

Components of Local Government

Local government in towns and cities provide services to the people who live there. Activities explore democracy in local government through town meetings, open meeting laws, electing people to school board and other local offices, and in cooperative organizations and worker/employee owned companies. Local governments face the public policy question whether to designate themselves as safe or sanctuary cities. A media literacy activity examines how digital democracy is evolving through social media.

Standard 6.10: Components of Local Government

Explain the major components of local government in Massachusetts. (Massachusetts Curriculum Framework for History and Social Studies) [8.T6.10]



Image by [Kevin Norris](#) from [Pixabay](#)

Look at a map of the United States and you will see **towns and cities** in every part of every state. The [Census Bureau](#) considers towns and cities to be **incorporated places** that "expand (or contract) over time as population and commercial activity increases (or decreases)" ([Understanding Place in Census Bureau Products](#), slide 3).

19,000+ Cities and Towns

There are over **19,000 incorporated places** in the country, each with its own local government. Places with a population of 50,000 or more are generally considered to be cities. New York City is the nation's largest with more than 8.6 million people.

Massachusetts has 50 cities and 301 towns (see [Forms of Local Government: Commonwealth of Massachusetts](#)).

Local governments have an executive (a Select Board or a Mayor) and legislative branch (a town meeting or town/city council), depending on the size of the community (see the [local government organizational chart](#) from Mass Audubon).

500,000 People Elected to Office

It has been estimated that [voters elect over 500,000 individuals](#) to local government from mayors to school boards, city council members, and many other positions. In March 2023, for example, one Massachusetts town alone elected two Select Board members, one moderator, one town clerk, one constable, one Board of Health member, one elementary school committee member, two regional school committee members, two library trustees, one water commissioner, one cemetery commissioner, one veteran and one non-veteran member of the Trustee of Soldiers Memorial, and one Housing Authority member ([North Quabbin Notebook](#), *The Recorder*, December 9, 2022).

96% of those elected to government positions nationwide are elected locally. On average, more than two-thirds of those candidates [run for office unopposed](#), giving voters no choice as to who wins. The impact these officials have on people's daily lives can be huge.

You can learn more at [Who Runs the Show? Understanding Your Local Government from Cincinnati Public Radio](#) (2019).

Modules for this Standard Include:

1. [INVESTIGATE: Town Meetings, Open Meeting Laws, Running for School Boards and other Local Offices](#)
 - MEDIA LITERACY CONNECTIONS: Local Governments, Social Media and Digital Democracy
2. [UNCOVER: Democratic Decision Making in Cooperative Organizations and Worker-Owned Companies](#)
3. [ENGAGE: Should Communities Declare Themselves Safe or Sanctuary Cities?](#)

1. INVESTIGATE: Town Meetings, Open Meeting Laws, Running for School Boards and other Local Offices

People's direct participation in local government is a hallmark of democracy. In this section, we look at three ways citizens can become directly involved in local government: Town Meetings, Open Meeting Laws and People's Remote Participation, and Running for Local Offices, including school boards.

Town Meetings

The **town meeting** is one of our most enduring political legacies from colonial America. A town meeting happens when members of a community gather to discuss issues and make decisions about them.*



Town meeting, Huntington, Vermont, 2006

[A Town Meeting in Huntington, Vermont](#), by Redjar, licenced under [CC BY-SA 2.0](#)

A town meeting is a form of **direct democracy** in which people from the town, rather than elected representatives, make decisions about government policies and practices. Read the [Rules of a Town Meeting](#).

The earliest recorded town meeting was in Dorchester, Massachusetts, October 8, 1633. In colonial America, only White males participated in town meetings.

Today, communities in Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts and Connecticut, and in the western part of the United States hold town meetings where everyone can attend and speak, although only registered voters can vote. In Vermont, [Town Meeting Day](#) is a designated once-a-year public holiday.

Switzerland is the only other country in the world with town meetings. Every Swiss community, from alpine villages to the city of Zurich, has town meeting governance. In Swiss communities with large populations, a local parliament replaces the all-community member meeting (Clark & Teachout, 2012).

There are two types of town meetings in the United States: Open and Representative.

- **Open town meetings** are held in towns with less than 6,000 people.
 - A board of selectmen reads a list of issues to be voted on.
 - A moderator runs the meeting, explains each issue, and holds the vote for each issue.
 - The meetings are run on [Parliamentary Procedure](#).
 - Votes are taken on a voice basis, not a written ballot.
- **Representative town meetings** are held in towns with more than 6,000 people.
 - Townspeople elect representatives to vote for them, acting similarly to a town council.
 - The number of town meeting members depends on town population.



Photograph by Torrey Trust

The time-honored traditions of New England-style town meetings were upended by the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout the spring of 2020, communities struggled to hold town meetings while upholding state and local policies and Centers for Disease Control (CDC) guidelines that recommended limiting large gatherings of people while maintaining social distancing protocols. Some towns chose to meet virtually on Zoom. Others opted for outdoor meetings on high school football fields; others chose large indoor facilities where social distancing could be maintained. Not everyone found the process either productive or fair. One parent in a western Massachusetts community called it "democracy only for those with access to transportation; child care; time; agency to speak long after your stated limit is up" ([Goodman, 2020, para. 4](#)).

In fact, the pandemic only heightened the already-present complexities of town meetings in today's society where not every community member has the time or resources to participate in making decisions in face-to-face meetings held in the evening or on a weekend. The future of town meeting-style direct democracy is still to be decided, but new formats that offer more ways for more people to participate may be needed.

*Note: The term "town meeting" is also used in modern political campaigns where candidates meet face-to-face with voters to present ideas and answer questions from the audience. Television networks often televise these as "town meetings" when they are held by presidential candidates.

Open Meeting Laws and People's Remote Participation

Many of the most important activities of local government happen in public meetings, such as those held by town and city councils, school committees, planning boards, and recreation commissions. People's access to these governmental activities are based on **Open Meeting Laws** (also known as **Sunshine Laws**) that require public meetings as well as records and decisions from those meetings be open to the public. The intent is to ensure that government officials are not allowed to make policies behind closed doors out of the view of community members.

Open meeting laws have not always been the case in the United States. It was not until 1976 that all states and the District of Columbia passed laws giving the public access **(in many cases limited)** to meetings. Under these laws, people have a right to attend, but are not guaranteed a right to speak ([Open Meeting Laws and Freedom of Speech](#), First Amendment Encyclopedia). Learn more about [Open Meeting Law in Massachusetts](#).

In many communities, individuals with disabilities, older citizens, parents with young children, and people working long hours or more than one job have been underrepresented or absent entirely from public meetings.

While the COVID-19 virus has made it more difficult for people to participate in the in-person activities of local government, the COVID-19 pandemic has also forced many communities to create online formats where community members can attend public meetings remotely. As the pandemic recedes, cities and towns have the option of allowing for both in-person and remote attendance to public meetings, a move many commentators believe will enhance public participation and confidence in government. What are the policies for public meetings in your community? Would you be more likely to attend a meeting if you could participate virtually?

Local School Board Elections

Local school boards (also known as school committees) are one of the most important components of local government and a tremendously influential part of the American educational system. A school board is a legal agency “created for the purpose of implementing state legislative policy concerning public schools and locally administering the state's system of public education” ([School Boards](#), n.d., para 6).

School boards control the day-to-day operation of schools in their districts, setting policies on everything from staffing, equipment purchases, school start and end times, finance and expenditures, and extracurricular activities. During the COVID-19 pandemic, school boards around the nation were involved in debates and disputes about masks and vaccinations as well as threats to teacher safety and issues around what should and should not be taught in schools.

Across the country, most school board members (about 90%) are democratically elected; while some members are appointed. The Los Angeles Unified School District – with more than 600,000 students – has an elected 7 member school board. In some places, notably big city school systems, mayors have great control of school boards and how educational decisions are made. Despite their power to impact educational policy and practice, school board elections generally attract little public attention with as few as 10% of eligible voters actually voting.



[Township High School District 211 Board Meeting](#) by [Mysterymanblue](#) is under [CC0 1.0](#)

Given the importance of school boards, who runs for these positions?

Candidates must be 18 years-old, allowed to vote, and living in the school district. No degree or experience is required. Most school board positions are part-time and unpaid. [Ballotpedia has data on 2,803 elections](#) for school board seats

from 2018 to 2020 in the 200 largest school districts and the districts in the nation's 100 largest cities. Between 57% and 61% of incumbents won; 35% to 40% of the elections were unopposed.

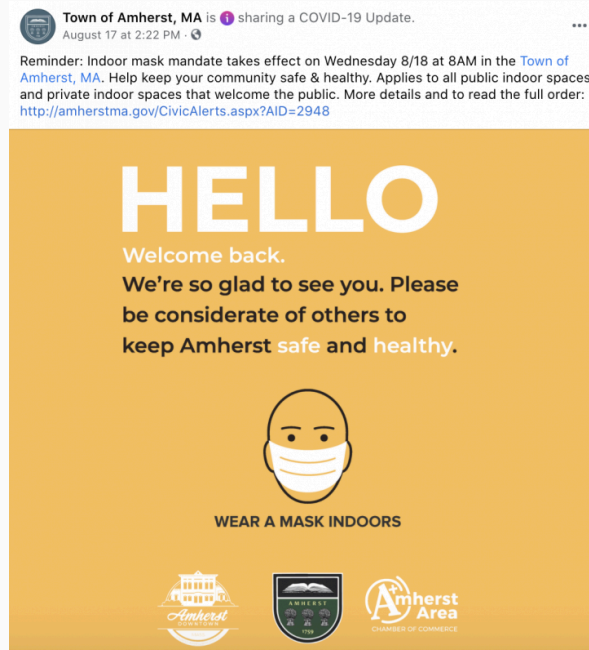
More and more people as well as politically motivated special interest groups are paying attention to local school board elections. The organization Right Wing Watch has reported that well-funded groups are encouraging conservative-minded individuals to run for local school boards to implement policies including anti-critical race theory curriculum, book censorship, and other changes ([Flux](#), August 14, 2021). At the same time, progressive groups are promoting their own candidates, particularly young people recently out of high school to bring youth- and student-centered viewpoints to the decision-making table ([Urgent Call: Get Out the Vote for School Board Elections](#)).

Questions to consider:

- Who serves on school boards in your community?
- Do school boards in your community or your state have student members?
 - ([Among the 495 U.S. Largest School Districts, 14% Have Student Board Members](#), National School Boards Association, February 2021, para. 7)
- When is the next election and who is running for a seat on the board?
- What would be your campaign message and issues if you were to run for school board in your community?

Media Literacy Connections: Local Governments, Social Media and Digital Democracy

Social media has been hailed as a way to promote what has been called **digital democracy** (or e-democracy or e-government). In theory, online access will give everyone in a community opportunities to express their views and influence public policy. The record to date has been far less than that, as one researcher noted, "democratic institutions have witnessed no digital revolution through the Internet" (Bastick, 2017, p. 3).



Town of Amherst, MA Facebook post about a COVID-19 mask mandate (August 2021)

Still, can technology revolutionize democracy? One starting point for considering this question is analyzing how your local government uses social media and how might it use it more effectively and democratically.

- [Activity: Review and Improve Your Local Town Government's Use of Social Media](#)

Suggested Learning Activity

- **Role-Play a Town Meeting**
 - Conduct a [Town Hall Circle](#) to discuss and vote upon a classroom issue.
- **Develop Policy Proposals for a Community DEI Officer**
 - Following the murder of George Floyd in 2020, there was a call for cities and towns across the nation to hire diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) officers. The role of these officers is to ensure the policies created and the communities being served by the town's government are fair and equal to residents of all backgrounds and races.
 - Many cities and towns have encountered serious tensions with the incorporation of DEI officers ([GBH News](#), August 9, 2022).
 - As a class, develop policy goals and objectives for a community DEI officer, including the reasons for of having this role if it does not currently exist as part of local government.

Online Resources for Town Meetings and Running for Local Office

- [Town and City Governments in Massachusetts](#).
- [Colonial Meetinghouses of New England](#) has information on the origins of New England town meetings.
- [Hear Ye! Hear Ye! The Town Meeting is Called to Order](#), a Town Meeting lesson plan from National First Ladies Library.
- [Counties Work](#). Play this game and run your own town! Adjust taxes, help citizens, and get re-elected
- [Run for Office](#): Type your zip code and see what offices you can run for in your state, county, and local community

2. UNCOVER: Democratic Decision Making in Cooperative Organizations and Worker-Owned Companies

October is [Co-op Month](#), celebrated nationally since 1964. **Co-op** is short for **cooperatives** - "democratic businesses and organizations, equally owned and controlled by a group of people. There are worker co-ops, consumer co-ops, producer co-ops, financial co-ops, housing co-ops, and more. In a cooperative, one member has one vote" ([Thoen, 2014](#), para. 3).



[Moving Van Company Employees Load a Moving Van](#), by Rharel, Public Domain

Cooperatives are everywhere. In the region near the University of Massachusetts Amherst campus there are food co-ops, agricultural co-ops, arts co-ops, compost and recycling co-ops, food sharing co-ops, credit unions, and worker-owned businesses installing solar panels, brewing beer, and designing and building sustainable structures.

Worker-owned companies, like cooperatives, function on the premise that "when you give people a stake in the outcome, people get more motivated" ([Teamshares](#) CEO quoted in the Boston Globe, September 24, 2023, p.B5) and the number of these organizations is growing throughout the country. The nation's more than 6000 worker-owned companies come in all sizes from small to large ([Knowledge at Wharton](#), November 11, 2022). There are two main types of worker-owned organizations:

- Employee Stock Ownership Plans (ESOP) - approximately 6,600 in the U.S ([ESOPs by the Numbers](#), February 2023).
- Worker Cooperatives and employee-owned businesses.

Some worker-owned companies consist of small groups of artisans or craft workers; for example, [Rock City Coffee](#) in Rockland, Maine or [PV Squared Solar](#), [Real Pickles](#) and the [Compost Cooperative](#) in Greenfield, Massachusetts.

Large-scale cooperatives like [Land O'Lakes](#) and [Ocean Spray](#) have become major players in dairy production and fruit farming, earning hundreds of millions in annual revenue as member-owned firms. In November 2023, [Sullivan Tire](#), the automobile service company, became the largest ESOP-owned business in New England. That company joins other New England ESOP firms Cape Air, Abt Associates, and Mass Bay Brewing Company.

Go here for more examples of [Employee Owned Businesses in Massachusetts](#).

Small Democracies in Action

The decision-making practices that happen in co-ops and worker-owned organizations provide models for how many businesses, government agencies, and school classrooms are, and could be, run as small democracies in action. Using different procedures and formats, members run these organizations democratically. Participating in democratic workplaces offer workers powerful reasons to invest time and energy in making decisions through their voices and votes.

Small democracies can happen in many ways. Mobile home owners in some 148 communities in New Hampshire have purchased the land where they park their vehicles and decide how to manage the facility democratically (*Boston Sunday Globe*, December 16, 2023, p. B8).

How [Platform Co-Ops Democratize Work](#) is TED video from August 2021 that explores how democratically organized companies are a fairer alternative to the gig economy

In the TED video "[The Case for Co-Ops, the Invisible Giant of the Economy](#)," researcher Anu Puusa describes the cooperative movement in Finland (5.5 million people have 7 million memberships in cooperative organizations) and its implications for the United States.

Suggested Learning Activities

- **Create a [Podcast](#) or Video**
 - Interview employees that work at a local co-op or worker-owned enterprise to learn what it is like to work in an employee-owned organization.
 - What are the advantages and drawbacks of working in this type of organization.
- **State Your View**
 - What skills, knowledge, and competencies do you think worker-owners need to successfully support their organizations?
 - At [PV Squared Solar](#), a prospective worker-owner must work at the company for a year and then complete an additional one year worker-owner training program dealing with all aspects of cooperative organizations including socially responsible business practices ([Solar Design and Installation Company Empowers Employees to be Owners](#)).
- **Propose an Educational Change**
 - How might a school classroom become a more democratic setting where students feel like owners of their education?
 - What might a student-owned classroom look like in everyday practice?
 - See Topic 1, Standard 1 Engage: How Can School Classrooms Become More Democratic Spaces? (*not yet available on the edtechbooks platform*)

Online Resources for Cooperatives and Employee-Owned Businesses

- [Why the U.S. Needs More Worker-Owned Companies](#), *Harvard Business Review*, August 8, 2018
- [Workplace Democracy and Worker Owned Companies](#)
- [Employee Ownership, Harpoon Brewery](#)
- [Worker Co-Ops & Democratic Workplaces in the United States](#) (2019)
- [The Employee Ownership 100: America's Largest Majority Employee-Owned Companies](#)
- [Employee Ownership for Small Businesses in Massachusetts](#), MassCEO (Massachusetts Center for Employee Ownership, 2020)
- Rock City Coffee: [Rock City Coffee Officially Becomes a Worker Cooperative](#)

3. ENGAGE: Should Communities Declare Themselves Safe and Sanctuary Cities?

A **safe** or **sanctuary community** is "a city (or a county, or a state) that limits its cooperation with federal immigration enforcement agents in order to protect low-priority immigrants from deportation, while still turning over those who have committed serious crimes" ([What is a Sanctuary City Anyway?](#)).



[Jesse Arguin reaffirming Berkley as a sanctuary city](#), by [Alfred Twu](#),

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In opposition to the federal immigration policies of President Donald Trump's administration, communities all across the United States have declared themselves to be safe or sanctuary cities.

In safe cities, local officials, including police officers, are prevented from taking actions based on a person's actual or perceived immigration status (see [Northampton council will vote on 'safe city' ordinance](#); [Greenfield's safe community resolution](#) passed by the Greenfield Human Rights Commission in 2017).

In Massachusetts, Amherst, Boston, Cambridge, Concord, Lawrence, Newton, Northampton, and Somerville passed safe or sanctuary city resolutions by mid-2019.

Suggested Learning Activity

- **Argue For and Against**

- [Are Sanctuary Jurisdictions a Good Policy?](#) (resources from the debate website ProCon.org)
 - Is a safe city designation needed if a community's police department has a policy of not asking for an individual's immigrant status?
 - What should a community do if the federal government threatens or decides to withhold funding from communities that limit cooperation with federal immigration enforcement by declaring themselves to be safe cities?
 - Is a safe city designation needed as a symbolic way to oppose federal immigration policies that community considers unfairly target people of color?

Online Resources for Safe and Sanctuary Cities

- [Map of Sanctuary Cities, Counties, and States](#), Center for Immigration Studies (2019)
- [Welcoming Cities Resolution](#), Seattle, Washington (January 30, 2017)
- [Executive Order 13768: Enhancing Public Safety in the Interior of the United States](#) (January 25, 2017)
- [Sanctuary Policy FAQ](#), National Conference of State Legislatures

Standard 6.10 Conclusion

To explore different dimensions of local government, **INVESTIGATE** examined town meetings as a form of direct democracy used in some communities in Massachusetts and across the nation. To provide a contrast to how local governments function, **UNCOVER** looked at the practices of democratic decision making in cooperative organizations and worker/employee-owned companies. **ENGAGE** asked whether communities should declare themselves safe or sanctuary cities.



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