



WISCONSIN POLICY FORUM

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An Abundance of Governments

Report shows Wisconsin's special districts, towns contribute to multitude of local governments

Wisconsin had the 11th-most local governments of any state in 2017, due in part to a tenfold increase in the last five decades in special-district governments that manage lakes, sewers, and sanitation, according to a new report by the independent, nonpartisan Wisconsin Policy Forum.

The latest issue of *The Wisconsin Taxpayer*, “An Abundance of Governments,” finds like the rest of the upper Midwest, Wisconsin had more local governments – 3,096 – than most other states. This number is down slightly from 2012, according to the report, which relies in part on data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s Census of Governments. Still, Wisconsin ranked highly among states for local government units even after accounting for population.

The breakdown includes 72 counties, 1,852 municipalities (cities, villages, and towns), and 438 school districts (422 public school districts and 16 technical college districts), the report found. While the overall tally of counties, municipalities, and school districts has barely changed since the 1967 Census of Governments, the number of special district governments increased from 62 to 734. An interactive package accompanying the report allows readers to compare the number of governments in different parts of Wisconsin with other regions in the country.

The abundance of governments has made overlapping responsibilities a longstanding concern. In the early 2000s, a major state panel now known as the “Kettl Commission” (named after commission chairman Donald Kettl) argued greater clarity and cooperation was needed at the local level to boost efficiency and accountability. Our report finds that in recent years, there has been growing interest in service sharing as a means to boost efficiency without necessarily eliminating entire units of government.

The report found the number of governments in a state often depends on its history, and therefore is largely regional. The framework for European settlement of much of the Midwest was established in 1787 by the Northwest Ordinance, which created a structure for six-mile-by-six-mile towns or “townships” that remains in place today. In part because of this, states like Illinois, Minnesota, Ohio, and Michigan also rank near the top of the states for number of governments.

The WPF report also found:

- The number of school districts in the state decreased dramatically in the decades following World War II – from 6,569 in 1942 to 417 in 1972 – in response to the closing of “non-operating” districts and districts that had only one room and one teacher.

- Wisconsin had the seventh-most towns of any state – 1,251 – but still had fewer than Illinois, Minnesota, and Ohio. Of the 86 municipalities in Wisconsin that had a population above 10,000, only four were towns.
- The vast majority of the state’s special districts are lake, sanitation, or sewerage districts, or housing authorities. But a handful of newly-formed “long-term care districts” both take in and spend more than all other types of special districts governments – a reflection of the cost of distributing critical healthcare services to the elderly and disabled.

WPF notes local government consolidation and service sharing has been a state-level conversation going back even into the first half of the 20th century, signaling that this issue is far from new. Though the state has not seen a large increase in local governments since the 1997 Census of Governments, the report notes it’s worth considering ways in which Wisconsin’s large number of local governments might serve their constituents more efficiently and effectively.

A copy of “An Abundance of Governments” can be [downloaded here](#). The interactive package comparing the number of governments in Wisconsin with other states can be [found here](#).