

K-12

CAROLINA

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# Conflict, Choice & Compromise at the County Level

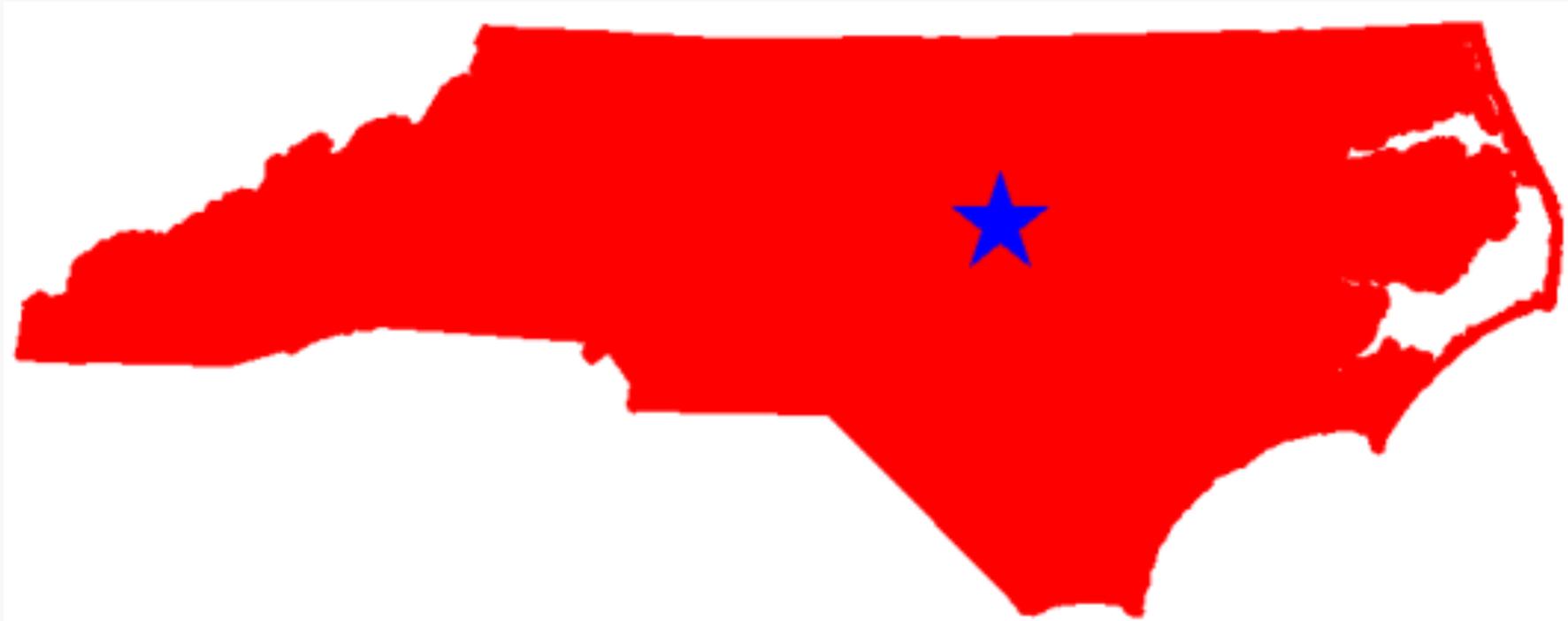
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# Local Government

- What comes to mind when you hear these two words?
- What do you already know about local government?
- Why is local government important? Why should you care about local government and the officials who run your local government?

# County & City Government

While **counties** and **municipalities** both provide services to their residents, they are formed in different ways, have a different basis for providing services, and exercise their authority differently.



# Basis of County Government

- Counties are the oldest unit of local government
- Colonies were divided into counties to help carry out laws and collect taxes in rural areas
  - *Because farmers lived far apart, county business was conducted in a central place most people could reach within a day's wagon ride*
  - *This distance to the 'county seat' established the boundaries of many counties*
- Counties were legally established by the **North Carolina General Assembly** to make basic government services more readily available throughout the state
- County lines were drawn and redrawn from 1776 to 1912, when the last of the hundred counties was created

# Who is in charge of counties?

- Voters in each county elect a **board of county commissioners**, a sheriff, and a register of deeds.
- While the board of county commissioners has general responsibility for county government, this board shares authority for setting county policy with other officials — state officials, the sheriff, the register of deeds, and independent county boards that oversee elections, mental health services, public health services, social services, and alcoholic beverage control.
- However, funds to support these services must be raised by the board of county commissioners and the budgets must be approved by the board of county commissioners, giving the board of county commissioners the potential to influence these programs as well.



# Welcome to Clover County, NC!

## Population: 145,400

- Clover County is located in the central piedmont region of North Carolina and is home to two towns (Town of Dogwood and Town of Pine Tree) as well as a number of suburban townships and unincorporated areas.
- The median age of Clover County is 29 years old. The median household income is \$39,700 and the unemployment rate is 6.2%.
- The Clover County School District serves 20,000 K-12 students in 15 schools. The other main educational institution is UNC-Dogwood, which serves 6,100 residential and 1,200 commuter students.
- Medical facilities include two regional hospitals, one at UNC-Dogwood and the other in the Town of Pine Tree area.
- Public transportation is readily available in Clover County. Each city or town includes a bus station, and the Town of Dogwood features an Amtrak station. The neighboring county is home to a medium-sized international airport.
- Clover County was recently rated one of the Top 20 most environmentally friendly counties in North Carolina by the Department of Environmental Quality.



# Congratulations, Clover County!

You've received \$6 million for community improvement!

- **County Commissioners:** Under the Chair's leadership, you will spend the next 15 or more minutes preparing for the meeting.
  - First, introduce yourselves to one another.
  - Then, go through the agenda to review who is assigned to present to you today. Pay attention to who they are, how much money they are requesting, and what they want the funding to go towards. You'll notice there is not enough money to give everyone what they want!
  - Discuss your first impression of each group's ask, & think about which of the issues being presented you personally think are most important.
  - As a Board, create 2-3 follow-up questions you might want to ask each group after their presentation.
  
- **Citizen Groups:** Based on the group assignment you received, you will spend the next 15 minutes developing a presentation to the Board of Commissioners in which you try & convince them to allocate the funding your way.
  - First, introduce yourselves, then begin brainstorming all the reasons you can offer as to why the Commissioners should see things your way.
  - Together, you must create an organized, & motivational presentation (2-4 minutes long) with an argument so strong that it will convince the Commissioners to vote according to your goals & desires.
  - Also, you should spend some time reviewing the other citizen groups that are on the agenda to present & guess what their stance may be. You might want to include some arguments against other financial requests in your own presentation.

# Youth Turnout in Local Elections



Local government often has more real-world impact on the everyday lives of citizens than other levels of government. Police departments, libraries and schools all fall under local government jurisdiction, and for homeowners, local government significantly affects their cost of living through taxation. Even the White House says "most Americans have more daily contact with their state and local governments than with the federal government."

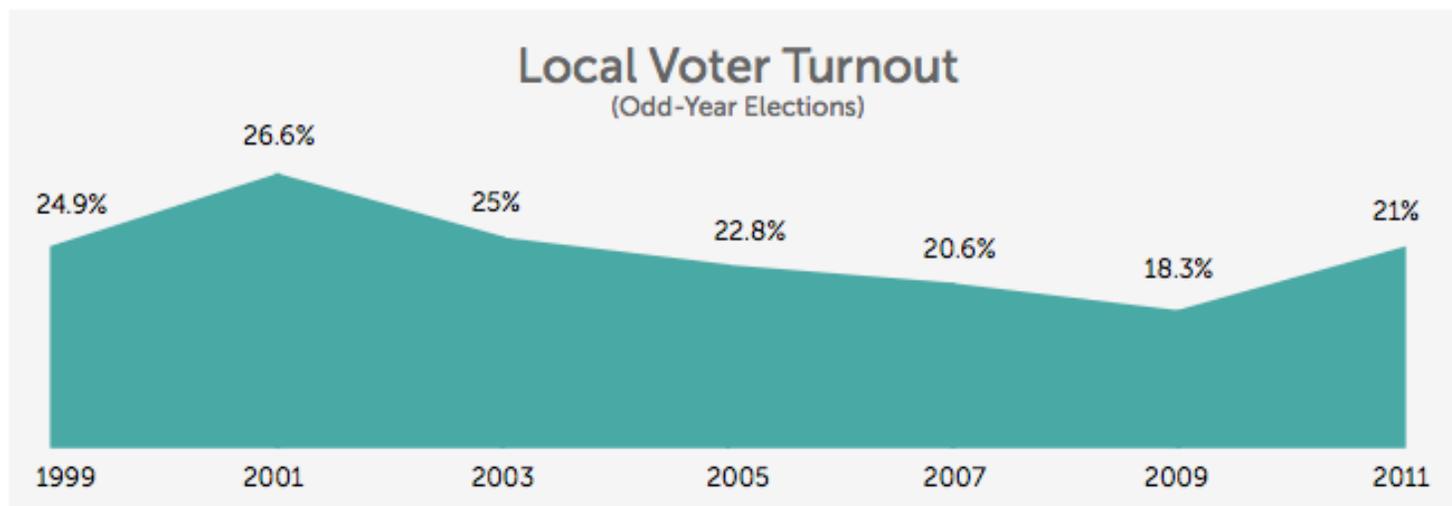
Voting is perhaps the quintessential indicator of civic engagement and a well-functioning democracy. For young adults, voting indicates current and future attachment to the cities where they live. Local elections, including the candidates and ballot initiatives, provide a crucial opportunity for residents to influence how their city approaches and invests in the issues that matter most to them.

But whereas voter turnout for presidential elections nears 60 percent, local election turnout is often a third of that or lower. Among millennials (20- to 34-year-olds) in urban areas, this turnout gap is even more pronounced.

# LOCAL ELECTION TURNOUT DECLINES

As was highly documented, voter turnout during the 2014 midterm election was the lowest it's been in 72 years (36.3 percent). It was even lower among millennials (21.5 percent).

Turnout for local elections is even lower and declining. A study of turnout for mayoral elections in the 144 largest U.S. cities found that turnout dipped from 24.9 percent in 1999 to 21 percent in 2011.



Source: Aaron C. Weinschenk and Thomas M. Holbrook. 2013. "Campaigns, Mobilization, and Turnout in Mayoral Elections." *Political Research Quarterly*.

# Why is turnout so low in local elections?

- Take a minute to brainstorm a **list of reasons for why you think turnout is so low for local elections, especially among millennials**. Be prepared to share your lists with the class.
- Complete the blank in the following sentence:
  - *I feel \_\_\_\_\_ about voting in local elections, like those for mayor or county commissioners.*

# LOW TRUST IN GOVERNMENT

Millennials report lower levels of trust in government than the general population. Sixty percent of people say they trust local government a great deal or fair amount compared with only 33 percent of millennial voters who reported trusting their local government a great deal or fair amount.

This same survey found that only 29 percent of millennials believe that political involvement of any kind rarely has any tangible results and the same small percentage found the idea of working in public service appealing (Harvard Institute of Politics, 2014).

## Trust in Government Among Millennials

(18- to 29-year olds)

HOW OFTEN DO YOU TRUST EACH OF THEM TO DO THE RIGHT THING?

- % WHO RESPOND ALL OR MOST OF THE TIME -

	FEB 2010	FEB 2011	MAR 2012	APR 2013	APR 2014
The Federal Government	29%	27%	27%	22%	20%
Your State Government	-	28%	32%	30%	28%
Your Local Government	-	33%	37%	34%	33%

\*Source: Survey of Young Americans' Attitudes toward Politics and Public Service, Harvard Institute of Politics, 2014.\*

Why is **millennial**  
turnout so  
**low**?

## LOCAL VOTING INHIBITORS

The review of existing research also identified several factors likely inhibiting local election turnout, particularly among millennials.

- **Less local media coverage:** A recent study found that a diminished news environment depresses citizen engagement. With recent cutbacks to local and state journalism, voters have less information to evaluate candidates and ballot initiatives and ultimately are less likely to vote.<sup>1</sup>
- **High mobility among millennials:** Research shows high mobility decreases political participation and this likely impacts millennials most since they move more often than any other age segment (Lake Research Partners, 2014).
- **Low rates of homeownership:** Studies have pointed to a correlation between home ownership and increases in local voting, with homeowners who have lived in the community for a long time voting at higher rates.<sup>2</sup> Since millennials own homes at lower rates than other age groups, this may depress their turnout.

1. Hayes, Danny and Jennifer L. Lawless. 2014. "As Local News Goes, So Goes Citizen Engagement: Media, Knowledge, and Participation in U.S. House Elections." *Journal of Politics*.

2. J. Eric Oliver. 2013. "Local Elections and the Politics of Small-scale Democracy." Princeton: Princeton University Press.



# What would you do?

- Brainstorm a **list of strategies for increasing youth turnout in local elections**. Be prepared to share your ideas with the class.

# CONNECTING WITH MILLENNIAL VOTERS

Lake Research Partners outlined a few broad areas of exploration based on the findings for considering ways to advance millennial participation in local elections.

1. Millennials often decide to live in cities **because they want to participate in the recreational and cultural opportunities that exist**. These events could be utilized to inform and engage young voters.
2. They like the idea of a **welcome packet** for new residents that includes who the local elected officials are and when local elections are held.
3. **They are an incredibly digital generation** that would love a local voting smartphone application that provides basic information about local candidates and issues.
4. **Millennials often don't recognize elected leaders in their communities**. They do recognize celebrities with ties to their community who could potentially be visible as part of a voter registration and mobilization campaign.



# Source:

- Why Millennials Don't Vote for Mayor: Barriers and Motivators for Local Voting":  
<http://www.knightfoundation.org/features/votelocal/#backstory>)