consideration of minority opinions, thus preventing county boards from meaningfully representing the diversity of opinions and interests of all constituents. Furthermore, because the size of local government boards typically varies little (or does not vary at all) among local governments with different population sizes, residents in smaller jurisdictions tend to have a greater degree of democratic representation at the local level than residents in larger jurisdictions.

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<sup>1</sup> Prior to 1996, the U.S. Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations was a key stakeholder in the analysis of local governance and intergovernmental relations in the United States.

- Third, the analysis considers the level of representation or “voice” that people have within each jurisdiction, as measured by the number of constituents per elected local representative for each local government. The smaller the number of constituents represented by each representative, the larger the voice each individual or households is likely to have in public decision-making. Although there are no theoretical standards or comparative norms by which to judge the degree of electoral representation at the local level, on its face, the average degree of local electoral representation in the United States appears to be quite reasonable, with each elected local representative on average representing the voices, opinions, and perspectives of residents of around 6,600 residents. Elected representation, however, is quite unevenly distributed across states: whereas some states have a high degree of electoral representation (with 1,000-3,000 constituents per elected local representative, on average), local governments in other states have much lower degree of democratic representation (exceeding 30,000 residents per elected local representative).
- Finally, the analysis considers whether the election mechanisms used result in a governing body that is representative of the underlying population. Some electoral mechanisms—such as at-large elections using multi-member districts—tend to result in unrepresentative election outcomes, whereas other electoral mechanisms—such as proportional representation or ranked-choice voting—tend to be more representative in nature. The analysis finds that 69 percent of popularly elected members of local governing boards are elected through at-large elections, which is arguably the least inclusive and representative election mechanisms. With a handful of exceptions, more representative electoral mechanisms—such as ranked-choice voting and proportional representation—are used in fewer than one-half of one percent of all local governments in the United States (Sightline Institute, 2017).

Beyond the specific findings of the quantitative analysis itself, this exploration of the state of local democracy in the United States provides a motivation to think differently about the nature of local governance and local democracy in the United States. In many ways, local democracy has been treated by many as a strictly local matter: in fact, local governments in many states are given considerable discretion to determine their own governance structure. The foregoing analysis suggests that allowing elected local government officials to determine the structure of local government elections in their own jurisdiction does not necessarily lead to local governance structures that ensure that all Americans have their voice, opinions, and interests represented at the local level.

This perspective suggests the need for a more proactive role for policy makers and the public policy community: as federalism and local self-government are core American values, state legislatures—who hold the constitutional authority to shape local democracy within their respective states—should ensure that local governments in their state use inclusive, representative and responsive local governance structures. Further analysis is needed—on a state by state basis—to determine how the structure and nature of local governance can be strengthened in order to enhance the legitimacy, inclusiveness, responsiveness and accountability of local governments.

# THE STATE OF LOCAL DEMOCRACY IN THE UNITED STATES: AN EXPLORATION

Jamie Boex \*  
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Most Americans support the bedrock principles of the American federal system, including the distribution of powers and responsibilities between federal, state and local governments; the separation of power between the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government at each level (which provides important checks and balances); the need for professional (non-political) public administration; the notion of local self-government; the principle of democratic representation; and the principle of one-person-one-vote.

Despite a shared commitment to representative democracy in the United States, proportionately little evidence has been brought to bear by the research community in recent years on the question whether the current political structures, governance systems and intergovernmental arrangements at the local level ensure an optimally inclusive and representative democratic local governance system. Instead, much of the focus of the current policy debate on democratic systems has been on the shortcomings of democratic systems at the federal and state levels.

Indeed, there are reasons to be concerned that federalism and democratic institutions are not succeeding in promoting the general welfare of the people and in securing the blessings of liberty at the local level. More than half of all Americans believe that politics and elections are controlled by people with money and by big corporations ([PRRI, 2016](#)). As a result, fewer than 15 percent of eligible citizens turn out to vote in local elections across the country, while only one out of three young Americans trusts local governments to do the right thing ([CityLab, 2016](#); [IOP, 2017](#)). Furthermore, local governments electoral structures seem to result in the systematic under-representation of minorities and women at the local level.

The current analysis considers whether the nature of local governance arrangements in the United States provide any justification for these negative view by exploring an important question: ***how democratic are local governments in the United States?***

This question is important for a myriad of reasons, but for the purpose of this analysis, it is sufficient to posit that having inclusive and representative democracy at the local government level—as a core American value—is inherently important in its own right.

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## 1. HOW TO MEASURE THE STATE OF LOCAL DEMOCRACY IN THE UNITED STATES ?

There is no consensus within the public policy literature on how to measure the democratic or representative nature of a local government, or how to measure the democratic or representative nature of a local government system as a whole. Local governance structures vary from country to country and from state to state and involve political, administrative and fiscal systems. As such, the democratic, inclusive or representative nature of a local government system is complex and multi-faceted and cannot be easily captured by any single measure of local democracy.

Many international measures of democracy consider not only the presence of representative government systems (for instance, elections that ensure free and equal access to political power); but also measure the presence or strength of key preconditions of effective democratic systems, such as the presence of fundamental rights (individual liberties and resources), checks on government (effective control of executive power), fair and predictable public administration, and the nature and extent of participatory engagement (e.g., [IDEA, 2017](#)). The measures used in international comparisons on democratic systems are unlikely to provide an adequate picture of the state of democracy when applied to local governments in the United States.

Instead, this exploratory “big picture” assessment of the state of local democracy in the United States focuses on four of the most rudimentary aspects of collective decision-making at the local level in the United States: how close are local governments to the people? How deliberative are local government decision-making bodies? How much voice and access do constituents have at the local government level? And how representative are local electoral systems?

For the purpose of this initial exploration, the analysis considers four different measures of local democracy:

- First, the analysis considers the size of an (average) local government’s population, as the jurisdiction’s population size reflects the “distance” between the constituent/voter and the local government jurisdiction: after all, the bigger (or more populous) each local government jurisdiction is, the smaller the voice of each individual or household.
- Second, the analysis considers the number of elected representatives within each local government that together comprise the board or council that deliberates on matters of importance and that has authoritative decision-making power. It is expected that the larger the number of elected representatives on the local government board or council (all else equal), the more informed and representative the local government’s decisions will be.
- Third, the analysis considers the level of representation or “voice” that people have within each jurisdiction, as measured by the number of constituents per elected local representative for each local government. The smaller the number of constituents represented by each representative, the larger the voice each individual or households is likely to have in public decision-making.
- Finally, the analysis considers whether the election mechanism used results in a governing body that is representative of the underlying population. Some electoral mechanisms—such as at-large elections using multi-member districts—tend to result in unrepresentative election outcomes, whereas other electoral mechanisms—such as proportional representation or ranked-choice voting—tend to be more representative in nature.

These four measures do not give us a perfect view of the democratic or representative nature of local governments in the United States. In fact, there are numerous other issues or measures that should be considered when analyzing the extent of local democracy: How much power or authority do local governments have? What functions and services are they responsible for? Is the local executive directly elected? What other local officials—if any—are popularly elected? Are elections partisan or non-partisan? How are candidates selected? Do term limits exist? Does the local electorate have direct decision-making power, for instance, through recall provisions or through referenda, for instance, when the local government wants to raise taxes or borrow funds?

In addition to these issues, there is considerable analysis within the political science literature on the relationship between residents and elected officials, and on the role that interest groups play as the primary means of aggregating and articulating residents' views to government officials. Furthermore, from the point of view of connecting residents with public officials, information—provided through mass media, social media, and the internet, as well as the televising of local government meetings on public access channels—is largely a public good and available to residents regardless of population size and council size.

These matters and many others are no doubt highly relevant in determining how democratic and representative local governments are, but—given that data are not readily available to answer all these questions—are left for future research.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE IN THE UNITED STATES

**Background.** While the United States Constitution defines the structure of the federal government and the relationship between the federal government and the states, the Constitution makes no reference to local governments. Since all powers not granted to the federal government are reserved for the states or the people (as per the Tenth Amendment to the Constitution), the power to establish local governments in the U.S. is unequivocally understood to be a State power. As a result, rather than being governed uniformly by federal law, the structure and powers of local governments in the United States are defined in each of the 50 state constitutions and subsequent legislation.

**Powers and functional responsibilities of different types of local governments.** Despite the absence of federal law or guidance on local governance issues, the structure of local governments is broadly similar in most states. However, due to the evolution of the local government system over time, most states have arrived at a rather fragmented local governments system, whereby different types of local governments have been assigned different functional responsibilities. As a result, a typical American household or resident is likely to live at the same time in a county, in a municipality (or town or township) and in a school district, while most likely simultaneously living in one or more special districts. Each of these types of local governments typically have their own elected leadership and have their own functional responsibilities:

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<sup>2</sup> In particular, any attempt to identify relationships between different features of local governance systems and the overall effectiveness of representative local democratic approaches (for instance, by measuring the perceived legitimacy of the local governance system, or by assessing the level of voter turn-out or the degree of public participation) is left for future research.

- **Counties.** In most states, counties were originally formed as administrative subdivisions of their respective state governments which, over time, evolved into self-governing local government units.<sup>3</sup> One of the most important original functions of county governments in most states was the administration of public order and the construction and maintenance of the county courthouse. In most states, counties continue to perform these functions today. Other powers and functions commonly exercised by county governments include spatial planning and land use controls; health and sanitation; roads, bridges and transportation; and recreation, leisure, and culture (NACO, 2010).
- **Municipalities, towns and townships** are defined as sub-county general purpose governments.<sup>4</sup> Municipal governments are generally organized around population centers, rather than providing complete territorial coverage of all areas within a county. There is no common list of the services provided by a municipality; instead, municipal services generally include the basic services that municipal residents expect the municipal government to provide in exchange for the municipal taxes which residents pay. In many cases, municipal, town and township governments provide some or all of the same services that are typically provided by the county government, either supplementing the county services, or providing these services in lieu of county provision. Such services may include the construction and maintenance of city streets, the provision of solid waste management, fire protection, police services, the maintenance of municipal parks and recreational opportunities, as well as a wide range of other services. Municipal governments may also provide—either directly or through municipal-owned companies—additional services such as electricity, water and sanitation, gas, cable television and/or public transportation. In unincorporated areas where there are no municipal governments, these services are typically provided—if provided at all—by the county government.
- **School districts** in most states are responsible for the provision of pre-primary, primary and secondary education. In some states, local school districts are also responsible for vocational training and some tertiary education (e.g., community colleges). In the majority of states, local school systems have considerable administrative and fiscal autonomy, and are led by a directly elected school board that has authoritative decision-making power over the delivery of public education within their jurisdiction.<sup>5</sup>
- **Special district governments** provide specific localized public services. Most perform a single function, but in some instances, their enabling legislation allows them to provide several, usually related, types of services. The services provided by these districts range from such basic social needs, such as hospitals and fire protection, to water and sewer provision, to the less conspicuous tasks of mosquito abatement and upkeep of cemeteries (Census, 2013).

Most residents in the U.S. live in—and receive services from—these different types of elected local governments at the same time. It is not necessary, however, for a resident to live in a county, municipality or school district: not all states have county governments; not all parts of counties are

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<sup>3</sup> As a result, counties typically provide complete territorial coverage of the state’s geographic jurisdiction. Louisiana and Alaska have functionally equivalent subdivisions called parishes and boroughs, respectively.

<sup>4</sup> For brevity, unless otherwise noted, we will collectively refer to municipalities, towns and township local governments as municipalities. The formal designation of these entities is sub-county general purpose governments.

<sup>5</sup> Of the 14,178 public school systems in the United States in 2012, only 12,880 systems are independent school districts included in the count of governments. The other 1,298 “dependent” public school systems are classified as agencies of other governments—state, county, municipal, or town or township—and are not counted as separate governments.



necessarily incorporated into municipalities or towns; and not all states rely on school districts that are autonomous local government entities. Furthermore, numerous states permit a county and a city to jointly form a consolidated city-county government. In other instances—particularly in big cities—the local school system may be managed by the city government ([NLC, 2018](#)).

A detailed overview of local government structure in each of the states of the United States is provided by the [Census Bureau \(2013\)](#).

**Measuring local government structure.** As part of the Census of Governments, which is conducted every five years, the U.S. Census Bureau collects information about the organization, employment and finances of all state and local governments in the United States.

In line with the classifications used by the Census Bureau, the current analysis considers four different local governments types below the state level: (i) county governments, (ii) municipal, town or township governments; (iii) school districts; and (iv) other special-purpose local governments.

Below the state level, the United States is organized into roughly 90,000 local government entities (Table 1). The number and composition of local governments has been quite constant since 1960, with approximately 3,000 counties; 35,000 municipalites, towns and townships; roughly 15,000 school districts and 30,000 special-purpose districts. The number of counties and sub-county general purpose local governments has changed very little since World War II. For their part, the number of school districts has gradually been declining over time, whereas the number of special-purpose districts has increased over the years.

	1942**	1952	1962	1972	1982	1992	2002	2012
Counties	3,050	3,052	3,043	3,044	3041	3,043	3,034	3,031
Municipalities*	35,169	34,009	35,141	35,507	35,810	35,935	35,933	35,879
School Districts	108,579	67,355	34,678	15,780	14,851	14,422	13,506	12,880
Special Districts	8,299	12,340	18,323	23,886	28,588	31,555	35,052	38,266
<b>Total</b>	<b>155,097</b>	<b>116,756</b>	<b>91,185</b>	<b>78,217</b>	<b>82,290</b>	<b>84,955</b>	<b>87,525</b>	<b>90,056</b>
Source: COG (1957; 1962;1972;1982; 1992; 2002; 2012). Note: * Subcounty general purpose governments includes municipalities, towns and townships; ** Data for1942 excludes Alaska and Hawaii.								

### 3. PROXIMITY TO THE PEOPLE: LOCAL GOVERNMENT JURISDICTION SIZE

**Background.** Federal, state, and local governments provide a mechanism for collective decision-making and collective service provision when the market fails to efficiently provide certain goods or services, or when the market fails to provide services at an optimal level. Although economic theory provides a good basis for decisions about which functions ought to be performed through free markets and which by collective or governmental action, it does not tell us what type of government or institution should perform those activities that require collective action (Olson 1969).

The appropriate scale for democratic government is an issue that has been debated by scholars, legislators and philosophers since antiquity (Mouritzen, Rose and Denters, 2009). Philosophers as early as Aristotle considered the effects of jurisdiction size on the quality of governance, arguing that on the

one hand a viable city should be large enough to provide its citizens with the goods and services they need and demand, while on the other hand local governments should be small enough to permit active involvement of citizens in the management of collective functions. This duality is recognized in today's subsidiarity principle, which states that public functions should be pursued by the lowest level of government that is sufficiently large to perform the respective function efficiently.

**Local government jurisdiction size as a measure of local democracy.** As long as local governments are able to efficiently perform the functions assigned to them, there are a number distinct benefits to having collective decisions made by smaller local government jurisdictions.

Perhaps most importantly, by having functions performed by local governments that are closer to the people (i.e., by relying on local governments, rather than on federal or state governments), residents are more empowered over the decisions made by the public sector. This is the case because collective decisions are more likely to conform to the needs and preferences of individual constituents when the group is small.

Furthermore, democratic participation and accountability are generally stronger when the size of the local government jurisdiction is smaller: the opportunity for representative decision-making to deviate from the will of the people—and to be “captured” by political or other interests—increases as the size of a local government jurisdiction size increases.

In addition, a well-structured multi-level governance system—that generally relies on the lowest level of government possible (that is able to perform a function efficiently)—is expected to enhance the general welfare of the people by allowing residents to sort into state and local jurisdictions that more closely match their preferences for public services and taxation (Tiebout, 1956).

As smaller (less populous) local government jurisdictions provide citizens with greater agency and voice over the public sector its decisions, it is quite reasonable to argue that—all else equal—smaller (less populous) local government jurisdictions are more democratic as they provide citizens with greater agency and voice over the public sector and public sector decision. As such, we analyze the average local government jurisdiction size in each state—for each type of local government—as a measure of the state of local democracy in the United States.

**Measuring local government jurisdiction size.** Since the founding of the United States, the decennial census—conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau—has been the most reliable source of population data in the United States.

	1942**	1952	1962	1972	1982	1992	2002	2012
Counties	43,333	49,583	87,774	66,758	74,497	81,732	92,756	101,863
Municipalities*	3,758	4,450	5,103	5,723	6,326	6,921	7,832	8,605
School Districts	1,217	2,247	5,171	12,878	15,255	17,245	20,837	23,971
Special Districts	15,925	12,263	9,787	8,508	7,925	7,882	8,029	8,068
<b>US Population (mn)</b>	<b>132.2</b>	<b>151.3</b>	<b>179.3</b>	<b>203.2</b>	<b>226.5</b>	<b>248.7</b>	<b>281.4</b>	<b>308.7</b>
Source: COG (1957; 1962;1972;1982; 1992; 2002; 2012); Census of Population and Housing (1940-2010). Note: Population figures were used for the closest decennial population census; * Subcounty general purpose governments includes municipalities, towns and townships; ** Data for 1942 excludes Alaska and Hawaii.								

According to figures from the Census of Population and Housing, from 1940 through 2010, the U.S. population more than doubled from 132.2 million to 308.7 million residents. Given that the local government structure has been more or less constant over much of this period, the average population per jurisdiction has increased steadily over time (Table 2). This has been true for all types of local governments, with the exception of special districts.

As an initial attempt to quantify the state of local democracy in the U.S., Table I (Annex) lists the 50 U.S. states (plus the District of Columbia), ranked by the average population size of each of the four main types of local government (county; municipality, school districts and special districts).<sup>6</sup> In addition, the table presents the composite average local jurisdiction size in each state, which reflects the population size of an average local government jurisdiction across the four different local government types, where the average jurisdiction size for each type of local government is weighted by the relative share of spending of each type of local government in each state.<sup>7</sup>

As different types of local government simultaneously provide residents with different local public services, the composite average local government jurisdiction size reflects the average group-size that a resident or household faces in collective decision-making and collective service-provision at the local level.<sup>8</sup> In doing so, local expenditures are used as a quantifiable proxy for the relative importance of the local services provided by the respective types of local government within each state.

**Analysis.** As the structure of local governments in each state is defined and created by the state government, there is considerable variation in the structure of local governments across the states. For instance, whereas the average state has 63 county governments, this ranges from 3 county governments in Hawaii to 254 county governments in Texas. Likewise, whereas a county in the United States has an average population of 103,568 residents, the state average for county population ranges from 12,627 residents (in South Dakota) to 1,329,229 residents (in Massachusetts).<sup>9</sup> This indicator thus suggests that residents in South Dakota are considerably more empowered over their county governments (and over the decisions made by their county governments) than residents in Massachusetts.

Other types of local governments are typically much smaller when it comes to jurisdiction size. On average, a municipal government in the U.S. has 8,749 residents, whereas an average school district and special district have 24,372 and 8,203 residents, respectively.

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<sup>6</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the term “municipalities” or “municipal governments” refers to sub-county general purpose local governments, include town and township governments.

<sup>7</sup> As such, local expenditures are used as a proxy for the relative importance of collective decision-making by different types of local governments. Local expenditures for each local government type by state for 2012 was reported by the Census of Governments (2012).

<sup>8</sup> Note that this composite measure purposely reflects a weighted average, rather than being additive in nature, as each different local government type is only partially responsible for local government services and local government spending. As such, it would be misleading to simply divide each state’s population by the total number of local governments in each state; this would give a false sense of the average local government jurisdiction size faced by citizens.

<sup>9</sup> When considering state-level county population averages, the unweighted mean is 154,621 residents.

According to composite average for all local government types, a typical resident is part of an average composite local government jurisdiction of 34,948 residents. Vermont has the lowest state-level average, with an average local jurisdiction size of 2,644 residents. This means that collective decisions made at the local level in Vermont tend to be quite inclusive and participatory. In contrast, on the other end of the spectrum are Maryland (with an average composite local jurisdiction size of 212,144 residents), California (216,297 residents), the District of Columbia (632,323 residents) and Hawaii (1,097,082) residents. All else equal, residents in these states could be argued to be much less empowered over local decisions and the local decision-making process than residents in other states.

#### **4. POTENTIAL FOR DELIBERATION AND REPRESENTATION: THE SIZE OF THE ELECTED LOCAL GOVERNMENT BOARD OR COUNCIL**

**Background.** Deliberation in democratic processes generates outcomes that secure the public good through reason rather than through political power. The United States Congress—the highest deliberative body of the federal government, which has authoritative decision-making over federal legislation and the federal budget—has 535 members, divided into two chambers: 435 members of the House of Representatives, and 100 Senators. Decisions by the federal government require considerable analysis and deliberation, as agreement is required from 218 Representatives and a minimum of 51 Senators for any legislation to be adopted or even for Congress to fund the ongoing operation of the federal government.

At the state level, the size of deliberative (legislative) bodies is somewhat smaller: nonetheless, on average, a state legislature has close to 150 members.<sup>10</sup> A unicameral state legislature of 150 members would require a majority of 76 members to make an authoritatively binding decision for the population of a state. Although the average size of state legislatures is smaller than the federal legislature, nonetheless, state legislatures are still likely sufficiently large in membership to draw on a wide range of insights and expertise, thus ensuring meaningful and informed deliberation and offering the potential for the representation of a wide range of political viewpoints.

Even though the public choice literature suggests that even a small elected body would tend towards the preferences of the median voter, an adequate number of elected representatives is often viewed as a necessary condition (but not necessarily as a sufficient condition) to ensure the representative and deliberative nature of federal and state legislative bodies.<sup>11</sup>

**The size of local elected bodies as a measure of local democracy.** Although deliberative democracy is an important aspect of America’s democratic practice at the federal and state levels, this issue is all but ignored at the local level. Indeed, much of the literature on local governance in the United States treats local governments more or less as operational entities that require little or no deliberation—in this view, elected local officials are helpful in ensuring accountable and responsive local service delivery, but not much deliberation is needed to make sure the trash is picked.

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<sup>10</sup> Most states have a bi-cameral structure similar to the federal legislature, while other states have a unicameral structure.

<sup>11</sup> For instance, despite the relatively large size of federal and state legislatures bodies, there is considerable evidence that women and minorities are systematically underrepresented at the federal and state levels.

In reality, however, elected local government bodies make many decisions that have important implications for the residents in their respective communities, well-beyond basic operational decisions. Local government powers range from the power of taxation, the power to regulate land use, the power to enforce laws and operate jails, the power to enforce environmental standards, and the power to provide of public services such as public education and public health services, to the power to construct roads and provide other public infrastructure.<sup>12</sup> Given the fact that these local powers and functions can have an immense impact on local residents, the decisions and actions of local governments are of worthy of considerable deliberation. In fact, stymying the capacity of local governments to be effective deliberative bodies could result in vicious cycle of weakly empowered local governments and inadequate deliberative capacity.

A strong argument can be made that having an adequately-sized local elected body in charge of a local government is a precondition for ensuring a level of deliberation sufficient to achieve local political representation (often defined as “the process or activity of making citizens’ voices, opinions, and perspectives “present” in public policy making processes”). While it would arguably meet the minimum threshold of a democratic system if a single elected local government official would be permitted to make authoritative decisions on behalf of the local government if there were perfect agreement among all local constituents, in the real world, such an arrangement would most likely leave many citizens’ voices, opinions, and perspectives unrepresented.<sup>13</sup>

In line with the core principles of representative democracy, therefore, local government decisions should not only reflect the priorities and preferences of the political majority, but the decision-making process at the local government level should also make sure that it protects the rights and interests of those who do not feel themselves represented by the political majority. In doing so, we should consider that there are not merely two “political” positions to be considered by any local deliberative body, but rather, that viewpoints on local decisions and local services may vary along a range of dimensions, as local voter perspectives and interests may differ not only based on party-political viewpoints, but between households with different income levels; between property owners and renters; existing residents versus newcomers (especially if newcomers seek a different bundle of local taxes and local public services versus established residents); those preferring local economic development versus those who prefer community amenities; families with children versus those without; and so on.

Even if a fully representative election mechanism were used, smaller local boards—by their very composition—are less able to represent the views of citizens: for instance, if a local government board only has five elected members, there is simply no seat at the table for anyone who seeks to represent

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<sup>12</sup> In many states, local governments are further empowered to engage in other areas of public decision-making, such as setting local law enforcement priorities, regulating the local ownership and use of fire arms, pursuing specific local environmental objectives, setting local minimum wages, regulating local businesses, and protecting the civil rights of local residents. Some of these issues result in political tensions between state government and local governments. In some states, state lawmakers have sought to preempt the political decision-making power of local governments in one or more of these areas.

<sup>13</sup> In addition, when local decision-making power is concentrated in the hands of only a few local politicians, this may increase the risk that local administration is politicized. In addition, small local councils may cause gapsti emerge between the median voter’s preferences and the (partisan) position of the median legislator on the local council ([de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw, 2017](#)).

opinions or views held by less than 10 percent of the constituents of the locality.<sup>14</sup> However, the potential ability of the local government board or council to deliberate and act in representative manner can simply be increased by increasing the size of the elected body: by doubling the size of the local board, the potential for a citizen to be represented on the board by someone who represents his or her view is also doubled.<sup>15</sup>

**Measuring the size of elected bodies.** As part of the Census of Governments, the U.S. Census Bureau collects information about the organization, employment and finances of all state and local governments in the U.S.. From 1957 up to 1992, the Census of Governments tracked elected representation at the federal, state and local government level, highlighting—among others—the number of popularly elected officials by type of local government, and—for later years—their breakdown by race and gender.

As a second measure of the state of local democracy in the United States, Table II list the 50 U.S. states (plus the District of Columbia), ranked by the average number of elected officials that comprise the elected board or council for each of the four main types of local governments.<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that the number of elected officials taken into account in this table exclusively reflects the elected representatives that make up the local government’s deliberative and decision-making board or council: neither the locally elected executive (if present) nor any other elected local official is included in this number.<sup>17</sup>

In addition, the table presents the composite local government average for the local government elected board size. As was the case before, this average was computed by weighting the local government elected board size for each of the four different local government types by the share of expenditures made by the different local government types in each state.

**Analysis.** A review of Table II suggests that elected local government boards or councils in the United States tend to be quite small: an average local government board or council has only 4.9 members. Indeed, there is little variation in the average size of elected boards among the different types of local governments: county government boards, councils or commissions on average have 5.7 elected members; municipal boards or councils are slightly smaller, with an average of 4.4 elected members; while school boards on average have 5.8 elected board members.<sup>18</sup> Special districts, in contrast, are led

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<sup>14</sup> After all, in order to secure one seat out of five, any local candidate would have to secure at least half of 20 percent of the vote. Given that most local governments in the United States rely on plurality elections—and in some cases, plurality elections using at-large multi-member districts—it is actually possible for 49 percent of the electorate to be systematically left without their voice, opinion or perspective represented.

<sup>15</sup> At the extreme, in a system of direct democracy, every citizen’s voice or opinion is heard as part of a town meeting that is empowered to take authoritative decisions.

<sup>16</sup> These averages were computed based on the number of popularly elected officials and the number of local government jurisdictions for 1992 (based on the Census of Governments, 1992).

<sup>17</sup> It is common practice in many states to elect—in addition to the County Board or Council—a number of county-level officials, including the county sheriff, the clerk of the county court, and a number of other local-level officials.

<sup>18</sup> The source data from the Census of Government (1992) seems to show some (minor) anomalies with respect to the number of elected officials that form the governing board of local governments. For instance, for Arkansas, the data source does not appear to record the elected members of the Quorum Court (the governing body of Arkansas counties) as elected county board members. Also, the data do not show elected boards of dependent school systems.

by a governance board with 2.6 elected members, on average. The lower number of elected special district board members is due to the fact that many special districts are led by appointed boards, or board with a mix of appointed and elected members.

A closer review of county governance structures reveals that only five states have county governments with county boards that, on average, have more than nine board members: Wisconsin (average board size: 26.0), Tennessee (17.8), New York (16.6), Illinois (14.7) and Louisiana (10.0). In contrast, the vast majority of U.S. states have county boards that—on average—have five or fewer elected board members.

This general pattern is repeated for the governing boards of other types of local governments as well: only in a handful of states, municipal board, school boards, or the governing boards of special districts have more than ten elected members, while in the vast majority of states, local governing boards have—on average—five or fewer elected board members.

## **5. ELECTORAL REPRESENTATION: NUMBER OF CONSTITUENTS PER LOCAL GOVERNMENT REPRESENTATIVE**

**Background.** Whereas the absolute size of a local government’s elected governing board offers an indicator of the overall potential for deliberation and representation of different viewpoints at the local level, perhaps the most direct measure of local democracy at the local government level is the degree of electoral representation: in other words, how close are constituents to their elected representative?

**Electoral representation as a measure of local democracy.** If political representation is the process or activity of making citizens’ voices, opinions, and perspectives “present” in public policy making processes, then the distance between the voter and his or her elected local representative should be one of the most relevant measures of local democracy. After all, the extent of electoral representation is an important indicator of access and potential voice: a local government in which 1000 constituents are represented by an elected local representative surely provides constituents with more voice and opportunity for participation when compared to a local government in which 10,000 constituents are represented by a single elected representative. As the distance between electorate and elected representatives grows, the voice of a single constituent by necessity get divided among a larger group of constituents. In addition, an increased distance between electorate and elected representatives reduces transparency and makes it is harder for voters (or groups of voters) to hold the elected official accountable, and therefore, provides greater opportunity for “capture” over the local decision-making process.

Larger electoral constituencies—whether intended or not—also form an obstacle to entry into active political participation: the larger the number of constituents represented by each elected local representative, the fewer the opportunities for active political participation as a political representative, and the harder it is to run for local office, as winning local office will require greater resources and greater effort. In addition, the larger the size of the local constituency, the harder it is for non-mainstream candidates to participate and be successful. Larger constituencies may particularly discourage women from becoming candidates for public office.

**Measuring local government constituent representation.** As a third measure of the state of local democracy in the United States, Table III list the 50 U.S. states (plus the District of Columbia), ranked by

the average number of constituents that are represented by each elected member of a local governing board for each of the four main types of local governments. As was previously the case, the number of elected officials taken into account in this table exclusively reflects the elected representatives that make up local governments' deliberative and decision-making boards or councils.

The average number of constituents per elected member of a local governing board for each state was computed based on population estimates for 2016 and based on the number of popularly elected official for 1992 (the latest year for which data are available from the Census of Governments). Although it would be preferable to have more recent data, we have no choice but to assume that the number of elected local representatives has not changed considerably over the past 25 years.<sup>19</sup> In addition, Table III presents the average or composite level of electoral representation for local governments in each state. This average was computed by weighting the level of representation for each of the four different local government types by the share of expenditures made by the different local government types in each state.<sup>20</sup>

**Analysis.** The extent of electoral representation at the local level in the United States is high: on average, Americans are represented by one elected representative per 6,611 residents.

However, the level of electoral representation is not even across different types of local governments or across states: electoral representation ranges from an average of 18,706 residents per elected representative at the county level to 2,028 residents (on average) per elected representative at the sub-county (municipal, town and township) level. The average level of electoral representation for school districts and special districts falls within this range (with around 3,900 residents represented by an elected governing board member in each of these types of local jurisdictions).

The degree of local electoral representation varies enormous between states: while in Vermont, South Dakota and North Dakota residents have considerable voice and access to local decision-making (with fewer than 1000 residents per elected representative, on average), in five states (and D.C.) more than 30,000 constituents are required to share a single local representative, on average.<sup>21,22</sup> This means that—all else equal—in some states, residents have in excess of 30 times greater voice over local government decisions than in other states.

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<sup>19</sup> Preliminary analysis of 2015 data on the number of elected county-level officials from the National Association of Counties (NACo) seems to support this assumption.

<sup>20</sup> Similar to previous indicators, the composite level of local electoral representation reflects the (weighted) average degree of representation across different local government types, rather than an additive degree of representation. After all, a resident does not achieve twice the level of representation when—rather than being represented by a single local official—the resident instead is represented by two elected representatives, each of which represent the constituent in decisions over, say, half of the total local budget. In fact, information costs and transaction costs of political representation are considerably higher in the latter case, while the voter's amount of voice over his or her political representative within each decision-making forum is no different.

<sup>21</sup> These states include Nevada (36,265), Florida (40,463), Maryland (43,439), California (45,033) and Hawaii (126,573).

<sup>22</sup> This variation seems to be driven predominantly by two factors. First, some states have a considerably greater level of electoral representation at the county level (on average) than others. Second, some states rely considerably more on (typically smaller and more representative) sub-county general-purpose governments (municipalities, towns and townships) for collective local decision-making and service delivery.



## 6. REPRESENTATIVE NATURE OF THE ELECTION MECHANISM: AT-LARGE ELECTIONS

**Background.** A basic principle of representative local democracy is that election results should reflect the preferences of the local community. For instance, if 60 percent of local voters prefer the positions of the Red Party and 40 percent of the voters prefer the positions of the Blue Party, then we would expect 3 out of the 5 elected local board (or council) members to belong to the Red Party, while 2 out of the 5 elected members ought to belong to be Blue Party.

Most Americans—regardless of political leaning—would consider an electoral system to be patently unfair and undemocratic if the above voter preferences resulted in the election of 5 local board members all belonging to the Red Party, with no representation whatsoever for the minority party. While this scenario sounds far-fetched, this result is not unlikely to occur in many local governments in the United States, as the most local governments in the United States rely on plurality/majority elections in single-member districts (also known as “first-past-the-post” elections).

Different electoral mechanisms result in different degrees of democratic representation. For instance, plurality elections in single-member districts have a tendency to result in the political majority being over-represented at the local level. This means that minority views are systematically under-represented under plurality electoral schemes. However, the extent of the representative effectiveness of plurality elections with single-member districts depends in part on the “electoral geography”.

In contrast, there are electoral mechanisms that are systematically more representative in nature. For instance, proportional representation (or party list) elections ensure a greater correspondence between citizens’ voices, opinions, and perspectives and the opinions and perspectives held by their elected representatives. Similarly, other voting mechanisms—such as ranked-choice voting—can be shown to result in more representative elected bodies. Although more common in Europe and elsewhere around the world, in practice, these electoral mechanisms are extremely rare in the United States.<sup>23</sup>

**Election mechanisms as a measure of local democracy.** Many local governments in the United States use an election mechanism that is even less representative than plurality elections, virtually guaranteeing single party control at the local level. This electoral approach is known as multi-member district plurality voting, “block voting” or “at-large” elections.

In at-large voting, all the candidates for the board run in one single election, where the entire local government serves as a single electoral district. Voters have the same number of votes as the number of seats to be filled, and the candidates with the highest numbers of votes win. An “at large” approach to electing a local government council or board thus all but assures that 51% of the local government’s voters determine 100% of the local government’s board, making sure that there is no representation at all for the minority party.<sup>24</sup>

Despite the fact that these elections are known not to be representative, the practice of at-large elections is widespread in the United States. In many local jurisdictions, at-large voting schemes are

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<sup>23</sup> For instance, in total, ranked choice voting is used by a few dozen local governments—mainly for municipal local governments—in seven states ([Fairvote, 2018](#)).

<sup>24</sup> Naturally, this concern is stronger when local elections are party-based.

preferred by local voters, who would rather have elected representatives look at policy issues across the locality as a whole, rather than local representatives who narrowly represent the interests of one ward or constituency. However, in other cases, at-large election schemes have been specifically adopted or used by an incumbent for their own political advantage, as at-large elections make political contestation more difficult and costly. In other cases, local governments adopted at-large voting structure to prevent racial minorities from gaining democratic representation ([NAACP, 2018](#)). In their 2013 decision on *Shelby County v. Holder*, however, the U.S. Supreme Court limited the application of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, thereby making it more difficult to challenge state and local governments with unrepresentative electoral mechanisms in court on the basis of the VRA.

Regardless of their motivation, however, at-large elections (and multi-member district plurality elections in particular) tend to reduce degree of democratic representation at the local level.

**Measuring election mechanisms.** Given the diversity of possible electoral mechanisms, it is difficult to quantify the representative nature of local elections in a single metric. However, given the prevalence of two main election mechanisms at the local level in the United States—single member district plurality elections versus at-large elections—it appears that this is the most meaningful indicator of electoral representation at the local level at the current time.<sup>25</sup>

Therefore, as a fourth measure of the state of local democracy in the United States, Table IV list the 50 U.S. states (plus the District of Columbia), ranked by the average percentage local governing board members that are elected in an at-large manner for three of the four main types of local governments.<sup>26</sup> As was the case for the previous measures, the elected officials taken into account for the analysis in this table exclusively reflect the elected representatives that make up the deliberative and decision-making board or council of each local government.

The number of popularly elected officials and their respective method for being elected is based on data from the Census of Governments, 1992 (the latest year for which such data are available). As it is relatively easier to change the nature of local elections compared to the overall structure of local governments, it is critical for more updated information to be compiled and monitored on the nature of local government elections.

Like the previous three tables, Table IV presents the average or composite indicator for the representative nature of local elections. Given the nature of the indicator, and given the absence of information on special districts, this average was simply computed by dividing the total number of local representative elected at large within a state for the three relevant local government types (county, municipality/town/township and school district) by the total number of elected local representatives within that state for the same three local government types.

**Analysis.** Table IV suggests that local government board members being elected at-large is the norm in the United States: 69 percent of popularly elected members of local governing boards (across the three local government types) are elected in an at large manner. However, this percentage varies across

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<sup>25</sup> More representative electoral mechanisms—such as ranked-choice voting and proportional representation—are used in fewer than one-half of one percent of all local governments in the United States ([Sightline Institute, 2017](#)).

<sup>26</sup> No information is available on the electoral structure of the governing board members of special districts, and therefore, special districts are excluded from this analysis.

different local government types, ranging from 25.1 percent at the county level to 76.5 percent for elected municipal (or town/township) board members. Similarly, 63.7 percent of elected school board members is elected in at-large manner.

Across all local government types, the reliance on at-large election for locally elected officials is less common in some states—such as Massachusetts (19.3 percent) and Hawaii (35.3 percent)—while being more prevalent in others: in eight states, more than four out of five local officials are elected in at-large elections.<sup>27</sup>

Although county government rely more heavily on plurality elections in single-member election district than on at-large elections, there are over a dozen states where, on average, more than half of the county board members are nonetheless elected on an at-large basis.<sup>28</sup>

## 7. AN INITIAL ASSESSMENT OF THE STATE OF LOCAL DEMOCRACY IN THE UNITED STATES

Before proceeding with an initial assessment of the state of local democracy in the United States, it should be once again noted that local governance is complex and multi-faceted and cannot easily be quantified by a small groups of indicators. While the four indicators computed for the current analysis consider important aspects of the local governance structure and the state of local democracy in the United States, they do not provide—by far—a complete, comprehensive and/or exhaustive assessment of local democracy in the United States.

Furthermore, against what standards should the state of local democracy in the United States be assessed? Although the U.S. Constitution—along with historical precedents and certain legal decisions at the federal and state levels—provide a number of qualitative standards and norms for assessing representative democratic governance, neither the academic literature nor best-practice provides specific, quantitative standards or norms with regard to the size of local government or the degree of representation that democratic local governments should adhere to. Nor is there an extensive comparative literature that would allow local governance practices in the United States to be compared to practices in other countries.

As such, both data limitations as well as the absence of quantitative policy norms or comparative standards with regard to the size of local government and the scope of representation limits our ability to draw conclusions from each of the four indicators of the state of local democracy. In the absence of clear norms or comparative standards, it is difficult to provide a definite assessment of the state of local democracy in the United States.

**An assessment of local government jurisdiction size.** As a first indicator of the state of local democracy in the United States, we considered the size of an (average) local government’s population, as the jurisdiction’s population size reflects the “distance” between the constituent/voter and the local

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<sup>27</sup> These states include Maine (80.2 percent); California (80.9); Iowa (81.5); North Dakota (82.7); Vermont (82.8); North Carolina (82.9); Minnesota (83.5); and Alaska (87.1).

<sup>28</sup> These states where county board members are predominantly elected on an at-large basis include Indiana (51.2 percent); Alaska (54.1); North Dakota (55.7); Colorado (58.3); Iowa (58.9); West Virginia (59.3); North Carolina (64.0); Vermont (71.4); Montana (71.6); Oregon (81.6); New Jersey (85.1); Utah (89.0); Pennsylvania (89.8); Kentucky (91.3); Wyoming (96.5); and Ohio (97.8).

government jurisdiction. This is based on the expectation that the bigger (or more populous) each local government jurisdiction is, the smaller the voice of each individual or household.

Before assessing the data on local government jurisdiction size in greater detail, it should be noted that the local government structure in the United States is quite fragmented, with multiple types of local governments (counties, municipalities, school districts, and special districts) each provide different services to households in the same local government area. Although it is common in international practice to have different (hierarchical) government levels, the degree of functional fragmentation among local governments that prevails in the United States is quite unusual among other countries.

Furthermore, it should be noted that each state’s average local government jurisdiction size is an imperfect indicator of the level of local democracy for any household or individual in that state, as states are not homogenous entities. Instead, it is important to recognize that there is considerable variation in the demographics and the structure of local governance *within* states (Table 3).

Whereas there are 138 highly populous urban or suburban counties with a population exceeding 500,000 residents (which together are home to close to half of the U.S. population), the majority of counties (1,709 counties) have a population of 30,000 residents or less. Naturally, the governance requirements of a county area—including the governance structure of the county government itself as well as the structure of other local governments within that area—will differ considerably whether the county—along with the other relevant local governments in the county area—are expected to service a population of 10,000, 100,000, or a million residents.

<b>Table 3. Number of Counties by Population Size (2016)</b>			
<b>Population Size</b>	<b>Number of Counties</b>	<b>Aggregate Population (2016)</b>	<b>Average County Population</b>
< 30,000	1,709	22,354,242	13,080
30,000-100,000	838	44,853,210	53,524
100,000-500,000	457	96,747,426	211,701
>500,000	138	159,172,635	1,153,425
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,142</b>	<b>323,127,513</b>	<b>102,841</b>
Note: Figures include a limited number of areas corresponding to counties but having no organized county governments.			

Based on local government size, how do we assess the democratic nature of local governments in the United States? For a typical county government, is having one voice and one vote in a county jurisdiction with—on average—100,000 residents adequate to ensure inclusion and democratic representation? Similarly, when is a municipal government or a school district too big or too small? Is an average composite local government jurisdiction size of 30,000 residents appropriate to ensure inclusion and democratic representation?

Based on the subsidiarity principle, it is most likely the case that many county governments in the United States are quite a bit larger than the “minimum efficient scale” for the functions that they are assigned to perform by their respective states. In fact, the Northwest Ordinance (1787) considered 60,000 residents to be an adequate population size for a state government—meaning that over a

quarter of the counties in the United States are sufficiently populous to meet the Ordinance’s minimum threshold for statehood.

The relatively large size of many county governments is offset by the typically smaller size of municipal governments and school districts: on average, fewer than 10,000 and 25,000 residents, respectively. Having these local governments much closer to the people offers a greater opportunity for responsive and accountable local governance, with constituents relatively more empowered and with greater political voice over local decisions. Furthermore, as noted above, the rankings of state-level average local government size hide the fact that residents in the vast majority of counties have considerable voice over their county governments, especially for Americans that reside in counties with fewer than 30,000 residents.<sup>29</sup>

An initial assessment of the available evidence on the structure and size of local governments—as an indicator of the extent to which local government jurisdiction size permits the “empowerment of people through the empowerment of their local governments”—would suggest that local government jurisdiction sizes in the United States generally strike a balance between being sufficiently large in scale to be efficient, while at the same time being sufficiently small to be responsive and accountable to the people. Although the fragmentation of the local government structure has potential negatives, an important benefit is that allows the public sector to deliver certain public services closer to the people without having to commit wholesale to smaller local government jurisdictions.

In some states, however, the large average size of county jurisdictions is a cause for concern. For instance, it is hard to argue that county governments as “close to the people” when—as is the case in nine states—county governments have an average population of over one quarter of a million residents.<sup>30</sup> That said, there could be benefits to having larger county jurisdictions—such as the ability to devolve a greater share of state powers to the county level—whereas the downside of larger county jurisdictions could be mitigated in different ways (e.g., transferring greater functional responsibility to sub-county local governments; ensuring large, representative county boards are in place; and so on). As such, a more detailed and granular assessment of the size and structure of local government jurisdictions would have to show, on a state by state basis, whether (and if so—the extent to which) the structure and size of local governments forms an obstacle to local democracy in the United States.

**An assessment of the size of local governments’ governing boards and councils.** The second indicator of the state of local democracy considered in the current analysis was the number of elected representatives within each local government that deliberates on matters of importance and that has authoritative decision-making power. It was posited that the larger the number of elected representatives on the local government board or council (all else equal), the more informed and representative the local government’s decisions would be.

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<sup>29</sup> This threshold was chosen for two reasons. First, technically, it is expected that 30,000 residents exceeds the minimum efficient scale for most local public services. Second, politically, the U.S. Constitution established 30,000 residents as the initial number of constituents to be represented by a single Representative in the United States Congress.

<sup>30</sup> These nine states include Maryland (average county population: 255,851), Florida (292,690), Delaware (305,697), New York (343,338), New Jersey (422,123), Arizona (436,884), Hawaii (464,104), California (667,394) and Massachusetts (1,329,229). Given that county populations often vary considerably within a state, such a large average county population suggest that there are county governments within these states that have a (sometimes considerably) larger population.

The typical local government board in the United States has only five members, while the average county board in the U.S. has 5.7 members. This means that county decisions—affecting the lives of a hundred thousand residents, on average—can be made by a board majority of three individuals.

As is noted further below, a result of the small local government board size, the degree of voice and representation of an average resident is limited—particularly at the county level. The small size of county boards further prevents the board from meaningfully representing the diversity of opinions and interests of the county’s constituents. Furthermore, because the size of local government boards typically varies little (or does not vary at all) among local governments with different population sizes, residents in smaller jurisdictions tend to have a greater degree of democratic representation at the local level than residents in larger jurisdictions.

There are a handful of states where the average size of deliberative bodies tends to be significantly larger than in other states. For instance, county governments in Wisconsin have much larger Boards of Supervisors than is common in many other states, with an average of 26 supervisors per county. Similarly, Tennessee county governments on average have 17.8 board members, whereas county governments in the state of New York on average have 16.6 county legislators or supervisors. In Illinois, the average is 14.7. Obviously, such larger boards provide for much more meaningful deliberation and more representative decision-making than in states where a typical county government is led by a board of five members.<sup>31</sup>

Although it is hard to compare local governance structures across countries, it does appear that the size of local government boards and councils in the United States is much smaller on average than in many other countries. For instance, the average county council in the United Kingdom has 42 members, allowing for much greater meaningful deliberation and representative decision-making, and allowing for much greater interaction between the county council and local residents. In fact, many European countries, national legislation determines a minimum size of local governing boards and sets the size of the governing council in proportion to the population size of the locality. For instance, the Dutch Municipal Act prescribes a minimum size for municipal councils at nine members for municipalities below 3000 residents, whereas more populous municipalities are required to have incrementally larger municipal council to ensure adequate deliberation and representation of residents’ views.<sup>32</sup>

Very little research is available to explain why the governing bodies of local governments—particularly at the county level—in most U.S. States are as small as they are. One may conjecture that increasing the size of the board is seldom favored by the local politicians in place (who would dilute the power of

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<sup>31</sup> In terms of municipal boards, only Massachusetts (average board size: 32 members) and Washington, D.C. (13 members) are outliers when it comes to the average absolute size of municipal boards or councils. The smaller average size of municipal boards (as well as town and township boards) can be explained by the much smaller average population—and arguably, the greater homogeneity—of these jurisdictions.

<sup>32</sup> According to the Dutch Municipal Act, municipalities with up to 6000 residents are required to have 11 council members, while municipalities with between 6,000-10,000 residents are required to have 13 councilors. For municipalities between 10,000-50,000 residents, as a general rule, the mandated council size increases by 2 councilors for every increment of 5,000 residents. This means that a municipality with 49,000 residents is required to have a municipal council with 29 members. Between 50,000-100,000 residents, as a general rule, the mandated council size increases further by 2 councilors for every increment of 10,000 residents. The maximum municipal council size is set at 45 members for municipalities with more than 200,000 residents.

their own position by doing so), the local business community, or by the state-level political establishment. In some cases the increased cost of a larger board or the supposed decreased decisiveness of a larger board have been used as arguments to oppose an increase in the number of local government board members.

An additional argument that is sometimes made is that there is no need to expand the size of the county governing boards as—in addition to the board itself—a number of other county-level officials—such as county sheriff—are directly elected every four years. While this seems very democratic, in practice a large number of these elections are for administrative positions, such as the Register of Wills, County Treasurer, or Circuit Court Clerk.

It is *a priori* unclear whether voters have the right kind of information to judge the qualification of candidates for such positions, or whether it would be more democratic and effective if such positions were filled by a professional local administrator under the guidance of an inclusive and representative elected governing body. Furthermore, local democracy is not an *either-or* proposition: just because voters directly elect the sheriff doesn't mean that the county's governing board should be smaller than is optimal to ensure inclusive and democratic representation.

**An assessment of the level of local electoral representation.** As the third measure of local democracy in the United States, the analysis considers the level of representation or “voice” that people have within each jurisdiction, as measured by the number of constituents per elected local representative for each local government. The smaller the number of constituents represented by each representative, the larger the voice each individual or households is likely to have in public decision-making.

Although there are no firm theoretical standards or international comparative norms by which to judge the degree of electoral representation at the local level, on its face, the degree of electoral representation does not appear unreasonable: on average, the voices, opinions, and perspectives of residents are represented at the local level based on a ratio of 6,611-to-1. Unsurprisingly, the degree of representation is slightly less at the county level (18,706:1), and greater at the sub-county (municipal, town and township) level (2,028:1), with the extent of democratic representation for school districts and special districts hovering somewhere in between.

Elected representation, however, is quite unevenly distributed across states: whereas some states have a high degree of electoral representation (with 1,000-3,000 constituents per elected local representative, on average), local governments in other states have much lower degree of democratic representation. There are five states as well as the District of Columbia where the average number of residents per elected representative—as per our methodology—exceeds 30,000 residents, including Nevada (36,265 residents), Florida (40,463), D.C. (43,377), Maryland (43,439), California (45,033) and Hawaii (126,573). Similarly, in 16 states, the number of residents per county representative exceeds 30,000 residents. These states would do well to review the state of local democracy in their respective states and revisit their local governance structures accordingly.

**An assessment of the representative nature of local electoral mechanisms.** Finally, the fourth indicator of local democracy in the United States considers whether the election mechanism used results in a governing body that is representative of the underlying population. Some electoral mechanisms—such as at-large elections using multi-member districts—tend to result in

unrepresentative election outcomes, whereas other electoral mechanisms—such as proportional representation or ranked-choice voting—tend to be more representative in nature.

In this regard, the analysis suggests that local governments in the United States tend to rely almost exclusively on two types of electoral mechanisms—plurality elections in single-member districts and at-large elections—that are quite unrepresentative and prone to capture by the major political parties. These electoral mechanisms are particularly unrepresentative at the county level, where electoral districts tend to be larger, and thus, more effective at drowning out minority votes.

With a handful of exceptions, more representative electoral mechanisms—such as ranked-choice voting and proportional representation—are virtually non-existent in the United States.

The at-large election of county boards amplifies local political divisions and artificially creates polarized “red counties” and “blue counties” where voters who are not in the majority have no political representation. While this practice may be convenient for state-level political parties, this practice risks undermining the democratic fabric of the country as a whole: rather than serving as laboratories for state and federal-level democracy based on inclusive, pragmatic, compromise-driven and community-oriented decision-making, the move away from representative democratic practices at the local level encourages local politicians to engage in politicized, ideologically-driven, hold-no-hostages decision-making.

In fact, legislation in many states allows local politicians themselves to determine the election mechanism used at the local level, rather than imposing uniform state-level standards that guarantee voters that they are served by representative and inclusive local governments. The problem that this poses is not dissimilar to the problem of gerrymandering at the federal and state levels, as this practice means that local politicians get to choose their voters, rather than local voters getting to choose their elected representatives.

## **8. CONCLUSIONS**

The state of local democracy in the United States is an important yet understudied aspect of the American experiment of federalism and self-government. As a preliminary exploration of the topic, the intent of this work has not been to provide definitive answers as to the state of local democracy in the United States, but rather, to inform the debate on the topic by providing data and insights based on a number of rudimentary—but key—indicators.

The initial assessment of the state of local democracy in the United States suggests that the state of local democracy in the United States is mixed. Americans are democratically represented below the state level through a patchwork of elected local governments, including counties, municipalities, towns and townships, school districts and special districts. While these local governments offer Americans different platforms for local self-government below the state level, the analysis indicates that there is considerable variation in the degree of local democratic representation between different states, between different types of local government, and most likely, within states as well.

While local governance systems focus on ensuring that local decisions are made by elected local bodies—and thus comply with the *pro forma* requirement of democratic decision-making—limited effort is made to ensure that the way in which local representative bodies are structured or operate



ensures inclusive representation or effective deliberation and decision-making. Few—if any—states have rules in place to ensure that residents have an adequate degree of local electoral representation, or that the degree of electoral representation is balanced between larger (more populous) and smaller (less populous) local jurisdictions within a state. Similarly, few—if any—safeguards are in place in the local governance structure itself to ensure that non-majority views are represented and taken into account in decision-making at the local level. In this light, it would be appropriate to have a serious debate as to whether (or under what circumstances) these shortcomings constitute a “democratic deficit” by which the local governance system as a whole falls short in fulfilling its underlying democratic principles.

While this review may help to provide structure to policy dialogues surrounding local democracy, many important questions remain unanswered. For instance, beyond the quantification of local governance itself, it will be important for future research to study the link between local democratic institutions and the purported benefits of effective and inclusive local governance systems: is the effectiveness of public services and the public’s satisfaction with the mix of local services and taxes offered by the local government greater (or smaller?) in localities that are deemed to be more democratic? Perhaps more fundamentally—does the people’s evaluation of the legitimacy of the public sector as a whole—or their trust in their local government leaders and their level of participation—vary with different aspects of local democratic practice?

Beyond the specific findings of the analysis itself, this exploration of the state of local democracy in the United States provides a motivation to think differently about the nature of local governance and local democracy in the United States. In many ways, local democracy has been treated by many as a strictly local matter: in fact, local governments in many states are given considerable discretion to structure their own electoral arrangements. The current analysis underscores that some local governance practices may limit the ability Americans to have their voice, opinions, and interests represented at the local level. This perspective suggests the need for a more proactive role for policy makers and the public policy community: as federalism and local self-government are core American values, state legislatures—who hold the constitutional authority to shape local democracy within their respective states—should not leave the extent of local democracy up to the political majority of any locality, but rather, should ensure that local governments in their state use inclusive, representative and responsive local governance structures. The current analysis suggests that this concern is more urgent in some states than in others.

Furthermore, the current analysis highlights that the research on local governance and democracy in the United States is limited by the availability of accurate, reliable and up-to-date data. For three of the four most basic indicators of local democracy, the current analysis was forced to rely on outdated data on the number of elected local officials and the nature of local elections from 1992. As federalism, democracy and local self-government are foundational elements of the American system, greater efforts should be made to “measure what we treasure”: in order to get a more complete and accurate picture of local democracy in the United States, updated and more granular data on local governance and local democracy is needed.

While providing useful insights into the complexities of local government structures and systems in the United States, the analysis simultaneously establishes the limitation of state-level comparison on the topic. Further research on the topic, therefore, should not only focus on developing additional state-level indicators of local democracy (quantifying, for instance, the powers and functional responsibilities

of local governments vis-à-vis state and federal authorities). Instead, detailed studies of local governance and local democracy should be pursued using more granular local-level measures of local institutions (rather than relying on state averages). The findings from these studies could be used to pursue reforms on a state-by-state basis, particularly in the states that are identified in the current analysis as having more limited democratic representation at the local level.

Based on this initial exploration, an area that requires specific further exploration is the degree of local electoral representation, particularly at the county level (which is sometimes referred to as the forgotten government level). In many states, the degree of electoral representation could be enhanced considerably simply by increasing the size of local governing board. For instance, drastically increasing the number of seats on county governing boards—say, from 5 board members to 9 or 15 members—would instantly and drastically increase the ability of county boards to be more representative of, and more responsive to, the diversity of the people that they are elected to serve.<sup>33,34</sup>

Another area where further exploration is warranted in order to strengthen federalism and local democracy is the nature of local government elections. The electoral approaches most commonly used in the United States at the local level—plurality elections, using either single-member districts or multi-member districts, or some combination thereof—are not likely to yield representative elected bodies. As such, it would be worthwhile to explore the introduction of more representative electoral mechanisms—such as ranked-choice voting and proportional representation—at the local government level, possibly in combination with efforts to increase the size of governing bodies.

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<sup>33</sup> The exact representational impact would depend on the electoral geography of a locality. This issue should be explored on a state-by-state or case-by-case basis.

<sup>34</sup> The cost of achieving greater democratic representation would be relatively minor. For instance, doubling the number of county-level elected representatives would most likely cost less than half of one percent of county-level spending. Naturally, this increase in cost would have to be weighed against the potential benefits of increased local representation and oversight.

**Table I. Local government jurisdiction size (average population), 2012**

[For meaning of abbreviations and symbols, see text]

County government			Municipal/town/township government			School district government			Special district government			Local government average		
Rank	State	Average	Rank	State	Average	Rank	State	Average	Rank	State	Average	Rank	State	Average
	<b>United States</b>	<b>103,568</b>		<b>United States</b>	<b>8,749</b>		<b>United States</b>	<b>24,372</b>		<b>United States</b>	<b>8,203</b>		<b>United States</b>	<b>34,948</b>
1	South Dakota	12,627	1	North Dakota	419	1	Vermont	2,151	1	North Dakota	898	1	Vermont	2,644
2	North Dakota	13,201	2	South Dakota	684	2	Montana	3,151	2	Wyoming	918	2	North Dakota	4,172
3	Montana	18,614	3	Kansas	1,524	3	North Dakota	3,823	3	Montana	1,317	3	South Dakota	4,447
4	Nebraska	19,952	4	Nebraska	1,959	4	South Dakota	5,483	4	Nebraska	1,462	4	Nebraska	5,557
5	Wyoming	25,061	5	Minnesota	2,040	5	Nebraska	6,822	5	South Dakota	1,523	5	Montana	7,846
6	Kansas	28,018	6	Vermont	2,236	6	Oklahoma	6,936	6	Kansas	1,895	6	Maine	9,474
7	Iowa	31,052	7	Maine	2,724	7	New Hampshire	7,956	7	Idaho	1,980	7	Kansas	10,322
8	West Virginia	33,735	8	Wisconsin	3,094	8	Iowa	8,399	8	Colorado	2,169	8	Iowa	11,144
9	Idaho	36,267	9	Iowa	3,246	9	Kansas	9,431	9	Missouri	3,248	9	Oklahoma	12,152
10	Mississippi	36,402	10	Indiana	4,151	10	Wyoming	10,480	10	New Mexico	3,305	10	Missouri	12,192
11	Kentucky	37,122	11	Illinois	4,718	11	Missouri	11,277	11	Delaware	3,527	11	Wyoming	12,288
12	Arkansas	39,322	12	Missouri	4,757	12	Arkansas	12,339	12	Oregon	3,767	12	Arkansas	13,471
13	Vermont	44,715	13	Alaska	4,942	13	Wisconsin	13,015	13	Arkansas	3,985	13	Idaho	14,727
14	Oklahoma	49,543	14	Pennsylvania	4,984	14	Maine	13,426	14	Illinois	3,990	14	New Hampshire	18,456
15	Alaska	52,246	15	Ohio	5,142	15	Idaho	13,523	15	Vermont	4,092	15	Mississippi	20,604
16	Missouri	52,824	16	Michigan	5,574	16	Illinois	14,227	16	Washington	5,367	16	Illinois	21,207
17	Minnesota	61,829	17	New Hampshire	5,644	17	Minnesota	15,915	17	Maine	5,608	17	Kentucky	21,287
18	New Mexico	63,198	18	Wyoming	5,822	18	New Jersey	16,950	18	Iowa	5,746	18	Minnesota	22,266
19	Georgia	64,836	19	Arkansas	5,875	19	Oregon	16,954	19	West Virginia	5,853	19	Alaska	24,073
20	Tennessee	70,177	20	Oklahoma	6,466	20	Michigan	17,159	20	Oklahoma	6,008	20	Indiana	24,751
21	Indiana	71,839	21	Montana	7,792	21	Ohio	17,282	21	Mississippi	6,799	21	Connecticut	24,945
22	Alabama	71,970	22	Idaho	7,979	22	Mississippi	18,201	22	Kentucky	6,975	22	Wisconsin	25,001
23	Louisiana	76,698	23	West Virginia	7,997	23	New Mexico	21,724	23	Pennsylvania	7,269	23	Alabama	25,679
24	Wisconsin	79,533	24	Mississippi	10,017	24	Indiana	22,465	24	Wisconsin	7,485	24	West Virginia	25,935
25	Maine	83,075	25	Alabama	10,460	25	Washington	23,380	25	Connecticut	8,032	25	Colorado	27,582
26	Colorado	83,671	26	Kentucky	10,479	26	Texas	24,151	26	Indiana	8,693	26	New Mexico	28,358
27	Virginia	86,167	27	Utah	11,654	27	Pennsylvania	24,832	27	Alabama	8,799	27	Massachusetts	32,075
28	North Carolina	97,521	28	New York	12,683	28	Kentucky	25,175	28	Minnesota	8,818	28	Oregon	32,225
29	Utah	98,458	29	Louisiana	15,138	29	Arizona	27,080	29	Utah	9,301	29	Texas	33,791
30	Texas	102,595	30	New Jersey	15,662	30	Colorado	28,820	30	Texas	10,023	30	Rhode Island	35,231
31	South Carolina	102,690	31	Delaware	16,089	31	New York	28,822	31	New Hampshire	10,082	31	Michigan	37,801
32	Oregon	108,315	32	Oregon	16,180	32	West Virginia	33,735	32	Rhode Island	11,670	32	Ohio	37,998
33	Michigan	119,077	33	South Carolina	17,495	33	Alabama	36,530	33	California	13,297	33	Tennessee	41,958
34	Illinois	126,228	34	North Carolina	17,635	34	California	37,114	34	Ohio	13,727	34	Georgia	43,036
35	Ohio	131,184	35	Georgia	18,542	35	Delaware	48,268	35	Tennessee	13,884	35	Washington	44,851
36	New Hampshire	132,072	36	Georgia	18,714	36	Georgia	55,111	36	Massachusetts	15,938	36	Pennsylvania	45,427
37	Nevada	172,433	37	Massachusetts	18,935	37	South Carolina	56,912	37	New York	16,670	37	Utah	47,569
38	Washington	176,846	38	Colorado	19,142	38	Louisiana	66,694	38	South Carolina	16,931	38	South Carolina	51,032
39	Pennsylvania	193,387	39	Connecticut	20,058	39	Utah	69,641	39	Florida	17,903	39	Louisiana	53,084
40	Maryland	255,851	40	New Mexico	20,248	40	Massachusetts	79,121	40	Georgia	19,451	40	New York	63,239
41	Florida	292,690	41	Texas	21,466	41	Nevada	162,290	41	Nevada	19,848	41	North Carolina	68,595
42	Delaware	305,697	42	Washington	24,545	42	Florida	203,343	42	Arizona	20,102	42	Delaware	74,778
43	New York	343,338	43	Rhode Island	26,931	43	Connecticut	211,197	43	Michigan	22,310	43	Arizona	105,188
44	New Jersey	422,123	44	Virginia	35,746	44	Rhode Island	262,573	44	North Carolina	30,475	44	New Jersey	107,316
45	Arizona	436,884	45	Maryland	37,481	45	Tennessee	461,160	45	Maryland	35,237	45	Virginia	112,551
46	Hawaii	464,104	46	Florida	47,116	46	Virginia	8,185,867	46	New Jersey	37,883	46	Nevada	154,656
47	California	667,394	47	Arizona	72,014	47	#N/A	#N/A	47	Virginia	42,414	47	Florida	163,720
48	Massachusetts	1,329,229	48	California	78,924	48	#N/A	#N/A	48	Louisiana	47,936	48	Maryland	212,144
49	#N/A	#N/A	49	Nevada	145,207	49	#N/A	#N/A	49	Alaska	48,763	49	California	216,297
50	#N/A	#N/A	50	DC	632,323	50	#N/A	#N/A	50	Hawaii	81,901	50	DC	632,323
51	#N/A	#N/A	51	Hawaii	1,392,313	51	#N/A	#N/A	51	DC	632,323	51	Hawaii	1,097,082

**Table II. Local Government Elected Board Size**

[For meaning of abbreviations and symbols, see text]

County government			Municipal/town/township government			School district government			Special district government			Local government average		
Rank	State	Average	Rank	State	Average	Rank	State	Average	Rank	State	Average	Rank	State	Average
	<b>United States</b>	<b>5.7</b>		<b>United States</b>	<b>4.4</b>		<b>United States</b>	<b>5.8</b>		<b>United States</b>	<b>2.6</b>		<b>United States</b>	<b>4.9</b>
1	Wisconsin	26.0	1	Massachusetts	32.0	1	Louisiana	10.0	1	Connecticut	4.7	1	Massachusetts	28.2
2	Tennessee	17.8	2	DC	13.0	2	Maine	9.6	2	New York	4.7	2	DC	10.8
3	New York	16.6	3	Hawaii	9.0	3	Connecticut	8.9	3	Nebraska	4.6	3	Tennessee	10.0
4	Illinois	14.7	4	Alaska	7.1	4	Pennsylvania	8.8	4	North Dakota	4.5	4	Wisconsin	10.0
5	Louisiana	10.0	5	Connecticut	6.6	5	Rhode Island	8.7	5	Oregon	4.5	5	Hawaii	8.7
6	Michigan	8.8	6	Rhode Island	6.5	6	New Jersey	7.9	6	New Mexico	4.2	6	Louisiana	8.0
7	Hawaii	8.3	7	Arizona	6.5	7	Illinois	6.9	7	South Dakota	4.1	7	Alaska	7.3
8	Alaska	8.2	8	Colorado	6.3	8	Kansas	6.9	8	Colorado	3.9	8	New York	6.7
9	South Carolina	7.0	9	Virginia	6.3	9	Michigan	6.8	9	Wyoming	3.8	9	New Jersey	6.6
10	New Jersey	6.4	10	Delaware	6.2	10	Texas	6.8	10	Massachusetts	3.8	10	Connecticut	6.5
11	Delaware	6.3	11	Washington	6.1	11	Wyoming	6.8	11	Rhode Island	3.8	11	Rhode Island	6.4
12	Massachusetts	6.2	12	West Virginia	5.9	12	New York	6.7	12	Nevada	3.6	12	Michigan	6.1
13	Virginia	5.6	13	Arkansas	5.9	13	Wisconsin	6.4	13	Arizona	3.6	13	Illinois	5.7
14	North Carolina	5.4	14	Oregon	5.7	14	Massachusetts	6.4	14	Idaho	3.4	14	Maine	5.6
15	Florida	5.3	15	New Jersey	5.6	15	South Carolina	6.4	15	Kansas	3.3	15	Pennsylvania	5.5
16	Minnesota	5.2	16	Texas	5.5	16	Nevada	6.4	16	Texas	3.3	16	Texas	5.5
17	Alabama	5.1	17	Mississippi	5.4	17	Minnesota	6.2	17	Vermont	3.3	17	Virginia	5.4
18	California	5.0	18	Tennessee	5.4	18	Missouri	6.0	18	Hawaii	3.3	18	Delaware	5.3
19	Maryland	5.0	19	Alabama	5.3	19	South Dakota	5.7	19	Iowa	3.2	19	South Carolina	5.2
20	Mississippi	5.0	20	Montana	5.3	20	Arkansas	5.6	20	Oklahoma	3.2	20	Colorado	5.1
21	South Dakota	4.7	21	Iowa	5.3	21	Oregon	5.5	21	Maine	3.1	21	Wyoming	5.0
22	Georgia	4.5	22	Kentucky	5.2	22	Colorado	5.5	22	California	3.0	22	Iowa	5.0
23	Nebraska	4.3	23	Georgia	5.2	23	Iowa	5.5	23	Washington	2.9	23	Maryland	5.0
24	North Dakota	4.3	24	North Carolina	5.2	24	Tennessee	5.4	24	Montana	2.9	24	Oregon	5.0
25	Texas	4.1	25	Florida	5.2	25	North Dakota	5.2	25	Missouri	2.8	25	Minnesota	4.9
26	New Mexico	4.0	26	New Mexico	5.1	26	Delaware	5.2	26	Delaware	2.8	26	New Mexico	4.9
27	Nevada	3.9	27	California	5.1	27	New Mexico	5.1	27	Maryland	2.6	27	Arizona	4.8
28	Arizona	3.8	28	Maryland	5.1	28	Utah	5.1	28	Florida	2.5	28	Missouri	4.8
29	Iowa	3.7	29	South Carolina	5.0	29	Indiana	5.1	29	New Hampshire	2.5	29	North Carolina	4.8
30	Wyoming	3.7	30	Utah	4.9	30	New Hampshire	5.1	30	New Jersey	2.4	30	Nevada	4.8
31	Washington	3.6	31	Nevada	4.8	31	Idaho	5.0	31	Illinois	2.1	31	South Dakota	4.7
32	Pennsylvania	3.3	32	Pennsylvania	4.8	32	California	5.0	32	Utah	2.1	32	Arkansas	4.6
33	Indiana	3.3	33	Louisiana	4.8	33	West Virginia	5.0	33	Michigan	2.1	33	California	4.6
34	Ohio	3.2	34	New York	4.7	34	Washington	5.0	34	Minnesota	1.9	34	West Virginia	4.5
35	Oregon	3.2	35	Ohio	4.6	35	Kentucky	5.0	35	South Carolina	1.8	35	New Hampshire	4.5
36	Utah	3.1	36	Missouri	4.6	36	Georgia	4.8	36	Virginia	1.8	36	North Dakota	4.4
37	Montana	3.1	37	Idaho	4.6	37	Ohio	4.6	37	Kentucky	1.8	37	Washington	4.4
38	Colorado	3.1	38	Oklahoma	4.5	38	Oklahoma	4.6	38	North Carolina	1.7	38	Florida	4.4
39	Missouri	3.1	39	Wyoming	4.5	39	Nebraska	4.6	39	Wisconsin	1.4	39	Oklahoma	4.3
40	Kansas	3.1	40	Wisconsin	4.4	40	Vermont	4.4	40	Tennessee	1.1	40	Kansas	4.3
41	West Virginia	3.0	41	New Hampshire	4.3	41	Arizona	4.4	41	Ohio	1.0	41	Idaho	4.3
42	Idaho	3.0	42	Vermont	4.1	42	Florida	3.7	42	Mississippi	1.0	42	Vermont	4.2
43	Maine	3.0	43	Maine	4.0	43	Montana	3.4	43	Arkansas	0.8	43	Nebraska	4.2
44	New Hampshire	3.0	44	Minnesota	3.8	44	Mississippi	3.2	44	Georgia	0.7	44	Mississippi	4.1
45	Oklahoma	3.0	45	Michigan	3.7	45	Alabama	3.0	45	Indiana	0.6	45	Utah	4.1
46	Vermont	2.0	46	South Dakota	3.7	46	#N/A	#N/A	46	Louisiana	0.6	46	Georgia	4.1
47	Kentucky	0.6	47	North Dakota	3.5	47	#N/A	#N/A	47	West Virginia	0.3	47	Ohio	4.0
48	Arkansas	0.0	48	Illinois	3.0	48	#N/A	#N/A	48	Alabama	0.1	48	Kentucky	3.9
49	#N/A	#N/A	49	Nebraska	2.7	49	#N/A	#N/A	49	Alaska	0.0	49	Montana	3.7
50	#N/A	#N/A	50	Kansas	1.7	50	#N/A	#N/A	50	#N/A	#N/A	50	Alabama	3.2
51	#N/A	#N/A	51	Indiana	1.5	51	#N/A	#N/A	51	#N/A	#N/A	51	Indiana	3.2

**Table III. Local Government Constituents per Elected Representative**

[For meaning of abbreviations and symbols, see text]

County government			Municipal/town/township government			School district government			Special district government			Local government average		
Rank	State	Average	Rank	State	Average	Rank	State	Average	Rank	State	Average	Rank	State	Average
	<b>United States</b>	<b>18,706</b>		<b>United States</b>	<b>2,028</b>		<b>United States</b>	<b>3,865</b>		<b>United States</b>	<b>3,911</b>		<b>United States</b>	<b>6,611</b>
1	South Dakota	2,866	1	North Dakota	128	1	Vermont	509	1	North Dakota	231	1	Vermont	777
2	Wisconsin	3,087	2	South Dakota	184	2	Nebraska	520	2	Nebraska	397	2	South Dakota	886
3	North Dakota	3,324	3	Vermont	535	3	North Dakota	534	3	Wyoming	410	3	North Dakota	887
4	Tennessee	4,007	4	Minnesota	548	4	Montana	572	4	Kansas	590	4	Nebraska	1,019
5	Nebraska	4,732	5	Massachusetts	607	5	South Dakota	850	5	Montana	654	5	Arkansas	1,594
6	Montana	6,169	6	Iowa	623	6	Iowa	1,301	6	Idaho	676	6	Maine	2,130
7	Wyoming	6,888	7	Maine	684	7	Kansas	1,305	7	South Dakota	799	7	Montana	2,197
8	Mississippi	7,290	8	Alaska	709	8	Oklahoma	1,404	8	Oregon	1,087	8	Massachusetts	2,312
9	Alaska	7,570	9	Wisconsin	714	9	Maine	1,529	9	Colorado	1,149	9	Wisconsin	2,395
10	Louisiana	7,637	10	Nebraska	719	10	Wyoming	1,545	10	Missouri	1,558	10	Illinois	2,513
11	Illinois	8,534	11	Kansas	854	11	New Hampshire	1,574	11	Delaware	1,728	11	Iowa	2,568
12	Iowa	8,541	12	Pennsylvania	1,037	12	Arkansas	1,653	12	Vermont	1,837	12	Kansas	2,697
13	Kansas	9,057	13	Arkansas	1,043	13	Missouri	1,840	13	Connecticut	2,061	13	Wyoming	2,844
14	West Virginia	10,965	14	Missouri	1,054	14	Illinois	1,872	14	Illinois	2,114	14	Missouri	3,110
15	Minnesota	12,158	15	Ohio	1,112	15	Minnesota	1,934	15	Maine	2,141	15	Alaska	3,267
16	Idaho	12,751	16	New Hampshire	1,329	16	Wisconsin	2,043	16	Washington	2,169	16	Oklahoma	3,459
17	Michigan	13,657	17	Wyoming	1,334	17	New Jersey	2,051	17	Oklahoma	2,322	17	Connecticut	3,614
18	Alabama	14,346	18	West Virginia	1,337	18	Oregon	2,170	18	Iowa	2,490	18	Idaho	4,197
19	Georgia	14,501	19	Oklahoma	1,470	19	Michigan	2,490	19	Rhode Island	3,375	19	Minnesota	4,447
20	South Carolina	15,455	20	Michigan	1,509	20	Pennsylvania	2,825	20	Texas	3,745	20	Tennessee	5,034
21	New Mexico	15,886	21	Montana	1,533	21	Idaho	2,922	21	Kentucky	4,182	21	Mississippi	5,304
22	Virginia	15,901	22	Illinois	1,572	22	Texas	3,721	22	New Mexico	4,247	22	Michigan	5,448
23	Oklahoma	16,985	23	Idaho	1,842	23	Ohio	3,762	23	New York	4,293	23	New Hampshire	5,527
24	Missouri	17,261	24	Mississippi	1,882	24	New York	4,155	24	Utah	4,487	24	Rhode Island	5,538
25	North Carolina	18,756	25	Kentucky	1,955	25	New Mexico	4,326	25	Massachusetts	4,544	25	New York	5,655
26	New York	20,872	26	Alabama	2,085	26	Indiana	4,428	26	New Hampshire	4,635	26	New Mexico	6,401
27	Vermont	22,307	27	Delaware	2,697	27	Washington	4,934	27	California	4,701	27	West Virginia	6,986
28	Indiana	22,334	28	Utah	2,724	28	Kentucky	5,071	28	Nevada	5,176	28	Colorado	7,125
29	Texas	26,894	29	Indiana	2,731	29	Mississippi	5,474	29	Arkansas	7,081	29	Texas	7,517
30	Maine	27,739	30	New York	2,733	30	Colorado	5,552	30	Arizona	7,405	30	Indiana	7,714
31	Colorado	28,857	31	New Jersey	2,801	31	West Virginia	6,659	31	Minnesota	7,688	31	Oregon	8,724
32	Utah	33,530	32	Oregon	3,008	32	Arizona	6,924	32	South Carolina	9,325	32	South Carolina	9,410
33	Oregon	35,908	33	Connecticut	3,067	33	Louisiana	7,093	33	Mississippi	9,549	33	Pennsylvania	11,412
34	Ohio	41,629	34	Louisiana	3,253	34	California	7,281	34	New Jersey	10,095	34	Washington	12,025
35	New Hampshire	44,493	35	Colorado	3,306	35	South Carolina	8,539	35	Maryland	10,463	35	Ohio	12,872
36	Nevada	47,420	36	Tennessee	3,652	36	Delaware	9,715	36	Wisconsin	10,986	36	Utah	12,913
37	Delaware	50,109	37	South Carolina	3,678	37	Georgia	11,663	37	Indiana	11,204	37	Delaware	13,377
38	Washington	51,324	38	Georgia	3,692	38	Alabama	12,599	38	Tennessee	12,693	38	Virginia	14,205
39	Maryland	52,317	39	North Carolina	3,780	39	Massachusetts	12,638	39	West Virginia	15,387	39	Georgia	15,083
40	Hawaii	57,142	40	New Mexico	4,154	40	Utah	14,957	40	Michigan	17,479	40	Kentucky	15,178
41	Florida	58,725	41	Rhode Island	4,159	41	Connecticut	23,529	41	Florida	17,498	41	North Carolina	15,270
42	Pennsylvania	59,186	42	Texas	4,347	42	Nevada	27,223	42	North Carolina	18,618	42	Louisiana	16,629
43	Kentucky	64,304	43	Washington	4,452	43	Rhode Island	40,632	43	Ohio	21,709	43	New Jersey	16,945
44	New Jersey	66,750	44	Virginia	5,825	44	Florida	58,893	44	Hawaii	27,472	44	Alabama	26,679
45	Massachusetts	92,051	45	Maryland	7,655	45	Tennessee	88,683	45	Georgia	34,715	45	Arizona	26,889
46	Arizona	121,598	46	Florida	10,184	46	#N/A	#N/A	46	Virginia	35,795	46	Nevada	36,265
47	California	137,719	47	Arizona	12,488	47	#N/A	#N/A	47	Alabama	83,850	47	Florida	40,463
48	#N/A	#N/A	48	California	16,802	48	#N/A	#N/A	48	Louisiana	260,093	48	DC	43,377
49	#N/A	#N/A	49	Nevada	33,794	49	#N/A	#N/A	49	#N/A	#N/A	49	Maryland	43,439
50	#N/A	#N/A	50	DC	52,398	50	#N/A	#N/A	50	#N/A	#N/A	50	California	45,033
51	#N/A	#N/A	51	Hawaii	158,729	51	#N/A	#N/A	51	#N/A	#N/A	51	Hawaii	126,573

**Table IV. Local Government Election Structures: Percent of Local Governing Board Members Elected At-Large**

[For meaning of abbreviations and symbols, see text]

County government			Municipal/town/township government			School district government			Local government average		
Rank	State	Average	Rank	State	Average	Rank	State	Average	Rank	State	Average
	<b>United States</b>	<b>25.1</b>		<b>United States</b>	<b>76.5</b>		<b>United States</b>	<b>63.7</b>		<b>United States</b>	<b>69.0</b>
1	Tennessee	2.0	1	Hawaii	0.0	1	Louisiana	2.0	1	Massachusetts	19.3
2	California	5.3	2	Massachusetts	18.6	2	Mississippi	16.5	2	Hawaii	35.3
3	Kansas	6.5	3	DC	38.5	3	Idaho	18.6	3	DC	38.5
4	Minnesota	6.6	4	Montana	39.0	4	Utah	23.0	4	Louisiana	43.9
5	Virginia	6.6	5	Indiana	48.5	5	Rhode Island	23.1	5	Tennessee	44.1
6	Wisconsin	6.6	6	Missouri	58.5	6	Kentucky	27.2	6	Montana	46.6
7	Michigan	8.4	7	Alabama	66.6	7	Tennessee	30.7	7	Indiana	46.7
8	Mississippi	8.5	8	Nevada	66.7	8	Massachusetts	31.7	8	Mississippi	46.9
9	Arizona	8.8	9	Wyoming	67.0	9	Georgia	32.6	9	Nevada	56.8
10	Delaware	10.5	10	Mississippi	67.3	10	Alabama	34.5	10	Alabama	58.5
11	South Carolina	11.5	11	Louisiana	67.3	11	Kansas	42.2	11	New Mexico	58.9
12	Maine	12.5	12	Rhode Island	70.1	12	Indiana	42.8	12	Missouri	59.0
13	New York	13.4	13	Oklahoma	70.6	13	Montana	47.1	13	Oklahoma	59.6
14	Oklahoma	14.3	14	New Mexico	73.3	14	South Carolina	47.8	14	Georgia	62.0
15	Texas	14.7	15	Connecticut	74.0	15	Washington	48.6	15	South Carolina	62.1
16	Illinois	15.5	16	Wisconsin	74.1	16	Maine	52.7	16	Idaho	63.5
17	New Mexico	19.1	17	South Dakota	75.6	17	Oklahoma	52.9	17	Wisconsin	64.4
18	Nebraska	20.3	18	Arkansas	76.2	18	Colorado	53.3	18	Nebraska	64.6
19	Georgia	27.1	19	Maryland	77.1	19	Nevada	53.7	19	Kansas	64.8
20	South Dakota	28.8	20	Pennsylvania	77.4	20	Florida	53.7	20	Wyoming	65.0
21	New Hampshire	30.0	21	West Virginia	77.4	21	New Mexico	54.9	21	Washington	65.5
22	Alabama	30.4	22	Ohio	77.8	22	Wyoming	55.7	22	Rhode Island	65.7
23	Washington	32.4	23	Nebraska	78.6	23	Pennsylvania	56.6	23	Virginia	67.2
24	Louisiana	33.9	24	Georgia	80.2	24	Nebraska	59.2	24	Colorado	69.9
25	Missouri	37.7	25	South Carolina	80.3	25	Oregon	60.6	25	Arkansas	71.7
26	Massachusetts	44.6	26	Colorado	81.1	26	New Hampshire	61.3	26	Pennsylvania	72.0
27	Florida	46.7	27	Illinois	81.6	27	Missouri	62.1	27	Illinois	72.1
28	Hawaii	48.0	28	Tennessee	83.0	28	Ohio	62.6	28	Oregon	72.7
29	Nevada	48.4	29	New Hampshire	83.6	29	Arkansas	64.7	29	New Hampshire	72.7
30	Maryland	48.7	30	Washington	83.6	30	North Dakota	64.8	30	South Dakota	73.2
31	Idaho	50.0	31	Delaware	83.9	31	Iowa	65.0	31	Maryland	73.5
32	Indiana	51.2	32	New York	84.9	32	West Virginia	65.1	32	Arizona	73.5
33	Alaska	54.1	33	Kansas	85.1	33	Michigan	66.8	33	Kentucky	73.7
34	North Dakota	55.7	34	Florida	85.4	34	Arizona	66.8	34	West Virginia	73.9
35	Colorado	58.3	35	New Jersey	86.1	35	Delaware	67.3	35	Connecticut	74.3
36	Iowa	58.9	36	North Carolina	86.8	36	New Jersey	67.6	36	Ohio	74.8
37	West Virginia	59.3	37	Utah	87.2	37	Vermont	70.6	37	New Jersey	75.6
38	North Carolina	64.0	38	North Dakota	88.0	38	Minnesota	72.0	38	Michigan	75.9
39	Vermont	71.4	39	Texas	88.1	39	Illinois	73.2	39	Florida	76.3
40	Montana	71.6	40	Oregon	88.6	40	Wisconsin	74.8	40	Delaware	77.4
41	Oregon	81.6	41	Michigan	88.9	41	South Dakota	75.5	41	New York	77.7
42	New Jersey	85.1	42	Virginia	89.3	42	Connecticut	76.3	42	Utah	78.1
43	Utah	89.0	43	Alaska	90.2	43	Texas	79.4	43	Texas	78.6
44	Pennsylvania	89.8	44	Minnesota	90.3	44	New York	79.5	44	Maine	80.2
45	Kentucky	91.3	45	Iowa	91.1	45	California	79.9	45	California	80.9
46	Wyoming	96.5	46	Kentucky	91.1	46	#N/A	#N/A	46	Iowa	81.5
47	Ohio	97.8	47	Arizona	92.3	47	#N/A	#N/A	47	North Dakota	82.7
48	#N/A	#N/A	48	California	92.4	48	#N/A	#N/A	48	Vermont	82.8
49	#N/A	#N/A	49	Idaho	93.8	49	#N/A	#N/A	49	North Carolina	82.9
50	#N/A	#N/A	50	Maine	94.1	50	#N/A	#N/A	50	Minnesota	83.5
51	#N/A	#N/A	51	Vermont	96.0	51	#N/A	#N/A	51	Alaska	87.1