

Political Process and Local Government Administration



City and County Government

Now as never before, Mississippians need a basic understanding of their local city and county political processes and governmental administration. City and county government is, after all, very close to everyone. It is to these local political units that citizens pay property taxes for schools and other services. Most people know that local government activity centers around the city hall and the county courthouse, but they may not fully appreciate what their local officials do or recognize how local government functions on their behalf.

Forms of Local Government

The organization of local government differs throughout the United States. County governments in Mississippi have a Board of Supervisors that is the chief governing body of the county, having five members who are elected for 4-year terms. Although there are some exceptions and variations, most municipal governments in Mississippi are of four basic types:

1. the weak mayor-council form (known in Mississippi as the mayor-board of aldermen form); used by approximately 95 percent of cities in Mississippi;
2. the strong mayor-council form (known in Mississippi as the mayor-council form);
3. the commission form; and
4. the council-manager form.

Duties of County Officials

County supervisors are responsible for general administration of county government.

The **tax assessor-collector** keeps records on all real estate and personal property declared as taxable, compiles a tax digest for the county, and receives taxes levied on county residents.

The **sheriff** is responsible for preserving the peace and protecting lives and property in the county, acts as an officer of the courts in serving court papers, and maintains the county jail.

The **coroner** is responsible for ascertaining the cause of death in unusual cases and ordering inquests as necessary.

Public school officials may include the board of education and superintendent as prescribed. These officials are responsible for providing elementary and secondary education for the county's residents.

The **chancery clerk** serves as clerk of the chancery court, keeps records and minutes for the court, and serves as clerk of the Board of Supervisors.

The **circuit clerk** serves as clerk of the circuit and youth courts, and keeps minutes and fills out the papers in each case.

Duties of Municipal Officials

The **mayor** is responsible for the general administration of city government. The mayor's duties and responsibilities will vary with the form of municipal government.

The **board of aldermen/city council** is the governing body of the city.

The **city manager** is responsible for carrying out the policy decisions of the mayor and the city council and administering the city government.

The **city clerk's** responsibilities vary with each type of municipal government, but generally the city clerk maintains city records.

The **city attorney** acts as legal advisor to the municipality, drafts ordinances and resolutions, and represents the city in legal proceedings.

The **public works director** is responsible for directing the operations of the public works department, which include maintaining streets and sewer, water, and sanitation systems.

The **planning commission** acts as an advisory body to the mayor, board of aldermen, and other city departments concerning land use and community development.

The Political Process: How It Works

The keystone of local government is the election process. This process allows for orderly changes in governmental administration and greater citizen participation in the political decisions made on their behalf.

How individuals are elected to office is greatly influenced by the local political situation; that is, whether a partisan or a nonpartisan situation exists. Whether the situation is partisan or nonpartisan, anyone who wants to run for a local governmental post must meet basic requirements and submit his or her name to the election commission. A primary election is held to decide the winner from among candidates of one political party. If there is no clear-cut majority of votes tallied for any one person, then a runoff election is held to determine the party winner.

A general election is held after the primary elections. The candidate receiving the most votes is declared elected and assumes office usually on the following January 1 in county government and July 1 in municipal government.

Educate yourself about your local governments and how they affect your day-to-day living, as well as your ultimate welfare. Learn how local government works and how you can contribute to it.

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