

Counties in the Federal System

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Tasks for the Day

- Local government & federalism
- A portrait of tax collection
- Possible changes
- Hoped for outcomes:
 - Put things in context
 - Learn about possible changes



The Winds of Change are Blowing...



Who's Responsible in the U.S.?

- That is a key question of the Constitution and still rings true today
- The answer has always been, and will continue to be, "it depends"
- The reason: The structure of government



The American System of Local Government Is...

- Based upon localism & federalism
- Complicated across units
- Complicated within units
- Exceptional



There are Many Governments in the U.S.

Type	Sub-Type	Totals
Federal		1
States		50
Counties		3,034
Subcounty	Municipal	19,429
	Town or Township	16,504
		35,933
Special Purpose	Special Districts	35,052
	Public School Systems	15,014
		48,558
Total		87,576

Table 1. Governments in the United States, 2002.
Source: *United States Census of Governments, 2002.*



And The Numbers are Increasing

Type	Sub-Type	Totals
Federal		1
States		50
Counties		3,033
	Municipal	19,492
	Town or	
	Township	16,519
Subcounty		36,011
	Special	
	Districts	37,381
	Public School	
	Systems	13,051
Special Purpose		50,432
Total		89,527



Table 2. Governments in the United States, 2007.
Source: *United States Census of Governments, 2007*.

Bottom Line: System is Complex

- Many governments with overlapping (and possibly conflicting) authority and functions
- Added bonus – “hyper-democracy” with 500,000+ elected officials
- This slows the process of governing down & makes it difficult to accomplish anything



But there is Method to the Madness

Based upon the U.S. system of federalism



Federalism 101

- Sharing of powers between levels of government – usually state / national
- In the U.S.:
 - Defining document is the Constitution
 - Powers reserved to the national and state governments
 - Some powers shared
 - There is ambiguity and power shifts between levels



What about Local Governments?

- Not mentioned in U.S. Constitution but obviously in every state constitution
- Powers need to be granted by the state (Dillon's Rule)
- States are not federations...but local governments have gained real political power



What About Tax Collection?

It is Complicated



Tax Collection Varies Widely

- Different names
- Different functions
- Different (and overlapping) jurisdictions



Various Names for Them (An Incomplete List)

- Tax Collector
- Treasurer
- Sheriff-Treasurer
- Tax Commissioner
- Collector-Treasurer
- Secretary-Treasurer
- Collector of Revenue
- Finance Director
- Assessor-Collector
- Auditor-Treasurer
- Receiver of Taxes



Functions Vary

- Some collect taxes
- Some do two or more of these
- Some disburse funds
- Plus...some do more!
- Some invest funds

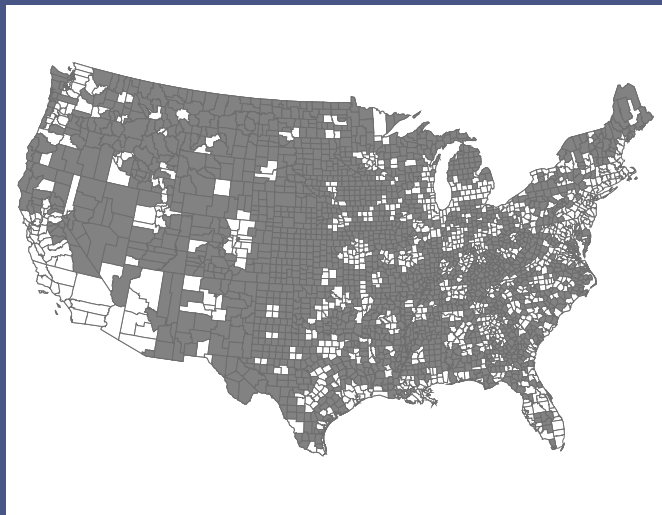


Different Jurisdictions

- Almost all states (98%) have a county office that performs tax functions
- But...many states allow collection function at city, town, or township levels
- The urban / rural split



Most of the U.S. is Rural (Land Area)



How are Officers Selected?

- For county tax functions:
- Charter counties (4%) not included

Type of Appointment	Number	Percent
Elected	40	80 %
Appointed	4	8 %
“Discretionary”	4	8 %
No County Office	2	4 %
Total	50	100 %

- At other levels, virtually always elected

Table 3. Methods of Selection. Source: National Association of Counties. 2008. *The County Treasurer*, and presenter analysis.



- And usually partisan

What Does All This Mean? It is Complicated

- Difficult to classify the “typical” jurisdiction
- There are thousands of *somewhat* independent offices that oversee tax functions
- But it makes life interesting for analysts



Why is it so Complicated?

- Historical evolution
- Democratic ideals
- Accountability
- Inertia



What About Efficiency?

Usually, efficiency ain't got nothing
to do with it



What About Change?

There is *should?* and there is *can?*...

Two different issues



Should the System be Changed?

- The *Progressives*: Yes. They made specific arguments for change of local (in particular, county) governance:
 - There should be no fee system
 - Most officials, particularly “line” or “row” officers, should be appointed and not elected
 - Counties should be professionalized
 - Counties should have home rule



Should the System Be Changed? (Cont'd)

- There have been many proposals...and seemingly more of them
- Downsides:
 - Accountability
 - Responsiveness
 - Innovation
- An interesting counterfactual
- More research!



Some Proposed Changes

- Consolidation of functions
- Consolidation of governments
- Change in selection method
- Cooperative agreements
- State data systems
- Outsourcing
- Any others?



Can the System be Changed?

- Theoretically, yes - no “constitutional” protection
- What about state legislators?
- Practically, very difficult:
 - Localism
 - Hyperdemocracy
 - Inertia
 - Strong advocacy groups
 - Incrementalism



What about Your State / County?

- Have you seen any proposals in your state?
- What happened?
- How did you or your association respond?
- What is the future?



Questions?

- Feel free to contact me at baybeck@umsl.edu
- Thanks!

