

Does Every Vote Really Count?

Everyone always gets excited during a presidential election, but does it really matter who you elect as mayor? The answer might surprise you. We're going to spend the next few weeks looking at the electoral process from the ground up. We'll start with local elections and work our way up to the presidential election. We'll look at what impact various elected offices have on our day-to-day lives. Are you ready? Let's get started.

Local Government

What is a County?

Counties are, in many ways, the building blocks of our system of government. Before we get into the specifics, let's get a big picture of what a county is and what it does. The National Association of Counties (NACo) has a wealth of information and statistics at its website, www.naco.org. Let's begin by looking at [why counties matter](#).

You will need to do some research. These answers will not all be found on NACo's website, so you will need to use a variety of resources to find the answers. Define the following terms as specifically as possible, including how it relates to where you live as applicable:

Municipality

Village

Borough

Township

City

Precinct

Commissioner

Mayor

Controller

City Council

Supervisor

Auditor

Treasurer

Register

Recorder

Sheriff

Public Defender

District Attorney

Row Offices (refers to a group of offices)

Prothonotary (this is a tough one—most states do not have one)

Counties by the Numbers

How many counties are in your state?

Create a graph showing the population of each county in your state.

Create a graph showing the area of each county in your state.

One method of finding this information is to go to <http://explorer.naco.org/>. Click on State Search and then choose your state from the list on the right. A dialogue box with a state map will appear. In the upper left corner of the box, you will see a bullet point icon. Click the icon to display a list of the counties in the state along with key data about each county.

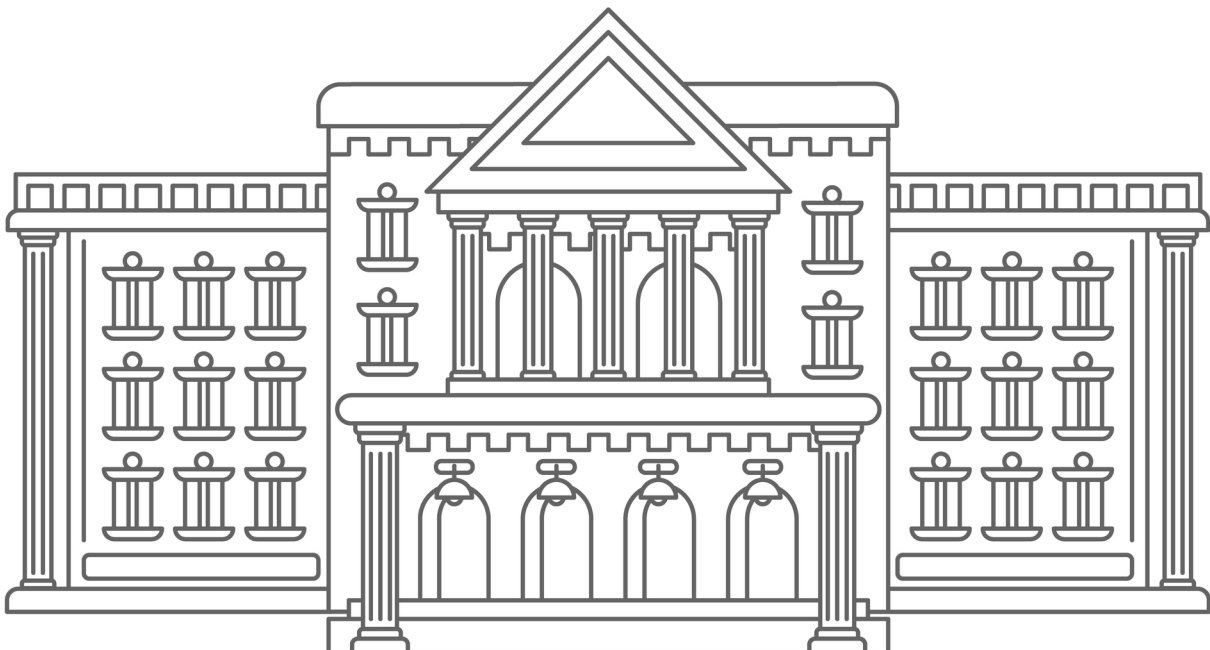
Compare the population of your county to the population of the most heavily populated county in your state and the least populated county in your state. What percent larger or smaller is your county to each of these?

Elections by the Numbers

What was the voter turnout in each election in your county for the last six years?

Has it increased or decreased?

What is the average voter turnout for the last six years?



In the Early Days

Dig into the past of your county. When was it founded? When were its first elections held? What were the results of that election?

Where is your county seat? Has it always been located there? What building or buildings house your county offices? When were they constructed?

Whose Job Is It?

We've already said it's easier to get excited about elections when we're choosing the next president than it is to pay attention to local elections. Now it's time to answer the question. Does it really matter who we elect as supervisor or mayor? Dig into your county and answer the following questions:

Who is responsible for fixing potholes?

Whose job is it to keep the roads clear from hazards (snow removal, downed trees, etc.)?

Who issues building permits or decides how/when they are issued?

What is the process for a new business that wants to open or move into your area? Who has an impact on that process?

Who hires or manages police and emergency services?

Who sets property taxes?

Who oversees the local jail and issues relating to it (public concerns, inmate complaints, staffing levels, etc.)?



Behind the Scenes at the Polls

What steps must you follow in order to be permitted to vote in an election?

What is the process for casting an absentee ballot?

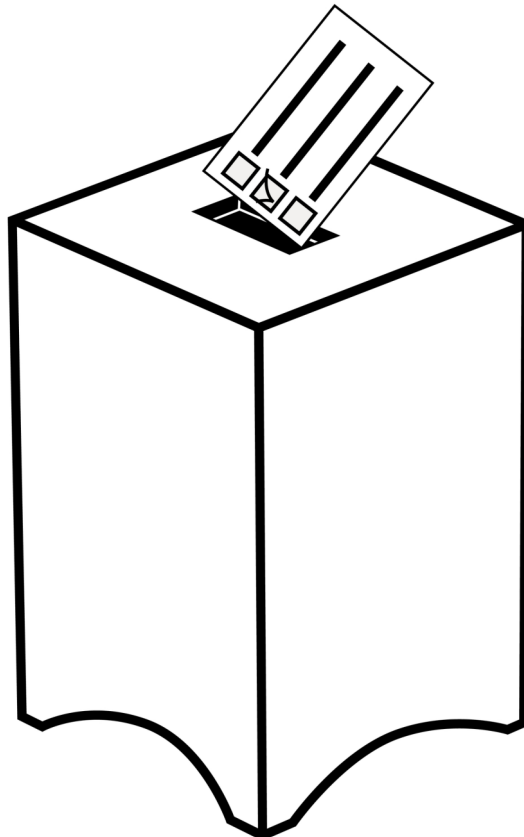
How and where are votes cast in your county?

How are votes tabulated and reported?

Who is in charge of overseeing the local polling station and voting process?

How is the process safeguarded against internal or external manipulation?

What methods are in place to help individuals who face obstacles to voting (i.e, physical challenges, not reading/writing English fluently, etc.)?



Extension Activities

Art:

Create a collage of images from around your county.

Create a visual representation of the data you graphed in Counties by the Numbers.

Health:

Determine who creates and enforces the codes or regulations that affect air quality in your area (i.e. outdoor burning, emissions, etc.).

Research your local hospital if you have one. When was it established? What are the challenges it faces? How is it facing these challenges?

