History of Local Governance in the U.S.

- Constitution preserved power of smaller units of government
- As states gained in power throughout 1800s, so too did localities
- New Deal and, especially, War on Poverty saw additional resources and, therefore, power, funneled directly to localities
- Local governments besieged in 1970s-1980s: takeovers of school systems, police departments, rising poverty- “end of the city”
Local Structures

- Elected officials at-large and/or by district
- Types of Municipal Government:
  - Weak Mayor—Council (mayor chosen from among council members)
  - Commission
  - Strong Mayor—Council (modeled on state/federal governments; appoints city heads)
  - City/Council Manager
Entities in Local Government

- City councils
- County commissions
- Consolidated local/county government
- School boards
- Library boards
- Planning and zoning boards
- Election commissions
- Water, sewage, other utility districts
- Executives
Types of Localities

- Incorporated municipalities (municipal charter similar to constitution):
  - Inner cities
  - First-ring suburbs
  - Suburbs
  - “Exurbs”
  - Rural communities
- Federations of municipalities
- Unincorporated areas under direct state statute jurisdiction
Financing Local Government

- Property taxes
  - State and federal abatements (along with incentive packages) have eroded this power
- Sales taxes
- Special use taxes
  - Example: JOCO tax for education
- User fees
  - Parks and recreation, developers, commuters
- Earnings taxes
- Recession in 1990 saw end of revenue sharing in most states
Functions of Local Policy

- Technically, local governments only control those areas specifically delegated by the state.
- Local policymaking is complicated by overlapping jurisdiction and ambiguous scope.
- Localities responsible for most:
  - Land use
  - Education
  - Housing
  - Emergency response
  - Parks and recreation
Localities & Social Policy

- Area Agencies on Aging locally administered
- Many localities administer mental health mill levies
- Public housing authorities
- Special education and in-school services
- CDBG and county welfare programs
- Jail system, public defender
- County hospitals (in some cases)
- Administration of block grant programs and other incentives, particularly for housing and CED
Local Government Reform

- Consolidation to increase efficiency
  - Layering of government can dilute tax base and lead to turf disputes
- Reform to break up political machines
- Privatization in provision of ‘public’ services—trash, utilities, even safety
  - Impacts quality, responsiveness, job creation
- Restrictions on tax increment financing
Advocacy in Local Policymaking

- Diffuse power
- Blurred lines between paid and elected officials
- Policy decisions often made informally
- Can be more difficult to intervene as an ‘outsider’
- Sometimes find advocacy more controversial because of dual relationships with policymakers
Making a Difference in Local Policymaking

- Serving on boards or commissions
  - How to position yourself, where to interject
- Running for elected office
- Testifying at hearings
- Monitoring budget and policy processes
- Working directly with policymakers
Some local areas very dependent on federal or state economic activity (military bases, research centers, government agencies, universities)

Assistance often dependent on population estimates—block grants, especially

Local officials take policy stances on state and federal issues—eminent domain, immigration, welfare reform, etc…
Questions/Discussion?