

# Local Elections Guide



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Many people think that the most important elections are those for the presidency, your members of Congress at both the state and federal level, and governors. However, by solely focusing on these elections, we overlook local elections which happen every year.

This is a problem because local elections are more likely to directly impact your life. Your city and country representatives are responsible for many government functions -- like public transit, roads, police, fire departments, schools, parks, libraries, and housing, for instance. Your vote especially matters in local elections as the outcomes of local races are sometimes decided by a few dozen votes.

This guide will help you understand common local positions and their core responsibilities so that you can make the best decisions possible for your community.

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## Mayor or City Manager

The mayor and city manager are responsible for the city's daily operations. They can hire and fire staff, implement legislation passed by city council, and may also have veto power. Additionally, they can play an important role in developing the annual budget for the city, although city council may amend it. In partnership with city council, the mayor and city manager address issues including land use, housing, job programs, transportation, parks, libraries, and how much to cooperate with the federal government on areas like immigration policy or drug issues. Many cities have non-elected city managers who are responsible for their daily functions. Cities will also sometimes only have one of these two positions.

## The City Council

City council members have the final vote in creating laws and approving a city budget. They may develop their own initiatives, as well as responding to the mayor's proposals. The council has ultimate say on which laws are passed. Some city charters give their councilmembers the power to select department heads and even have direct control over city departments or funding allocations. In these instances, the government is considered a strong council government.

## County Executive and County Commissioner

The county executive and county commissioners play similar roles to the mayor and city council, but for issues affecting an entire county. They approve budgets, oversee spending, hire county employees, and set rules for broad countrywide programs.

County governments often serve areas of the country that are not incorporated into a municipal (i.e. city, town, or village) government, for instance with police and fire services. Some municipalities combine city and county governments into one consolidated entity, having the powers of both city and a county, for instance: Athens, Georgia; San Francisco, California; Indianapolis, Indiana; and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

### City and County Clerks

City clerks manage the records of your city, and are often called the historians of the community. They are sometimes elected and sometimes appointed. The county clerk, on the other hand, supervises elections, including nominations, ballots, polling places, and poll workers. In some counties, the county clerk serves as the secretary of the county commission as well, recording minutes, setting the agenda, and handling administrative tasks for commissioners. The county clerk may also be responsible for overseeing county records (e.g. birth and death certificates, marriage certificates, property deeds). The county clerk is an elected position in 24 states.

### School Board

The district school board is the link between the classroom and the community. They decide how and what students are learning by setting policies, curriculums, and budgets for the school district. School board members affect funding for programs like arts, music, sports, the school calendar, and what time school begins and ends. They hire or fire school principals and set guidelines for teachers. Your vote for the school board directly affects the education of students in K-12 schools. 11 states also have elected state-wide school boards.

### District Attorney

The district attorney (DA) is the chief prosecutor for a local government area, usually a county. They have the authority to investigate and bring issues to trial, prosecute criminal offenses, and make sentencing recommendations. While district attorneys can be appointed, they are likely to be elected. The district attorney has a particularly important impact on your community including addressing police brutality and misconduct cases. They may work to reform the criminal justice system, address inequalities in sentencing, and advocate for changes to cash bail standards.

### City Attorney

County governments often have district attorneys while cities have city attorneys. City attorneys generally handle all legal matters for the city, including traffic tickets and civil lawsuits. They also provide legal advice for city departments. The city attorney prosecutes misdemeanors while the district attorney handles felonies. City attorneys are more likely to be appointed than district attorneys.

### Sheriff

Unlike most officials in law enforcement in the United States, sheriffs are usually elected. The responsibilities of sheriffs vary considerably by county. Many sheriffs have the role of a police chief, though some have limited law enforcement duties. Sheriffs can often be responsible for managing county jails and security at local government buildings. In many rural areas of the United States, the sheriff is one of the most influential political office-holders.

## Judicial Elections

Federal judges enjoy lifetime appointments under our system of government, but this is not the case for many judges at the state and local levels. It is important for you to cast your ballot for judges because they decide important cases with consequences for individual people, the law, and civil rights. State and local judicial elections vary by state. Most state court systems are divided into three levels: trial courts, appeals courts, and a state supreme court. Larger cities often have municipal courts (also known as city courts) which hear traffic offenses and violations of city ordinances.

## Ballot Initiatives and Referendums

Ballot initiatives and referendums are proposals for new policies, laws, and ordinances which citizens vote to accept or reject. These may be proposed by local governments or citizens. For example, a county commission in Horry County, South Carolina, placed a referendum on their 2016 ballot for road projects that would be funded by an extra 1% Sales Tax on all retail sales, prepared food/beverage and accommodations.

## Key Definitions of Local Government Positions

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| <b>Mayor and City Manager</b>                   | They are responsible for the city’s daily operations.   |
| <b>City Council</b>                             | They have the final vote in creating laws and approving a city budget.  |
| <b>County Executive and County Commissioner</b> | They approve budgets, oversee spending, hire county employees, and set rules for broad countrywide programs.                        |
| <b>City and County Clerks</b>                   | They keep the records for the community and may oversee elections.  |
| <b>School Board</b>                             | They decide how and what students are learning by setting policies, curriculums, and budgets for the school district.               |
| <b>District Attorney</b>                        | They have the authority to investigate and bring issues to trial, prosecute criminal offenses, and make sentencing recommendations. |
| <b>City Attorney</b>                            | They generally handle all legal matters for the city, including traffic tickets and civil lawsuits.                                 |
| <b>Sheriff</b>                                  | They are often responsible for managing county jails and security at local government buildings.                                    |
| <b>Judicial Elections</b>                       | They decide important cases with consequences for individual people, the law, and civil rights.                                     |
| <b>Ballot Initiatives and Referendums</b>       | These are proposals for new policies, laws, and ordinances which citizens vote to accept or reject.                                 |

## Local Election Quiz

Match each local position with the correct definition.

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**Mayor and City Manager**

These are proposals for new policies, laws, and ordinances which citizens vote to accept or reject.

**City Council**

They decide how and what students are learning by setting policies, curriculums, and budgets for the school district.

**County Executive and County Commissioner**

They are often responsible for managing county jails and security at local government buildings.

**City and County Clerks**

They have the authority to investigate and bring issues to trial, prosecute criminal offenses, and make sentencing recommendations.

**School Board**

They are responsible for the city's daily operations.

**District Attorney**

They keep the records for the community and may oversee elections.

**City Attorney**

They have the final vote in creating laws and approving a city budget.

**Sheriff**

They approve budgets, oversee spending, hire county employees, and set rules for broad countrywide programs

**Judicial Elections**

They generally handle all legal matters for the city, including traffic tickets and civil lawsuits.

**Ballot Initiatives and Referendums**

They decide important cases with consequences for individual people, the law, and civil rights.