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- *County governments are critically important to Illinois and its voters.*
- *Voters have neither much awareness nor much knowledge about county government.*
- *County governments operate today much as they did in Abe Lincoln's day.*
- *County elections are partisan, but county affairs are largely managed on a non-partisan basis.*
- *Most counties are hampered by a lack of policy leadership.*



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issue: *Illinois County Government: Overlooked, Underappreciated, Very Important*

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Editor's Introduction: This is the first of a two-part series on Illinois' county governments. Counties are a vital part of Illinois' governmental structure, but operate largely outside the purview of voter awareness. This first part will describe county government – its history, powers, structure, and importance – and report on the ways in which Illinois counties (other than the unique case of Cook County) are operating and adapting to the modern era. The second part in this series will examine the impact and implications of the most significant of the adaptations – the use of professional government administrators to manage day-to-day county operations.

If Abe Lincoln were to return to Illinois today, he would feel most at home with county governments. Relatively unaffected by the "Good Government" reform movement of the 20th century, Illinois counties continue to be organized and operated in the modes first established in the 19th century.

What would distress Abe most about county government is not how little counties do; they perform far more functions today than they did in his day. Rather, Abe would be appalled at how little the Illinois public knows about their county governments and, even worse, *how little the public seems to care about county government.*

Experts today agree that fewer than five percent of Illinois voters could name the officials they elect to run their county governments. Even fewer can name the county board members elected to represent the district in which they live. In the most crass sense, county governments today operate with little public pressure to be accountable to their local voters.

Are county governments even important?

County governments are critically important to the State of Illinois and its voters.

Every square inch of Illinois territory falls within the jurisdiction of a county government. For rural residents, county

government is their *primary* provider of local government services, affording them law enforcement services, roads, building and land use control, and waste disposal.

County governments also serve as a subdivision of state government. Their responsibilities on the state's behalf include: housing and financing all local

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courts; administering *all* national, state, and local elections; overseeing the provision of social services; providing health protection services, sometimes including medical care to the indigent; maintaining and patrolling state, county, and town roads and highways; and maintaining real estate title records.

In addition, county governments provide services to all other local governments: they administer the property tax system and collect the property taxes levied by other governments in the county; they provide secure detention facilities (the only secure jails for most cities and villages); they are responsible for appointing members of the governing boards of many special districts located within their jurisdictions; and each county's states attorney serves as a source of advice on questions regarding the application of state statutes by other local governments.

Table One summarizes the kinds of powers which county governments are authorized or mandated to perform by state statute. In performing their duties, Illinois counties collectively levy \$2.3 billion in property taxes each year and they spend over \$5.7 billion each year, or 6.5 percent of all state and local government spending in Illinois.¹

Finally, counties are important because they are utilized as the geographic base for the grass-roots organizations of the Democratic and Republican parties. Many Illinois political leaders at the state and national levels of government first started their governmental careers as elective or appointive officers in an Illinois county government.

tableone Powers of County Governments

Set forth below are the major categories into which the powers of county governments can be divided. This categorization provides a sense of the breadth and consequence of the powers and responsibilities of county governments in Illinois.

Administration of Justice	Agriculture	Appointments of members of governing boards of local special district governments
Business Regulation	Building inspection	Elections
Courts	Collect user fees	
Economic Development	Education	
Emergency & Disaster Services	Environmental Protection	Extend and assess all property taxes levied in the county
Forest Preserves	Geographic Information	
Historic Preservation	Health and Safety	Indigent Defense (Public Defender)
	Juvenile Programs	
	Land and Water Use Regulation	
Planning and Zoning	Probation	Prosecution of felonies
Public Order (Law Enforcement)	Public Utilities	Public Works
Real Estate	Register of Deeds	Revenue Collection
Relations with Other Political Subdivisions	Roadways and Other Surface Transportation Structures	Secure Detention Facilities (Jails)
Vehicles and Traffic Control	Veterans' Affairs	

This table has been adapted, with additions, from a report by the Illinois General Assembly Legislative Research Unit entitled "Kane County Powers and Duties" dated January 25, 2006.

Why don't Illinois voters care about county government?

There are several reasons for voter disinterest in county government:

1. County business is largely routine, lacking news appeal. Although counties perform a multitude of functions, many – like keeping track of property ownership, maintaining roads, and providing services to agriculture – are of little news value. Other functions, like managing lo-

cal elections, have news value only when poorly provided. Still others, like social services, have considerable news value, but the linkage between social service agencies and county government is rarely mentioned.

2. Even more so than other governments, *counties have little discretionary money to spend.* While their expenditures are substantial, most are committed to existing programs, leaving county officials little money with which to consider new programs.

3. Some county officials are content to operate without public scrutiny. Illinois county officials privately acknowledge that the absence of adequate media coverage of their work is bad for democracy, but a blessing for them because it gives them greater freedom of action in dealing with the problems confronting county government.²

4. Counties have little money to spend on public relations programs. Thus they are at the mercy of local newspaper and radio/TV outlets to disseminate information about their work. Unfortunately, counties can thus become victims of the media's bias toward emphasizing bad news.

Some county officials and media have made an effort to provide more information to the public. Lake and Peoria counties have established public relations departments. In another case, a former county board chair wrote a weekly report for publication in a local newspaper.

5. Most seriously, Illinois voters don't know anything about county government. This is not the voters fault. Rather, the blame can and should be placed on Illinois' public schools.

Why are the schools to blame?

The schools deserve primary blame because they are not doing their job – they are not fulfilling either their legal or ethical responsibility to educate their students about government, and, most significantly, about American local government.

Most Illinois public schools and all of its institutions of higher education no

longer fulfill their statutory responsibility to teach their students – the future voters of Illinois – about government.³ The state's required civics education is deemed fulfilled by Illinois public schools, from kindergarten through university doctoral programs, by the six weeks of education in the constitutions of Illinois and the United States government taught as part of a required 8th grade American history course.

Education about county government is even more deplorable. According to the standards for Illinois schools set forth by the Illinois State Board of Education, no education in Illinois local government is required beyond the fifth grade, and functionally most school districts complete this obligation at the fourth grade level – a level when students are still learning very basic material (how to learn) and take very little substantive knowledge forward to their adult lives.

Since this deplorable state of affairs has existed for several decades, today's Illinois voters know very little about their local governments in general and county governments in particular.

How has reform affected county governments?

Until very recent decades, the Good Government reform movement that swept through the nation in the late 19th century and throughout the 20th century had little effect on Illinois county governments. County governments have been, and most still are, operating much as they were during Abe Lincoln's day.

How do county governments operate?

There are two basic, different organizational formats under which all but one (Cook) of Illinois' 102 counties are operated. These formats have been used continuously, with only three modifications, since the 19th century.⁴

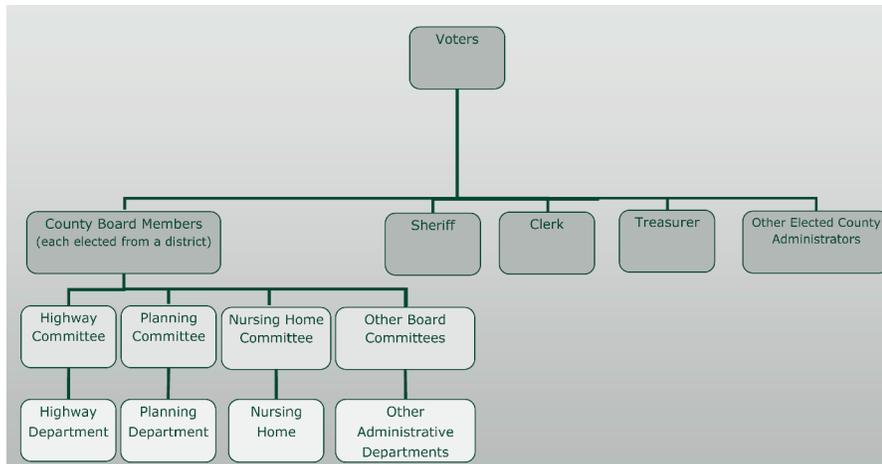
The most common form of organization, used in 84 counties, is the county board form. Under it, administrative authority is divided between the county board (the legislative body) and a varying number of elected officeholders.⁵ Each county must elect a sheriff, county clerk, circuit clerk (for the courts), and treasurer. They may choose by ordinance (approved by referendum) either to elect or appoint a coroner, recorder, assessor, and auditor. Elected officerholders serve four year terms.

County boards are composed of members elected from districts within the county. Unless other provision has been made, county board chairs are elected by the members of the county board. County boards typically have between 20 and 29 members. Each board's administrative duties are managed by committees made up of board members. **Table Two** (on the next page) plots the structure of county governments organized under the county board form.

The 17 counties at the state's southern tip that do not have townships are organized under the county commission form of government.⁶ In this form, the county board is composed of three commissioners elected at large. The county board's administrative duties are divided among the three commissioners, one of whom serves as board chair, usually on a rotat-

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tabletwo Organization Under the County Board Form of Government



Notes: Each county board committee is comprised only of members of the county board. The named departments are typical; each county has many more committees, each directed by a county board committee. Key: — Line of authority and control

ing basis. Commission counties operate under the same provisions for elected administrative officers as do county board counties. This form is depicted in **Table Three** on the next page.

What modifications have been made to these plans?

Modifications have been made to these plans, with the goals of the 20th century Good Government movement in mind, but they have not all had the desired effect. The primary modifications are the following.

County board representation. County boards were first modified in the late 1960's to bring the county board plan into conformity with the one person/one vote rule established by law in *Baker v Carr*.⁷ That modification changed the method of electing county board members from

a township basis to a district basis and capped the size of county boards at 29 members (previously some boards had become as large as 50+ members).

While this change brought county boards into compliance with one person/one vote, it did not reduce county board sizes to levels recommended by the good government movement (seven to twelve members) for local governing bodies. Further, in counties with one or more medium sized municipalities, the changes severely reduced the voting representation of rural residents on the governing board of their primary local government.

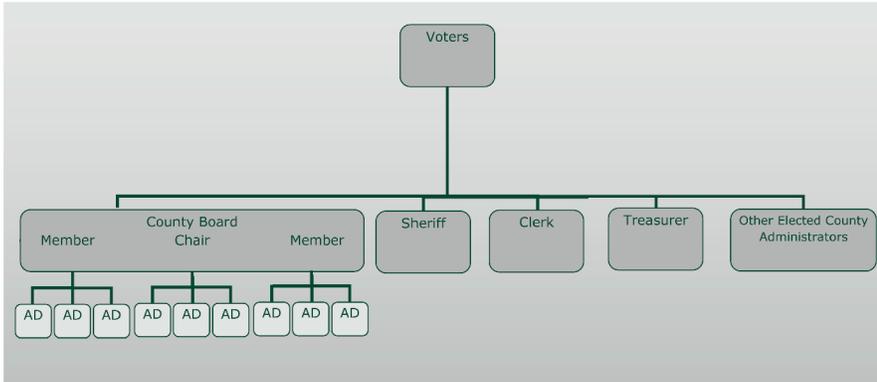
Election of county officeholders. The Good Government movement strongly urged the elimination of elections as a means of selecting administrative officers other than the chief executive

officer of a local government. The goal was to encourage the use of professional expertise in the day-to-day operations of government while still holding the chief executive officer accountable to the public through the electoral process. The 1970 Illinois constitution authorized some modification of the common county practice of electing seven to ten officeholders in each county. However it still required the election of four officeholders (sheriff, county clerk, clerk of the circuit court, and county treasurer) and required local referendum approval before four others (coroner, recorder, assessor, and auditor) could be made appointive positions.

Provision for executive leadership. The principal governmental reform of the 20th century was strengthening executive leadership in government. The offices of U.S. president and state governors were all noticeably strengthened in the first half of the century. A variety of different steps were also taken to strengthen executive/administrative leadership in city government.

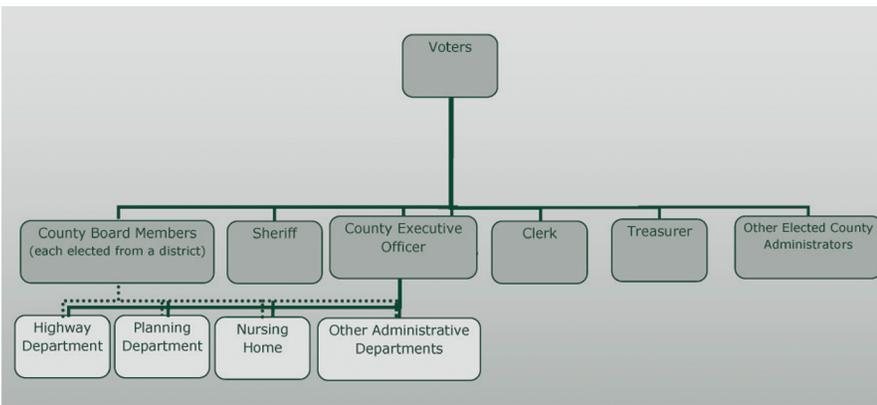
But nothing was done to start the reform process in Illinois counties until the 1970 Illinois Constitution authorized an elected county executive officer and required such an officer as a condition of county government acquisition of home rule powers. This linkage to home rule had the effect of preventing any county from adopting a chief executive format, since it linked two major changes – acquisition of home rule powers and the establishment of an elected chief executive officer – in a single ballot proposition, thereby consolidating two different sets of opponents into a single voting block. Subsequently, the Illinois General Assembly

tablethree Organization Under the County Commission Form of Government



Notes: The county board has three members. The board chair is elected from the board members by the members themselves. AD = Administrative Department
 Key: ————— Line of authority and control

tablefour Organization Under the County Executive Form of Government



Notes: Each committee is comprised only of members of the county board. The named departments are typical; each county has many more committees, each directed by a county board committee. Key: ————— Line of authority and control
 Legislative oversight

been widely used nor had much impact upon county government.

What reforms did counties not use?

Consolidation of administrative responsibility. The 20th century “Good Government” movement also sought to strengthen government administration. The national government, for example, empowered three different commissions to make recommendations for centralizing and strengthening control over the administration branch of the federal government: the Brownlow Commission which was empowered in the 1930’s and the two Hoover Commissions empowered in the post World War II era. The most significant of the many commission recommendations that were adopted was the establishment of the Executive Office of the President in 1937.

At the local level, the primary response to this recommendation was the adoption of the council-manager form of government (known as the city manager form in Illinois) which has been the form recommended for local governments by the Model City Charter published by the National Municipal Leagues now known as the National Civic League. This form of government was first adopted in Illinois by Glencoe in 1914 and was made available as an option for all Illinois cities and villages in 1951. A majority of all Illinois cities over 10,000 population now use this form. It has never been available as a statutory option for Illinois counties.

passed legislation making home rule optional under a plan providing for an elective chief executive officer. Despite this option, however, only Will County is operating under the chief executive form outlined in **Table Four**.

To encourage more counties to strengthen executive leadership, the legislature gave counties the option to elect the county board chair by an at-large vote of the electorate rather than by the members of the county board. This option has neither

Professionalization of administrative office holders. Government reformers have always urged the elimination of patronage to fill administrative offices,

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preferring instead to base administrative appointments on merit alone. This reform effort gave rise to the use of civil service systems and, more recently, merit systems to govern the recruitment, appointment, and retention of government workers. The adoption of such reforms led to the evolution of a university degree, called the Master of Public Administration (MPA), to provide government with the same quality of administrators that the business sector recruits from university Master of Business Administration (MBA) programs.

The rise and use of professionalism in Illinois has been mixed. Illinois' state government has had an inconsistent record, at best, in professionalizing government administration; most cities and villages in the 10,000 to 200,000 population range, and many smaller municipalities as well, now utilize professionally trained administrative leadership; most Illinois county governments do not.

Nonpartisan local government. The reform movement also recommended that the role of national political parties in local government affairs be minimized by electing local government officials on non-partisan ballots. No effort to adopt this reform was ever made in Illinois, either in cities or in counties. Informal rules took over, however, and most city governments are now elected on ballots in which candidates do not list a political party affiliation on the ballot. Political parties thus do not participate in most city or village elections in Illinois.

At the county level, however, candidates typically run for election to both elective offices and county board seats with a party identification listed on the ballot. Political parties are thus often active in

promoting their candidates in Illinois county elections.

How are county governments affected by partisan politics?⁸

Given that county elections are conducted on a partisan basis, the operation of county governments is surprisingly little affected by partisan politics. Where elected by county board members, county board chairs are typically elected from the membership of the majority party. But exceptions do occur. In DeKalb County, which has historically been dominated by Republican board members, the board in recent years has had an identical number of Republican and Democratic members. After considerable board discussion, a Democrat was elected board chair and the conduct of county business has continued without either rancor or significant partisan behavior.

County board chairs often assert that partisanship does not enter into board operating decisions, and they are not without evidence for that claim. A former chair of the DuPage County Board ran for election as a Republican "because it was the only way to get elected," but asserted that party membership was not relevant once the election was over and the board chair was selected. As discussed above, most of the business of county government does not lend itself to partisan differences. Pragmatism – and the limits of funding – are more powerful influences.

Partisanship has similarly not posed problems in the relationships between county boards and those county officeholders elected to office on a partisan electoral ticket. Such officers realize

that their funding comes from the county board and that, as a result, good relationships must be maintained. "Going along to get along" appears to be a maxim of county government.

In general, county elections are based on partisanship, but county affairs are managed on a non-partisan basis.

How well are counties managed?

This is a serious question for county government. In most counties, such major county programs as planning and zoning, economic development, highways, and nursing homes are still directed by committees of the county board – a mixture of legislative and executive functions abandoned long ago by other governments in the state and throughout the nation.

Many county elected and appointed officials acknowledge that it is difficult to work with or for a county board of 20 or more members, but many county board members do not share that perspective. To the contrary, they remind critics that large county boards provide better representation opportunities for rural residents and minorities. In the end, however, all parties acknowledge that better measures are needed to assess managerial effectiveness in county government.

What is the source of policy leadership in such an environment?

Even many successful county officials acknowledge that the absence of effective policy leadership is the chief operating problem confronting county governments. Except in counties with an elected chief executive officer, county organization schemes do not provide for

a clearly defined leadership position. Veteran county officials acknowledge that the use of an elected county executive is desirable: it centralizes administration and helps provide leadership. But the record also suggests that the executive form has done little to generate new ideas, solve problems, or produce more activist county governments.

Why is policy leadership lacking?

There are few incentives for county leaders – even for elected county chief executive officers – to take initiatives or assert leadership. While there are plenty of problems for leadership to address, counties – even more so than other governments – lack the fiscal resources to undertake major new policy initiatives. In an environment marked by a large county board, diffused administrative responsibility, limited resources, and other elected officeholders, the political task of building a support base sufficient to take significant action is daunting.

There is also limited political motivation to inspire political leadership. While taking leadership initiatives builds a broader public notoriety, it also builds opposition from those opposed to the initiative. Most county officers, doing a political cost/benefit analysis, forgo the difficult and potentially dangerous task of local policy leadership.

So how well do county governments operate?

The answer to this question lies in the eyes of the beholder. Some would argue, with much justification, that the 150 year old structure used to govern most Illinois counties does not adapt well to the

needs and demands facing contemporary governments.

Others would argue, also with some justification, that the absence of public concern with county government, and the relative absence of political controversies in most (but not all) Illinois counties, is evidence that voters are satisfied with county government. The argument would be more compelling if there was any evidence that voters knew or understood county government – or, indeed, even knew that county governments existed.

While not suggesting that county governments deserve praise, others would argue, again with justification, that they work well enough to get their jobs accomplished in a manner that does not provoke controversy or dissension.

Finally, there are those who would assert, with substantial justification, that, with structural modifications, county governments could do a much better job than is currently being accomplished in most of the state's counties.

What hope is there for modernization of Illinois county government?

There is one change taking place that does show promise for improved performance by county governments. That is the employment of professional local government administrators to assist with the management of county government.

The use of county administrators will be the focus of the second Policy Profile in this two-part series.

Endnotes

¹ U.S. Census Bureau, 2002 Census of Governments, Tables 45, 48, and 49. The gap between taxing and spending is made up by grants and fees for services.

² This opinion was consistently expressed by elected and appointed county officials interviewed for the preparation of this report.

³ This educational problem is discussed in full in: James M. Banovetz and Gary D. Glenn, *Illinois Public Education Undermines Democracy* (Northern Illinois University Center for Governmental Studies: Policy Profiles 4:1, April 2004). The publication can be found on the internet at www.cgsniu.org/publications/policy_profiles/policy_v4n1.pdf

⁴ Cook County is a special case. Its organizational format, a county executive form, is set forth in the Illinois Constitution, Article VII, section 3(d), section (4b). The provisions regarding elected county officeholders also apply to Cook County.

⁵ In this paper, the term “elected officeholder” refers to those officials elected at-large by the voters of the county to fill a specific county office, such as sheriff, clerk, treasurer, or assessor.

⁶ Unlike the rest of the state, which was settled largely by immigrants from New England and the mid-Atlantic states, the 17 counties at the state's southern tip were settled by immigrants from the southern states. These settlers developed a different organizational structure onto the lands they settled; early Illinois law accommodated such cultural differences by permitting the differing government forms.

⁷ *Baker v Carr*, 369 US 186 (1962)

⁸ This discussion, and that in the rest of this paper, does not apply to Cook County. Cook County is a special case and operates in an environment unique in Illinois county government

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The views expressed in this edition of *Policy Profiles* are those of the contributing authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Center for Governmental Studies or the officers and trustees of Northern Illinois University. For more information please contact jbanovetz@niu.edu.

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