Local Governments

Lone Star Politics
Chapter 6

In Texas there are:
- 254 counties
- 1,196 cities
- 1,089 school districts
- 2,245 special districts

In the US there are:
- 50 states
- 3,034 counties
- 35,933 cities, etc.
- 13,506 school districts
- 35,052 special districts
- 87,575 total governments

Are they important?

Government employees in millions

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Cities and the State of Texas

General Law Status
• Cities are formed once there are 200 residents of an area. Cities this size are organized under the general laws of Texas
• Currently, about 900 Texas cities with a population under 5,000
• Limited to structures and powers prescribed by state law

Dillon's rule
• The legal principal that cities can only exercise those powers expressly allowed by state law
Home Rule Cities

Cities may become “home rule” cities if:
- Population over than 5,000 residents
- Voter approve a city charter

What’s so fun about Home Rule?
• More choices in structure of government
• May change system of election without getting the permission of the state.
• Broader power of annexation
• Broader police powers

Forms of City Government
Mayor-Council Form

- Elected Mayor serves as executive
- Elected council serves as legislative body
- “Strong” and “weak” mayor variations

City Departments
- Fire
- Police
- Parks
- Water
- Legal
- Tax Etc.

Mayors
- Heads City departments
- May have a veto
- Appoints department heads

Council
- Adopts ordinances
- May override vetoes
- Confirms Appointees

Mayor-Council Form

- Traditional form of city government
- Most common form for Texas cities under 5,000 (general law cities).
- Houston and El Paso
Council-Manager Form

• Mayor may be directly elected by public or by council from within
• Elected council serves as legislative body and selects city manager
• Most common form for home rule cities (including Nacogdoches)

City Manager

• Professional manager hired by the city council
• Intended to bring in professional management rather than politics
• Austin, Dallas, Ft. Worth and San Antonio
Commission Form

- Elected city commissioners act as legislators and each heads a city department
  - Originated with 1900 Galveston hurricane
  - By 1917 used by 500 cities nationwide
  - No longer allowed under Texas law

Commission Form

- Voters
  - Commissioner
  - Police Department
  - Commissioner
  - Water Department
  - Commissioner
  - Parks Department
  - Commissioner
  - Fire Department

City Elections
City Elections in Texas

- Non-partisan elections
  - Attempt to remove political machines from cities
- Timing
  - Most city elections held at different times from partisan elections like state elections

At-large elections

- Used by 36 of 290 home-rule cities
- All voters have a roll in selecting all members of the council.
- Top vote-getters wins seats.
  - May discriminate against minorities
  - Raises costs of campaigning

At-large by place

- Candidates must decide which seat on council they will seek
- All citizens may vote on all seats on council or “places” on ballot
District elections

• Each council member represents a geographic district.

What Cities Do

Basic Services

• Most basic protective services are provided by cities and counties.
• Provide water, trash pickup, recreation, etc.
Land Use/Zoning

• Cities decide how land is used.

Economic development

• Citizens expect city government to bring businesses and jobs to the area.

County Government
Counties in Texas

- Texas has 254 counties
- Their population range from 3,984,349 (Harris) to 42 (Loving)

Responsibilities

- Election administration
- Law Enforcement
- Tax Collection
- Roads & bridges
- Courts
- Records

Organization

- Established under general laws of the state of Texas
  - Commissioners Court
  - County judge
  - Sheriff
Commissioners Court

- 4 commissioners and county judge
- Elected in partisan elections to staggered, 4-year terms
- Powers
  - Set county taxes (within limits)
  - No general ordinance-making power
  - Shapes policy through budget power

County Judge

- Presides over commissioners court
- May preside over constitutional county court

Sheriff

- Chief law enforcement officer of county
- Jurisdiction may extend over entire county
- Operates jail
Independent School Districts

- Texas has 1,100 school districts
- Range from Houston with 211,000 students to Doss Consolidated School District with 16 students
- 366 have fewer than 500 students

School Boards

- Schools are overseen by “boards of trustees”
- Number, term in office, and system of election varies
- Create budget, set tax rates, and hire superintendent to administer schools

Special Districts

- Perform specific function
  - 1,100 Water districts
  - Soil and water conservation districts
  - Junior/community college districts
  - Flood control districts
  - Airport authorities
  - Mosquito control districts
  - Public Improvement District

*There are 2,266 special districts in Texas, 465 in Harris County alone*