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LOCAL GOVERNMENTS
A global presence?

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Introduction

As joint editors, we are conscious that this book is ambitiously titled. We set the contributors an enormous challenge; they have more than met that challenge.

Authors were invited to submit contributions of their own research findings and wider work about similar features of local government across different jurisdictions. These were then grouped into relevant sections to create a wide-ranging review of different features of local government internationally.

We have deliberately minimised binary two-country comparisons in favour of a wider-ranging approach. This is because we consider that there are distinctive elements of local government structure, form, and process that can be usefully compared, contrasted and discussed in a number of ways across a number of international boundaries and in the context of a variety of national cultures.

In doing this we wish to prompt readers to think of some research themes and questions that could develop further opportunities for multi-national study and research. All chapters offer the potential for further research opportunities and we discuss these possibilities further below.

Two examples of different aspects of representation will serve to illustrate some of the opportunities we see for further comparative research that could help develop a better understanding of local governments.

Boston, Massachusetts, has a city population of approximately 670,000; the council is governed by 13 councillors and an executive mayor. Liverpool, England, has a population of approximately 490,000; it is governed by 90 councillors and an executive mayor. There is limited work published and available on whether such differences lead to better, worse or simply different forms of governance; even whether such arrangements generate different workloads for the elected representatives involved (McGarvey and Stewart, Chapter 5, this volume).

In a number of countries across (mainly northern) Europe there has been a consistent long-term trend led by central governments to reduce the number of councils and, in doing so, make council areas larger. Sweden has, over several decades, reduced the number of councils from approximately 2,500 to under 300; Holland reduced the number of municipalities from more than a 1,000 to under 400 in the same timescale. In France and Italy there has been much more limited change in the number of councils. Over the past 70 years France has reduced the
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number of first-tier councils from approximately 38,000 to 35,000; in that same period Italy has increased the number of councils from approximately 7,800 to 8,000 (Magre and Pano, Chapter 28, this volume). However, in both France and Italy, there have been major changes applied or discussed in the intermediate tiers of government. In France, regions formally created in the 1980s have recently been merged and reduced in number. In Italy, structural change – a reduction in the number of regions – has been discussed but not implemented, and various regional bodies are proposing ad hoc changes to the already asymmetrical powers possessed by some Italian regions. It would be interesting to further explore why certain forms of institution such as the very many small local councils in France, Italy and Spain have lasted, whereas other forms of intermediate institutions have not been as durable. In some countries the most local and small of councils seem the great survivors; other sub-national institutions wax and wane in their relative status and number (De Ceuninck et al., Chapter 25, this volume).

As editors, our shared observation is that in different countries, within the respective resident academic communities, we often see a focus on a relatively limited range of local governments from an often-limited range of nation states. Two of the editors (Kerley and Liddle) share membership of the editorial board of Local Government Studies, published by Taylor & Francis in the United Kingdom. In each volume, the majority of articles are focused on specific local government jurisdictions that tend to be those of the UK, northern Europe, Australasia and North America. A review of similar geographically defined papers from the journal Lex Localis, (published in Slovenia) over the past five years, suggests that there is an emphasis on local government across a small number of countries and a particular concentration on Balkan and Eastern European countries. The Canadian Journal of Local Government and the Australian Journal of Public Administration both signal their editorial focus very clearly through their titles, and this reflects in their contents. Both understandably concentrate on articles related to their particular countries of origin. As Swianiewicz (2018) has recently observed, studies of territorial reform and the impact of that for collaboration between councils have tended to focus on northwestern Europe.

We have therefore not encouraged an over concentration on the most often researched forms of local government systems in a small number of countries, nor have we sought to discuss every form of local government in every nation state in the world. We anticipate this collection will provide a wider focus that can be of value in developing different frameworks of understanding about different aspects of local governments.

What do we mean by ‘local’?

As different studies have shown, citizens have different frames of reference describing their sense of community, or place-based allegiance.

People often simultaneously hold more than one geographic place reference in their head and they will use these in different ways to communicate with different agencies and different people. A man might describe himself as coming from ‘New York’ if speaking to a French colleague; to a fellow New Yorker he might say ‘Staten Island’. A woman who says she comes from Manchester is perhaps using the general description labelling the conurbation composed of more than 10 different local governments. That geographic term ‘Manchester’ is probably globally understood more through the impact of football than any awareness of local governments. These different senses of ‘local’ are also set against different operational and political/cultural assumptions about the appropriate scale of governments (in terms of landmass, population and local revenues), that have some responsibility for locally delivered and organised functions.
For the various functional responsibilities of local governments globally, there are different assumptions about scale, degree of local discretion that can be exercised within the confines of constitutional or legislative authority, and the manner in which local government units are structured and organised.

The forms of structure and governance are often dependent upon historical legacy and cultural assumptions. In Germany, the states are responsible for most public education, principally as a reaction to events in twentieth-century German history. In most of the constituent states of the USA, school districts, independent of local councils, remain autonomous entities responsible for schooling, with the original motivation of removing universal school education from ‘political’ influence (Benton, Chapter 13, this volume). In Finland and South Korea, education is managed by agencies of the nation state. In the United Kingdom, education systems are different in each of the four constituent countries.

Whatever the actual form of governance and actual tier of institutional responsibility for public services and decisions on regulation and resources, there are very few nation states where the central governing state alone assumes responsibility for all provision and all decisions in a given geography.

Therefore, the most common reflection of the importance of ‘local’ is the almost universal extent to which various forms of geographically defined sub-national state administrative or political divisions are found in countries throughout the world. This is regardless of whether these are jurisdictions with large land mass and populations greater than one billion, or the smallest state entities, with populations of fewer than 50,000 (Hassall et al., Chapter 9, this volume). Some form of local entity can be found in almost every nation state in the world; even North Korea has localised arrangements of ‘administrative divisions’ that are designated in various ways.

The extent, size, formal hierarchy and degree of independence of such localised divisions varies widely. It is apparent that almost every nation state has found some need to create local divisions of some form or another. This has been either as part of historic legacy – ‘shires’, for example – or is seen as a necessary political development as part of social and institutional development process, sometimes encouraged by international bodies. The creation of such local divisions has happened recently in South Sudan. In Pakistan various changes have occurred over the period since Partition, and the most recent changes to local government have included reservation of some decision making places by gender, religion and social class.

The terminology applied to describe such administrative divisions varies widely. This does however confirm such sub-state divisions – usually referred to as ‘local governments’ – with various mixtures of authority, responsibilities, and power are a near universal phenomenon (Hassall et al., Chapter 9, this volume). The only nation state that does not appear to have such sub-divisions of any kind is the Vatican City – the smallest state in the world.

Where there are such local divisions across many countries, we can often find a coherence of both structure and terminology; so ‘counties’ typically encompass a greater area than do ‘municipalities’. However, large cities often have distinct forms of government that recognise their sheer scale and economic influence. In some instances, and in some jurisdictions, the term ‘city’, which most would typically take to denote an urban centre of some population size, has been attached to entities with very small populations. Missouri, for example, has entities described as cities that range from a population of over 500,000 to under 100 people. There are also occasional oddities such as the usage in Alaska of the term ‘borough’ for local governments, including the mixed and widely distributed non-contiguous areas of ‘Unorganized Borough’, where more than 80,000 people live.
There is no standard universal form of localised division; one common feature however, is that such divisions, however they are titled, have a major role in delivering a range of public services, providing facilities, and regulating various aspects of social life (Mafrolla, Chapter 15, this volume).

Hesse and Sharpe (1991: 608) observe that ‘local governments ... play a major role in the delivery of fundamental collective public and quasi-public goods’. The authors confine their comment to local government in the ‘Western industrialised world’, but we would argue that this observation now holds more widely and across a wider range of countries than at the time it was first made. Changing patterns of nation state authority and global power have been accompanied by the growth of the varied forms of institution that comprise local governments globally, the services provided and functions fulfilled.

One other significant aspect of the word ‘local’ is to be found in the extent to which there are variations of organisational architecture and form within the jurisdiction of one nation state. This is not surprising in hard federal jurisdictions, where the structural architecture and processes of local governments would be expected to vary widely as between a number of states or provinces. This is clearly the case in the USA and Germany, for example, where the number of councillors in different councils – and their form of governance – varies widely between different states.

However, many countries have minor variations of governance that depart from the broad norm because of particular historic, geographic, demographic, social and economic features (Schoburgh, Chapter 12, this volume; Bissessar, Chapter 8, this volume). Sometimes such features create forms of local governments that have inherited legacy structural arrangements from previous generations of society and government.

It does seem to be the case that this is often pronounced in nation states that have a legacy of either former imperial power, or quasi-imperial power. The end of empire has often resulted in untidiness (Nickson, Chapter 10, this volume). The Netherlands has three ‘special municipalities’, which are in the Caribbean. France has departments and communes in the Indian Ocean, in South America, and off the coast of Canada. Spain has two autonomous cities in Morocco, Ceuta and Melilla. Both the US and the UK have complex relationships with a variety of detached island territories. In some long established nation states, even in core geographies, variation has often been historically present, particularly in relation to the capital city. Paris, for example, had no elected mayor between 1793 and 1977 and was directly run by the French government, perhaps because of a continuing residual elite fear of the power of the Paris ‘street’. Washington, DC had no mayor until 1973 and no representation up to then in the national legislature. Mexico City and the Australian Capital Territory are similarly located on land areas with governance arrangements unlike that of other states within the two respective countries.

London is the capital city of the United Kingdom, and has long been the subject of debate on appropriate forms of governance and the office of Mayor of London was only created in the 1990s. Nested inside the boundaries of London is the City of London, which has a night-time population of around 9,000, and an archaic franchise based on medieval trade arrangements. It does, nevertheless, have extensive powers, including the operation of its own police force (the smallest in the UK). In nation states that have very remote and sparsely populated areas, there are variations of governance, provision of services and control of financial resources (Kitchen and Slack 2004). Canada, Brazil, Australia, and some other countries all have variations of standard structure and organisations in their more remote ‘territories’.

While such historic curiosities can arouse intense interest among campaigners and scholars, they appear to be of no great significance to the general population living in such jurisdictions. ‘Local’ can therefore have many meanings that vary even within nation states and certainly vary across national jurisdictions.
Local governments: a global presence?

What do we mean by ‘government’?

In considering ‘local governments’ we have assumed that the word ‘government’ usually implies aspects of two key features that are widely observed. These are some form of democratic accountability through the periodic election of the ultimate decision makers responsible for governance, and therefore their capacity to reflect views on behalf of those who elect them. The other factor is some degree of local discretion over the exercise of functions that such a body has. Whatever the formal mechanics of representation, we have taken it as axiomatic that the term government implies this periodic election of the ultimate decision makers in those local governments rather than their appointment by others such as a government minister.

However, there are, as we indicate above, always the possibility of localised variation that mediates various features of local government and that are often historically and culturally embedded and broadly accepted, though often the subject of some intermittent discussion about possible change. So in Holland, mayors of local municipalities are appointed by the government, not elected.

The possibility of elected representatives being removed or suspended from office (regardless of the status of that office) is complex in many jurisdictions and often clear provision is not well established, perhaps in the hope that any such necessity will not arise. In some countries, there is provision for recall elections. Elsewhere, the direct removal of elected councillors for no clearly defined legal reason is usually a consequence of some quasi- dictatorial intervention in politics (Hassall and Mae, Chapter 4, this volume).

The other aspect of the power that we associate with government is the extent to which such local governments can be instructed on what actions to take, or to have their actions countermanded through the administrative decision of a superior body or official. This leaves open however, some questions about respective spheres and tiers of government where there is some superordinate responsibility and authority that relates to the decisions of elected representatives.

In France, local communes are often assumed to have considerable autonomy; however, the office of departmental prefect has authority over a range of functions that can, in some cases, directly contradict the intended purpose of the various local councils within the department. He or she is also the official authorised to review the ‘legality’ of decisions and actions by local governments.

In the territorial communities of the Republic, the State representative, representing each of the members of the Government, shall be responsible for national interests, administrative supervision and compliance with the law.

(Constitution of France, 1958, Article 72)

In 2017, the Prefecture in Nouvelle Aquitaine prohibited by decree some councils from operating beach showers because of water shortages (Kerley, field observation). More significantly, French prefectural authority was used to relocate refugees in France regardless of the wishes of local mayors (Chrisafis 2016). A similar superordinate process of direction occurred throughout Germany during the refugee inflow of 2015–2016. Local governments in both France and Germany are often cited as autonomous bodies with considerable local discretion by campaigners elsewhere who envy their supposed greater and legally protected autonomy.

In various US states, different state governments appear to exercise such powers most frequently in the suspension of school boards because of continuing poor educational achievements across the jurisdiction. The School District in Philadelphia has been under state control
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since 2001 (Economist 2018). In Italy, some 200 or more councils have been suspended by state decree because of criminal activity.

A further factor that could be considered important is the extent to which local governments have some form of constitutional protection or entrenchment. This is often considered to be an important corollary of democratic provenance and accountability; citizens are confident that they are casting their votes for a body that cannot simply be abolished. Certainly, this matter is often returned to in academic and policy discussions in the different local governments of the United Kingdom. In preparation for the creation of the Scottish Parliament in the late 1990s, one study (Hughes et al. 1998) examined the constitutional status of various local government forms in different nation states. They observed, in relation to France, that the retention of so many small councils was less a matter of constitutional barrier in that:

In theory the French Parliament does have the power to regulate local government at will. In practice the French communes and departmental councils have a popular ‘legitimacy’ that few British local authorities would claim.

(Hughes et al. 1998: 6)

The same authors also refer in their study to Sweden as a country where any change to the constitutional position of local government (as with other constitutional changes) has to be approved in two parliamentary sessions with a general election intervening. They cite this as an indication that local government has a higher order of constitutional protection than in some other jurisdictions. In contrast, a study by two Swedish authors (Erlingsson and Ödalen 2013) is politely dismissive of this notion of constitutional protection for local government, asserting that if national governments wish to make changes, and have sufficient parliamentary votes, then they can. Whatever the formal position, the reference above to the continuing reduction of the number of Swedish councils suggest that such constitutional protection is, in practice, limited.

In the United States, where public reference to foundational documents appears a near constant feature of daily life, and in Australia (Aulich, Chapter 24, this volume), the Commonwealth constitution is silent on any local government arrangements, as is the case in the USA. The State of New York (2000: iii) argues that:

It is implicit in the idea of the federal system, however, that the states, in the exercise of the powers reserved to them by the United States Constitution, would provide for local government in ways which would take into account local diversities and needs . . . Local governments have become in fact, as well as theory, a third level of the federal system.

**Government or administration?**

Because of our emphasis on ‘government’ we have not sought contributions that have exclusively considered local ‘administration’ in the sense of functions of central government that are operationally provided on a distributed and localised basis. In the case of some changing and developing systems of local government (Vashakidze, Chapter 16, this volume; Hassall and Mae, Chapter 4, this volume), these are sometimes inter-related with the competences of local governments. In other instances, the re-shaping of the overall architecture of a state and the manner in which processes and functions are changing has implications for both local governments and localised forms of operational administration (Anderson, Chapter 29, this volume).
The distinction between the powers, responsibilities, and functions of different tiers and spheres in government and the way that is reflected in operational practice is acknowledged in documents such as European Charter of Local Self-Government (effective from 1988):

It is not possible to define precisely what affairs local authorities should be entitled to regulate and manage. Expressions such as ‘local affairs’ and ‘own affairs’ were rejected as too vague and difficult to interpret. The traditions of member states as to the affairs which are regarded as belonging to the preserve of local authorities differ greatly.

(Article 3)

In some fields, such as the provision of various aspects of health care, there clearly are many diverse forms of organisational architecture in different nation states. We can therefore often see a range of arrangements with differing and shared responsibilities and functional overlap (Robertson et al. 2014).

**Are local governments important?**

There are a number of aspects to the degree of importance we can ascribe to various spheres and tiers of local government in different countries. We might consider political salience to citizens, career options and progression for politicians, policy developments and advancing possible legislative and other changes, in addition to the sheer range of services provided to citizens.

Some years ago, a documentary series about French rural life, broadcast on Channel 4 in the United Kingdom, reported one resident’s view about the importance of decisions made at that local level. She compared decisions about elections in her village (one of those 30,000 small communes) to the significance of what is sometimes described as the ‘monarchical’ presidency that is established in France: ‘It’s the mayor who affects your life not the President . . . in Presidential elections your vote counts for nothing . . . but in village elections every vote counts’ (A French Affair 2003).

Paradoxically, in many countries the importance attached by this resident to voting in village elections is gainsaid by electoral engagement – as indeed it is in France when we assess electoral turnout. Even in countries with a tradition of high electoral turnout, and even where elections to the national parliament and local councils are coterminous (Sweden for example), the votes cast for local government will typically be several points below the national vote. Of course, such levels of electoral engagement and voter turnout vary from country to country, as well as between tiers of government (Potluka et al., Chapter 23, this volume).

Whatever the comparative degree of engagement, and allowing for the reality that voting for local governments is widely seen by many citizens as less electorally important than national elections, local government can be seen as a bellwether for national political trends. During 2017, a shift in local elections in South Africa was seen as significant for the prospects of former President Zuma. In Italy, however previous electoral success of the Five Star movement in local elections in some big cities proved counterproductive, as the newly elected representatives appeared to manage civic affairs very badly.

In the United Kingdom, central government decisions about local government and the possibility of devolution to sub-central government led to the loss an election for the Labour government of James Callaghan in 1979. Decisions about changing local government taxation contributed to the end of the premiership of Margaret Thatcher in 1981.

Sub-central governments have also been important career steps for some leading politicians and, indeed, for the development of some political parties. President Widdodo of Indonesia
has been a city mayor and governor of a province; four recent US presidents have been state governors; Prime Minister May of the United Kingdom was a borough councillor; Willi Brandt came to national prominence in Germany as mayor of West Berlin; President Nieto of Mexico has been a state governor; and the prime minister of India, Mr Modi, has been chief minister of Gujarat.

Although success in sub-central government elections has apparently not been that helpful for the Five Star movement, in various countries (notably Germany and Scotland) Green parties have leveraged footholds in local governments and various forms of sub-national governments to build political support. The early breakthrough of the National Front in France was in municipal elections.

In cross national and international networking, politicians in sub-central governments of all forms can advance policy causes they consider important to their jurisdiction and their citizens through their public voice and discretionary authority. In the United States, we have seen cities and states arguing that they will advance preventative environmental measures and remediation of past damage; even President Trump and congress do not intend to. Some cities in the USA have explicitly sought to create ‘sanctuary status’ to protect people whose residence status is disputed.

City mayors globally and public pension funds such as Calpers (California), one of the largest activist public pension funds, have collectively sought to influence invested companies in matters such as the environment, financial sustainability, and human rights.

In Japan, local governments have, for some time been trying to alter local population flows using financial incentives to attract younger residents into ageing towns and cities (Economist 2017).

The basis for such influence remains rooted in the locally representative role that local and sub-central governments fulfil on a daily basis, providing services to citizens. In various places, this ranges from maintaining and cleaning streets, educating children, public safety, making provision for older people and those with disabilities, and in most localities, ultimately taking the responsibility for those who die without family or friends to determine and pay for their funeral arrangements.

Such local governments also regulate a wide range of activities and functions for the well-being of their residents across a full spectrum of everyday necessities: such as street vendors, taxi drivers, various trades and professions, building codes and land use, and food hygiene. German cities have recently secured constitutional court agreement to institute limitations on diesel cars. Local governments in various countries (using licensing powers) have been central to challenging the Uber growth and operating model.

In all developed countries, and many developing countries, when members of a household go out each morning, their daily activities—from walking on a pavement to buying a coffee, or benefiting from street lighting on their journey home at night—are contingent on the powers and provision of their various local governments.

We hope that readers of the following chapters will get a wider insight into such vital matters as they read the contributions collected here. We also hope that readers will be prompted to develop their own further research ideas and projects.

The structure of this book

This handbook is organised into six sections. Our allocation and grouping of chapters to sections has a degree of ‘best fit.’ As you will see, some chapters naturally locate themselves, while others could be placed in more than one section.
Local governments: a global presence?

**Elected roles and governance**

We start with the core of local governments; election and service as an elected representative. Three of the chapters here consider the relationship between the views of elected representatives and appointed officials or, in relation to communities where traditional roles are still socially and culturally important, the balance between election and the assumption of ultimate decision making power.

**Local government jurisdictions**

As we suggest above, if readers wish to review a catalogue of local government structures in various countries they might usefully start with a collection such as the *Commonwealth Local Government Handbook 2015/16* (Commonwealth Local Government Forum 2016), or go to the website of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (www.ccre.org) to obtain coverage of almost 100 countries in all. This section has chapters that review less-noticed groups of local governments or that take an unusual perspective on aspects of local government in more frequently studied countries.

**Range of local government services**

Local governments globally provide a wide range of public services, either at their own hand, commissioned from other providers, or in some form of partnership with a variety of legal and civic society entities. This range changes over time as societies and governments mature and develop and there is no fixed pattern, even within federal sub-national or national jurisdictional boundaries.

**Citizen engagement**

The chapters gathered in this section discuss established and emergent forms of citizen participation, with instances examined and reviewed across a total of 16 very different societies and to very different purposes.

**Multi-level governance**

The yearning expressed by some for a neat and clean division of responsibilities between different spheres and tiers of government appears to be impossible to achieve, even were it desirable to do so. This occurs even in those nation states that have formal written constitutions that appear to provide some specific direction on ‘which does what’. However, tensions exist, and responsibilities sometimes shift between different spheres and tiers as partnerships and collaborations mutate and transform.

**Getting and spending**

These chapters review how some local governments raise money, whether through their own local resources and with some degree of discretion, and monies transferred through some forms of equalisation grant. We also have a chapter that looks at how that expenditure is assessed by other governments, even when quite properly and legitimately spent, and a chapter on challenging corruption in emergent democratic regimes.

We hope you find all the chapters interesting.

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Notes

1 We have used UK English language terminology throughout this collection, with some exceptions. In some chapters a glossary of terms and translations is provided.
2 We have counted in excess of 30 such terms in the English language alone.

References