

**GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE IN THE UNITED STATES:
INCREMENTAL PROGRESS TOWARD REGIONAL GOVERNMENT
OR MORE OF THE STATUS QUO?**

DISCUSSION POINTS

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The Overall Structure of Government in the United States (US)

As is clearly indicated in Table 1 the structure of government in the US is complex in its mixture having multiple levels of government—federal, state, and four levels of local government. It is also expansive in the number of governmental jurisdictions. They presently total just slightly fewer than 90,000 jurisdictions. The downward change in the total number of governments in the fifty–five years between 1952 and 2007 has been considerable (24%). It is even more pronounced if one goes back prior to 1952.

However, the dramatic change has been focused in a decline in school districts (81%) and a sharp growth in the number of special districts (303%). The remaining local jurisdictions have changed but by far less. They are primarily municipal/township (6%).

As an aside it is interesting to note that the total number of jurisdictions was reported as in excess of 155,000 in 1942, 73% more than in 2007. These numbers highlight the complexity of the US governmental structure in terms of sheer numbers. This complexity is exacerbated when one takes into account which governments undertake which functions, that is, who does what? Functional assignment and execution varies widely across the sub–federal jurisdictions as is reflected in the budgets of these units.

Table 1
Trend in Number of Governments in the United States: 1952 to 2007

(Source: Census of Governments 2002, Vol.1, No.1, and Census of Governments 2007, *Government Organization*.)

Government Type	2007	2002	1992	1987	1977	1952
Total Governments	89,476	87,576	85,006	83,237	79,913	116,805
Federal	1	1	1	1	1	1
State	50	50	50	50	50	48
<u>Local:</u>						
County	3,033	3,034	3,043	3,042	3,042	3,052
Municipal	19,492	19,429	19,279	19,200	18,862	16,807
Township	16,519	16,504	16,656	16,691	16,822	17,202
School District	13,051	13,506	14,422	14,721	15,174	67,355
Special District	37,381	35,052	31,555	29,532	25,962	12,340

Defining Metropolitan Governance

First he more traditional definition that emphasizes governmental structure.

Second is advanced by scholars who advocate what has come to be known as the "New Regionalism."

The New Regionalism view of metropolitan governance can be briefly outlined as follows:

- a minimum role for government (where possible none),
- where there is government follow a market, public choice type model,
- governance should be through informal arrangements not formal government,
- private sector service provision is preferred,
- the more local and smaller the better.

Factors Affecting the Adoption of Metropolitan Government and Governance in the US

I. Political Considerations

- ❖ *American Local Government Ideology*
- ❖ *Movement of Power Away from the Existing Local Political Base*
- ❖ *Constitutional Status of Local Governments*
- ❖ *Political Territorial Imperative*
- ❖ *Constitutional and Legal Status of Local Government*
- ❖ *Lack of State Leadership or Intervention*
- ❖ *State Electoral Structure*
- ❖ *Ease of Incorporation and Annexation*
- ❖ *Race, Class, and the Protection of Enclaves*
- ❖ *The Residential Bias of the American People*
- ❖ *Lack of Federal Leadership*
- ❖ *The Strength of Pro-Sprawl and Pre-Fragmentation*
- ❖ *A Dislike for More Government*
- ❖ *The Difficulty of Implementing a Metropolitan Government:*
- ❖ *Uncertainty*
- ❖ *Local Government Autonomy*

II. Economic and Financial Considerations

- ❖ *Protection of Financial Base*
- ❖ *Inter-jurisdictional Economic Competition*
- ❖ *Fear of New Taxes*

How to Move Toward Regional Government/Governance

Walker (1987) has provided an outline of types of movement toward regional governance. It is quite exhaustive in its specification and has categories that range from "easiest" to "middling" to "hardest." It is shown in Table 2.

As might be anticipated the *easiest* types are the ones that have been most widely adopted since they require only a marginal shift from an existing status quo situation.

Some are:

- ❖ *informal cooperation,*
- ❖ *inter-local service agreements,*
- ❖ *private contracting,*
- ❖ *extra-territorial powers,*
- ❖ *regional councils/councils of government,*
- ❖ *joint powers agreements,*
- ❖ *cooperative purchasing agreements*

Table 2
Regional Governance Approaches: Walker's Classification

(Source: Adapted from Walker, 1987.)

Approach	Summary description
<i>Easiest</i>	
Informal cooperation	Collaborative and reciprocal actions between two local governments
Inter-local Service Agreements	Voluntary but formal agreements between two or more local governments
Joint Powers Agreements	Agreements between two or more local governments for joint planning, financing, and delivery of a service
Extra-territorial Powers	Allows a city to exercise some regulatory authority outside of its boundary in rapidly developing unincorporated areas
Regional Councils/Councils of Government	Local councils that rely mostly on voluntary efforts and have moved to regional agenda-definer and conflict-resolver roles
Federally Encouraged Single-Purpose Regional Bodies	Single-purpose regional bodies created when tied to federal funds
State Planning and Development Districts	Established by states in the 1960s and early 1970s to bring order to chaotic creation of federal special purpose regional programs
Contracting (private)	Service contracts with private providers.
<i>Middling</i>	
Local Special Districts	Provides a single service or multiple related services on a multi-jurisdictional basis
Transfers of Functions	Shifting of responsibility for provision of a service from one jurisdiction to another
Annexation	Bringing an unincorporated area into an incorporated jurisdiction
Regional Special Districts and Authorities	Region wide districts for providing a service, for example, mass transit or sewage disposal
Metro Multipurpose District	A regional district to provide multiple functions
Reformed Urban County	Establishment of a charter county
<i>Hardest</i>	
One-Tier Consolidation	Consolidation of city and county
Two-Tier Restructuring	Division of functions between local and regional
Three-Tier Restructuring	Agencies at multiple levels of government that absorb, consolidate, or restructure new and/or existing roles and responsibilities

The *middling* category is more troublesome in terms of adoption but has been manifest in the use of special districts and to a lesser extent annexations. As was shown in Table 1 special districts have increased by 303% between 1952 and 2007 from 12,340 to 37,381.

The type of special districts that have been authorized varies widely but they all share a common distinction, they deal with a single function. Sometimes they cover multiple counties in a MSA but more often they are limited to a single county area. The types of special districts in existence for 2002 are shown in Table 3 (Census of Governments, *Government Organization 2002*, pp. 13–15).

Walker's *hardest* category is manifest in the US only as one-tier consolidation of city and county. With the exception of Metro Portland the two and three tier consolidation category is a void. Even the presence of a one-tier consolidation approach is limited. Table 4 lists the consolidations that have occurred since 1805, some 204 years. Despite hundreds of referendum proposals, only a paltry thirty-four have been enacted.

Table 3
Types of Special Districts in the US **Number (2002)**

Single Function Districts 31,877		
education (not a school district)		518
libraries		1,580
hospitals		711
health		753
welfare		57
highways		743
air transportation		510
other transportation		205
drainage and flood control		3,247
soil and water conservation		2,506
other natural resource		1,226
parks and recreation		1,287
housing and community development		3,399
sewerage		2,004
solid waste management		455
water supply		3,405
other utilities		1,161
fire protection		5,725
cemeteries		1,666
industrial development		234
other single function		1,161
Multi-Function Districts 3,175		
natural resources and water supply		102
sewerage and water supply		1,446
other multi-function		1,627
Total Special Districts as of 2002		35,052

Source: Census of Governments (2002), *Government Organization*, pp. 13-15.

Table 4
Successful City-County Consolidations

Year Approved	Local Jurisdictions Involved, State	Means Used
1805	New Orleans, New Orleans Co., LA	LA
1821	Boston, Suffolk Co., MA	LA
1821	Nantucket Town, Nantucket Co., MA	LA
1854	Philadelphia, Philadelphia Co., PA	LA
1856	San Francisco, San Francisco CO., CA	LA
1874	New York, New York Co., NY	LA
1898	New York, Brooklyn, Bronx, Staten Island, Queens	LA
1904	Denver, Denver Co., CO	LA
1907	Honolulu, Honolulu Co., HI	LA
1947	Baton Rouge, East Baton Rouge Parish, LA	REF
1952	Hampton, Elizabeth City Co., VA	REF
1958	Newport News, Warwick Co., VA	REF
1962	Nashville, Davidson Co., TN	REF
1962	Virginia Beach, Princess Ann Co., VA	REF
1962	South Norfolk, Norfolk Co., VA	REF
1967	Jacksonville, Duval, FL	REF
1969	Carson City, Ormsby Co., NV	REF
1969	Indianapolis, Marion Co., IN	LA
1969	Juneau, Greater Juneau Borough, AK	REF
1970	Columbus, Muskeg Co., CA	REF
1971	Holland/Whaleville Towns, Nansemond Co., VA	REF
1971	Sitka, Greater Sitka Borough, AK	REF
1972	Suffolk, Nansemond Co., VA *	REF
1974	Lexington, Fayette Co., KY	REF
1975	Anchorage, Greater Anchorage Area, AK	REF
1977	Anaconda, Deer Lodge Co., MT	REF
1977	Butte, Silver Bow Co., MT	REF
1984	Houma, Terrebonne Parish, LA	REF
1990	Athens, Clark Co., GA	REF
1992	Lafayette, Parish, LA	REF
1995	Augusta, Richmond Co., GA	REF
1997	Kansas City, Wyandotte Co., KS	REF
1999	Louisville, Jefferson Co., KY	REF
2000	Hartsville, Trousdale Co., TN	Not reported

Spanning Governance Reform: the St. Louis Metro Area

Formal Governance Proposals

- ❖ ***Separation of the City from the County: The "Great Divorce 1876"***
- ❖ *Consolidation under City Government: 1926*
- ❖ *A Metropolitan Federation: 1930*
- ❖ *The Metropolitan Sewer District: 1954*
- ❖ *A Metropolitan Transit District: 1955*
- ❖ *A Metropolitan St. Louis District: 1959*
- ❖ *The Borough Plan: 1962*
- ❖ *Major Countywide Reform: 1987*
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Incremental Governance Changes

- ❖ *Special Districts*
- ❖ *Cooperative Arrangements*

REFER TO TABLE 5 IN PAPER