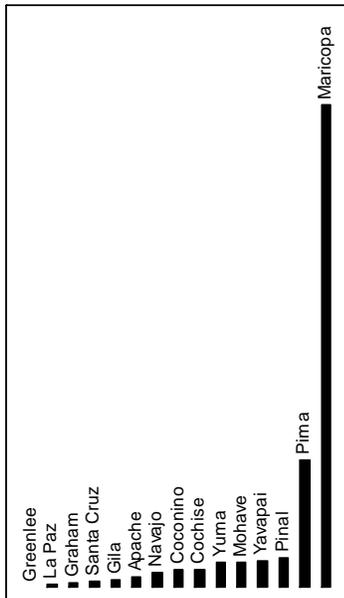


# ARIZONA LOCAL GOVERNMENT FACTSHEET

## Arizona local governments

|                 |         |
|-----------------|---------|
| Counties:       | 15      |
| Municipalities: | 89      |
| Towns:          | 44      |
| Cities:         | 45      |
| Districts       | 16,000+ |
| School dist.    | 231     |

## Counties by population



## Population facts:

- **Maricopa County** is the nation's 4<sup>th</sup> largest county
- **Phoenix** is the nation's 5<sup>th</sup> largest city
- **Phoenix, Tucson, Mesa, Scottsdale, Chandler, Glendale, Tempe, Gilbert,** and **Peoria** are Arizona's largest cities (in descending order); all have over 100,000 people.
- **Gilbert** grew by a record 265% from 1990 to 2000—the fastest growth of any American city

**Arizona's local governments** Roughly 17,000 local governments operate within Arizona's borders. These include **counties**, **municipalities** (cities and towns), and **districts**. There are also 21 tribal governments in Arizona. However, the latter derive their authority from the national government and are largely beyond the state's control. Local governments are not sovereign governments. Rather, they are "creatures of the state." According to a principle known as **Dillon's rule**, local governments can exercise only the powers expressly granted to them by the state's constitution and laws. Some local governments enjoy greater autonomy through **home rule**. They achieve home rule by adopting a **charter** (similar to a constitution). A charter lets them operate under their own governing structure in lieu of the generic structure dictated by state law. It also gives these governments more power to independently tax and regulate. None of Arizona's 15 counties enjoy home rule, but 20 of its cities have charters.

**County governments** County governments developed at a time when cities were small and far flung. The state could not efficiently perform core functions such as law enforcement and tax assessment from the state capital. And it would have been wasteful for every small community to assume these responsibilities on its own. Accordingly, counties were established as **administrative arms of the state**—i.e., to provide state services on a more efficient regional basis. Arizona's counties still perform a variety of important state services for all residents (see sidebar "What counties do.") In addition, counties now furnish "city-type" services for those living in **unincorporated areas**—county land that is not within the boundaries of any city or town.

Arizona's counties have a **traditional county commission** structure. Power is divided between an elected **board of supervisors** and separately elected officials (sheriff, county attorney, assessor, recorder, treasurer, superintendent of schools, and clerk of the superior court). Larger counties have five-member boards, while the smaller counties have three-member boards. Supervisors are elected from separate districts within the county. All county officials have four-year terms that coincide with the presidential election cycle. The board of supervisors determines the county's annual budget, sets the county's tax rates, enacts ordinances, hires and oversees other county employees, and adjudicates zoning and other appeals.

In modern times, counties have struggled to fulfill their responsibilities. A common criticism of Arizona's county government is that it is "headless." There is no single county leader comparable to a governor, mayor, or strong city manager. The sheriff, county attorney, and other elected officials sometimes run their departments like independent fiefdoms, overspending their budgets, and pursuing their own agendas. Arizona's counties also have chronic fiscal problems. They are saddled with very costly functions such as operating jails and hospitals, and providing indigent healthcare. County property taxes (which are now subject to voter-imposed limits) are inadequate to cover these costs, and counties are typically less successful than cities in attracting state and federal funding. Counties are also hamstrung by Dillon's rule. Finally, the qualifications for most county offices are low, and the voters do not always choose officials with sufficient expertise. In 1992, after Maricopa County teetered on the verge of bankruptcy and was labeled the "worst government in America," the state allowed counties to adopt home rule. However, the voters in both Maricopa and Pima county rejected the proposed reforms, fearing that home rule would lead to higher taxes and less accountable officials.

**What counties do:**

- Assess & collect property taxes
- Conduct elections & maintain voter registration records
- Operate jails
- Prosecute state crimes (county attorney)
- Operate superior & justice (JP) courts
- Administer welfare & social programs
- Operate county hospitals & provide indigent health care
- Administer public health programs & inspections
- Administer air pollution & environmental programs
- Maintain property records
- Build and maintain bridges & roads
- Operate county fairs, parks, libraries, & agricultural extension services

*“City” services provided to unincorporated areas:*

- Law enforcement (sheriff)
- Provide utilities (e.g., water, sewer, trash collection, electricity, gas, irrigation, land-fill)
- Fire protection
- Provide public housing
- Make and enforce zoning, subdivision & subdivision regulations
- Regulate traffic, public nuisances, building safety

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**Municipalities** Cities and towns provide indispensable modern services such as police and fire protection, water and sewer, trash collection, street maintenance, traffic control, public transportation, zoning regulation, etc. (One important function that Arizona municipalities do not control is the operation of public schools—schools are run by independent district governments). Although Arizona has always been urban, one-third of its present-day municipalities did not legally exist prior to 1960.

Cities and towns are technically called **municipal corporations**. In Arizona, the difference between a city and town is the complexity of government and size: towns require a minimum population of 1,500; cities need 3,000 people. In contrast to counties, most Arizona cities use the **council-manager** form of government that is preferred by urban experts. It originated in the early twentieth century as a Progressive alternative to the traditional mayor-centered government. In fact, Phoenix was one of the first cities in the nation to embrace this reform. The council-manager form of government emphasizes professional management over electoral politics. Power is divided between an elected city council and a powerful, professional city manager appointed by the council. The council’s job is to set broad policies. The city manager actually runs the city by hiring and supervising city personnel, preparing the budget, and recommending policies to the council. Although Arizona’s council-manager governments have mayors, the mayor typically has no greater voting power than other council members. In some cities the mayor is chosen by the members of the council themselves, although many charter cities have mayors who are directly elected by the voters. With the exception of Tucson and South Tucson, city elections are **nonpartisan** to reduce the politics in local governance. Finally, in most Arizona cities the mayor and council are elected on an **at-large** (citywide basis) to control **NIMBY** behavior (“not in my backyard”). However, in recent years Phoenix, Glendale, Mesa, and other larger charter cities have returned to the district (“ward”) system for electing council members.

**Districts** Unlike counties and municipalities, districts exist to perform a single function for the residents and businesses located within the district’s boundaries. Arizona has **special districts, school districts, and community college districts**. Fire districts are the most common special districts, followed by water improvement districts and irrigation districts. Special districts are also formed to run hospitals, libraries, stadiums, or to provide electricity, flood control, and numerous other services. These governments typically have the power to tax property owners and borrow funds through the sale of bonds. Most special districts are governed by elected boards. (Counties and municipalities govern thousands more special districts which provide neighborhood improvements such as street lighting.) Special districts can be any size, and their boundaries can cross city and county lines. There are several reasons why this form of government is popular: Districts don’t burden all the taxpayers for services benefiting a limited area. Districts promote local control. Districts can more efficiently address regional problems that extend beyond city and county boundaries. And districts provide a way to evade the constitutional debt restrictions that apply to counties and municipalities.

Arizona currently has 231 elementary, high school and unified (combined) school districts. Each district is governed by a three- or five-member elected board consisting of unpaid citizen volunteers. School board members are chosen in nonpartisan elections and serve staggered four-year terms. The actual day-to-day management of the school district rests with a full-time appointed superintendent who serves at the board’s pleasure. Finally, Arizona also has ten community college districts whose boundaries largely coincide with county lines. Each district is governed by a five-person board elected in nonpartisan elections from individual precincts within the district.