

How Government Works: State and local power

By USHistory.org, adapted by Newsela staff on 02.16.17

Word Count **572**

Level **MAX**



State and local governments do everything from creating laws to helping run municipal services. That means they help take care of our water, our streets, our public libraries, our schools and much more. Image by: Newsela staff.

The United States government is made up of one national government, 50 state governments, and 89,000 local governments.

The vast majority of government employees work for local and state — not the federal, or national — governments. Teachers, policemen, clerks at the motor vehicle office; these and other roles are held by state and local employees. This seems to confirm the general notion that government is in fact "closer to the people," and therefore more democratic. But in order for this to be fully true, the citizens of local government must be invested and involved.



Who Holds State And Local Power?

Governors, legislators and many other elected officials lead state governments. Judges sit on both state and local courts. Local officials include mayors, city council members, city planning commissioners and school board members.

Many local officials are nonpartisan. In other words, they do not run for election to office with a party label. Instead, they simply run on their own good names. Often these individuals cross register themselves in both political parties.

Participation In State And Local Politics

How interested are Americans in their local political affairs? What about citizen participation: voting, attending meetings, phoning officials and keeping up with local politics? Citizens generally take less interest in and are less informed about their local governments than they are about the national government. Percentages of eligible voters who actually vote in presidential elections have been hovering around 50 to 60 percent in the past few elections. Local elections draw far fewer voters, with some school board and city council members elected with 10 to 15 percent of the eligible voters. Why the dramatic difference, if they are so close to the people?



Some of the reasons are understandable. After all, local governments in particular keep busy with relatively noncontroversial routines. They provide fire and police service and keep the roads in shape. They try to attract businesses that can create more jobs. People tend to let local officials do their jobs until something happens that directly affects their lives. For example, people are more likely to get involved when a landfill company or a drug rehabilitation center buys the property next to theirs, or when a house down the street is robbed.

But the participation rates tend to suggest that most people have very little interest in local politics. Still, many of the burning issues of modern times are also state and local concerns. People need protection from crime and violence, and they depend on state and local officials for that. Drugs, gangs, racism and poverty confront governments on every level. Education, the protection of the environment and health care delivery all cry out for active participants to solve their problems. All across the United States, thousands of political activists are making the attempt. But to function properly, a democracy needs all of its citizens to take part.

Quiz

- 1 Select the paragraph from "Participation In State And Local Politics" that suggests people should be more active in both local and national elections.

- 2 Which selection from the article supports the idea that local government is "closer to the people"?
 - (A) The vast majority of government employees work for local and state — not the federal, or national — governments. Teachers, policemen, clerks at the motor vehicle office; these and other roles are held by state and local employees.
 - (B) Many local officials are nonpartisan. In other words, they do not run for election to office with a party label. Instead, they simply run on their own good names. Often these individuals cross register themselves in both political parties.
 - (C) Local elections draw far fewer voters, with some school board and city council members elected with 10 to 15 percent of the eligible voters. Why the dramatic difference, if they are so close to the people? Some of the reasons are understandable.
 - (D) Drugs, gangs, racism and poverty confront governments on every level. Education, the protection of the environment and health care delivery all cry out for active participants to solve their problems. All across the United States, thousands of political activists are making the attempt.

- 3 What is the central idea of the following paragraph?

But the participation rates tend to suggest that most people have very little interest in local politics. Still, many of the burning issues of modern times are also state and local concerns. People need protection from crime and violence, and they depend on state and local officials for that. Drugs, gangs, racism and poverty confront governments on every level. Education, the protection of the environment and health care delivery all cry out for active participants to solve their problems. All across the United States, thousands of political activists are making the attempt. But to function properly, a democracy needs all of its citizens to take part.

- (A) Participation in national elections is more democratic than participation in local elections.
- (B) Involvement in the democratic process, especially at the local level, will improve life in the United States.
- (C) Crime and violence prevent people from becoming involved in local politics and maintaining democracy.
- (D) Political activists are trying to change the world through democracy but other people should, too.

- 4 Which detail would be most important to include in a summary of the article?

- (A) Many local officials are nonpartisan. In other words, they do not run for election to office with a party label.
- (B) Local elections draw far fewer voters, with some school board and city council members elected with 10 to 15 percent of the eligible voters.
- (C) Governors, legislators and many other elected officials lead state governments. Judges sit on both state and local courts.
- (D) People tend to let local officials do their jobs until something happens that directly affects their lives.