

About Local Government

HOW LAWS ARE MADE

Laws are made by legislative bodies such as Congress and state legislatures. The United States is a democracy, which means that the government exists at the will of the people. U.S. citizens have the right to vote and elect their lawmakers and other government leaders, like the president. If they are unhappy with the performance of these leaders, they can vote for other people in the next election, thereby “firing” those whose performances are not up to standard. The federal government’s legislative bodies (Congress) are the House of Representatives and the Senate. Representatives are elected every two years; each senator faces an election every six years. A state’s number of representatives is determined by the size of the state’s population. Every state has two senators. This ensures a somewhat even division of power between large states and small states.

PURPOSES OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local governments exist to meet community needs. Besides establishing various rules and laws, local governments are also responsible for

- operating police and fire departments;
- providing emergency and health services;
- overseeing public works, transportation, and parks and recreation; and
- implementing federal and state programs.

STRUCTURE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

The U.S. Constitution divides power between the federal government and state governments. It does not grant any powers specifically to local governments. Thus, throughout the United States, local governments are created by state governments and have only those powers delegated to them by their respective states.

Louisiana law creates two types of local government. Parishes are the equivalent of counties in other states. Louisiana is divided into sixty-four parishes, the borders of which reflect some of the original boundaries of Catholic parishes from the colonial period.

Within parishes are municipalities. Municipalities include villages, towns, cities, boroughs, and townships. Municipalities vary in size both by area and by population. Louisiana’s largest municipality by population is the city of New Orleans, with more than three hundred thousand people. Its smallest municipality is the village of Mound, in Madison Parish, which, according to the 2020 Census, had fewer than twenty residents.

Parish Government Structure

Thirty-eight parishes in Louisiana are governed by the police jury system, which dates to 1807, predating statehood. A police jury government has between five and fifteen elected members who function as a county board of commissioners. Police juries perform both the legislative and the executive functions of parish government. Their powers include passing and enforcing local ordinances; maintaining infrastructure, prisons, and hospitals; and levying taxes.

The Louisiana constitution permits parishes, by majority vote, to replace police jury rule via the adoption of a home rule charter, a type of local constitution that defines the structure of government for the parish. Today, twenty-six parishes operate under a home rule charter. This charter gives a parish greater autonomy from the state than it has under a police jury; the Louisiana constitution states that a charter government may exercise any power not denied by general law. Most parishes with a home rule charter—twenty-one of twenty-six—use the president-council structure, in which the parish president, an elected executive, carries out legislation passed by the elected council. One parish, Caddo, has a commission-administration government. The Caddo Parish Commission is an elected body with twelve commissioners. The commission makes laws for the parish and is also responsible for appointing a chief executive officer called the parish administrator. Four other parishes—including New Orleans, Baton Rouge, and Lafayette—have a consolidated city-parish government. This form of government merges parish government with municipal government.

Parishes make laws using procedures similar to the lawmaking procedures of the U.S. Congress. In the president-council system, the council enacts ordinances by majority vote, and the president approves or vetoes them. Police juries also enact ordinances by majority vote, but because there is no separate executive, there is no veto process.

Municipal Government Structure

Many municipalities in Louisiana operate under the mayor-board of aldermen structure. The mayor is the elected executive leader of a municipality. The board of three to nine elected aldermen functions as a town or city council. Depending on the municipality, some aldermen may be elected at-large, meaning they are elected by—and represent—the entire population of the municipality. Other aldermen may be elected to represent specific districts within the municipality. Municipalities elect the chiefs of police, while other positions like the parish clerk and the tax collector are appointed by the mayor and aldermen. Locally elected officials typically serve four-year terms.