MUNICIPALITIES

**DEFINITION**
Municipalities are political units incorporated for general-purpose, local self-government that provide public services for a specific concentration of population in a defined area; cities, villages, boroughs, and most towns (in nine states, towns are actually townships) are municipalities.

**SCOPE, ETC.**
All fifty states have municipalities, but the numbers of municipalities vary widely from state to state; Illinois, with 1,282, has the most, and Hawaii the fewest: one. The criteria that states use to incorporate (that is, create, charter, and recognize) municipalities vary, but minimal requirements concerning population density and distance from other municipalities characterize most of them. To be incorporated as a municipality, citizens must usually present a petition to the state requesting incorporation, hold an election that endorses it, and have the secretary of state certify that all requirements have been met. The services provided most frequently by municipalities are, in order of the largest portions of the municipal budgets expended, public safety and corrections, environmental protection, education, social services, transportation, courts, and housing. Relative to counties, municipalities are more involved in road construction and maintenance, fire protection, parks and recreation, and public housing.

**GOVERNMENT**
All municipalities are governed by city or town councils, usually of five to seven part-time members, elected by district, at-large, or a combination of the two. Half of the nearly 6,700 municipalities with populations of 2,500 or more use a mayor-council plan, in which a mayor is elected at-large as a chief elected officer and is not a member of the city council. Mayor-council municipalities are often categorized as weak mayor governments or strong mayor governments, and the terms are self-evident. But, in fact, very few mayors have the kinds of powers that we normally associate with strong chief executives. In municipalities using the council-manager plan, a mayor may be elected at-large, or from a district, or by the city council members, but is also a member of the city council and may not veto legislation enacted by it. Over two-thirds of municipalities hire professional city or town managers or administrators, but only two-fifths (41 percent) of municipalities (about 2,500) technically qualify as council-manager governments, in which the mayor is a member of the council, the manager reports directly to the council (as opposed to the mayor), and has full administrative authority. About 2 percent of municipalities use a commission plan form of government, in which commissioners of three to five members are elected, usually on a nonpartisan basis, and who both make laws and manage the government directly, much in the same mode as counties with commission plans. The remaining 7 percent of these 6,700 municipalities use a town meeting form of government, which is described next under "townships."

In about a fifth of all municipalities, mayors are not elected by the voters; in these cities (which typically, but not exclusively, are council-manager or commission cities), the mayor has been elected by the voters as a councilmember or commissioner and then is elected mayor by the council members. Unlike counties and townships, voters in municipalities rarely elect municipal-wide officers other than the mayor and council members.

TOWNSHIPS

**DEFINITION**
Townships, a term often, but not always, including towns, are political units that function as local governments and which provide public services for residents of areas without regard to population concentration.

**SCOPE, ETC.**
Twenty states in the Northeast and Midwest have townships and towns, and about a fifth of Americans are governed directly by them. In the six New England states, Minnesota, New York, and Wisconsin, townships are called towns. The Census Bureau categorizes most townships in New England, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and to a lesser degree, those in Michigan, New York, and Wisconsin, as strong townships, and in these eleven states townships function like municipalities or, in the New England states, like counties. In the remaining nine midwestern states, most townships are rural townships, and these townships have very limited responsibilities; most, in fact, have no full-time employees. Some rural townships are no more than subdivisions of counties, with no powers of their own.

**GOVERNMENT**
Townships commonly use what amounts to a commission plan, electing three to five part-time members to boards of supervisors or trustees; additional officials, such as a clerk or treasurer, are also elected by the voters. A few townships use equivalents of the municipal council-manager and mayor-council plans.

The most democratic and interesting form of township government is used by towns in New England: the town meeting. All the townspeople who wish to attend annual town meetings enact legislation, write and approve the budget, form town policies, and elect part-time selectmen and other town officers to take care of things between town meetings. Usually, the daytoday town management falls to the popularly elected town clerk, but in Maine professional town managers usually report to the selectmen. Most New England towns (84 percent of those with 2,500 people or more) use the open town meeting, in which all townspeople may participate, and the remainder uses the representative town meeting, in which 100 to 150 elected townspeople may participate. Anywhere from 5 percent to a fourth of townspeople attend open town meetings, on the average, and the smaller the town, the higher the turnout.
**SCHOOL DISTRICTS**

**DEFINITION**

School districts are organized local entities providing public elementary, secondary, and/or higher education and, under state law, have sufficient administrative and fiscal autonomy to qualify as separate governments.

**SCOPE, ETC.**

Forty-five states use school districts exclusively to make policy for and manage their public schools, although all states constrain the independence of their local school districts through state boards of education (except Wisconsin, which does not have one), chief state school officers (usually called commissioners of education, or superintendents of schools or of public instruction, among other titles), and state departments of education. The states that do not have school districts at all or do not use them exclusively, employ dependent school systems. Dependent school systems are departments of state, county, municipal, or township governments. There are 1.412 of them, and the Census Bureau does not recognize dependent school systems as governments. Alaska, Hawaii, Maryland, North Carolina, and Virginia have no school districts; a minority of schools in Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Tennessee are run by school districts. Another seven states rely principally on school districts to govern their schools, but these states also use dependent school systems. In all, seventeen states and Washington, DC, use dependent school systems, either exclusively, mostly, or partially.

**GOVERNMENT**

More than four-fifths of the nation's school districts are governed by nonpartisan elected boards of education or school boards, usually ranging in size from five to fifteen members. Over 15 percent of school board members are appointed by county, municipal, or township governments. School boards may appoint professional superintendents of schools to manage the schools, although often school superintendents are elected independently, and report directly to the electorate instead of to the school board.

**SPECIAL DISTRICTS**

**DEFINITION**

Special districts are organized local entities (other than school districts) authorized by state or local law to provide only one or a limited number of designated services with sufficient administrative and fiscal autonomy to qualify as separate governments.

**SCOPE, ETC.**

All states have special districts, which are usually called districts or authorities. Not all districts and authorities are recognized by the Census Bureau, however, as governments. Many special districts are also chartered as government corporations. Special districts are the fastest-growing type of local government, and have been the most numerous of all five types since 1972. Illinois, with 2,920 special districts, has the most, and Alaska the fewest: fourteen. Two-thirds of special districts overlap the boundaries of two or more general-purpose governments—that is, townships, municipalities, counties, and even states. A third of all special districts have boundaries that match the boundaries of a county, municipality, or township.

Only 8 percent of special districts are multipurpose districts, which are responsible for more than one governmental function (although more than half of these are nothing more than water and sewer districts, thus making them multipurpose). Over a third of all special districts provide water and sewer services, 16 percent control fires, 11 percent are in the public housing business, 6 percent provide library and educational services, 4 percent are health and hospital districts, and 4 percent are involved in transportation. Special districts that are municipalities, or that provide a social service or transportation service, are among the most rapidly growing. Fewer than half (46 percent) of special districts use their own employees to provide services directly: Most contract out the provision of these services or simply finance them by issuing bonds.

Unlike all other types of local governments, which are chiefly reliant on the property tax for their revenues (ranging from municipalities, which depend on the property tax for slightly over half of their revenues, to school districts for almost all their revenues), nearly a third of special districts derive some or all of their income from user fees, such as charges for electricity or tolls for bridges. Even so, 47 percent of special districts can levy property taxes, and 18 percent can levy other kinds of taxes and assessments as well.

**GOVERNMENT**

All special districts are governed by boards of directors of at least three members who normally serve without compensation and are usually appointed to the boards by local chief elected executive officers, county commissions, municipal councils, or township governments. This is almost invariably the case if the special district is also a government corporation. In a minority of instances, board members are elected by voters in local government jurisdictions. Board members have fixed terms but are often reappointed, and their chief responsibility is usually the appointment of an executive director to manage the district. In perhaps a fifth of special districts, executive directors are appointed not by the district board but by the chief elected officer or elected legislative body that chartered the special district.