

# County Government in Virginia

Structure, Powers and Duties

# County Government in the United States

- Approximately 3,000 counties or their equivalents in the US
- While states enjoy Constitutional recognition of powers, counties do not
- Local government relies on state for authority. What states give, they can take away
- Home Rule vs. Dillon Rule
- Many states have highly structured local governments below county
- Variations are often regional

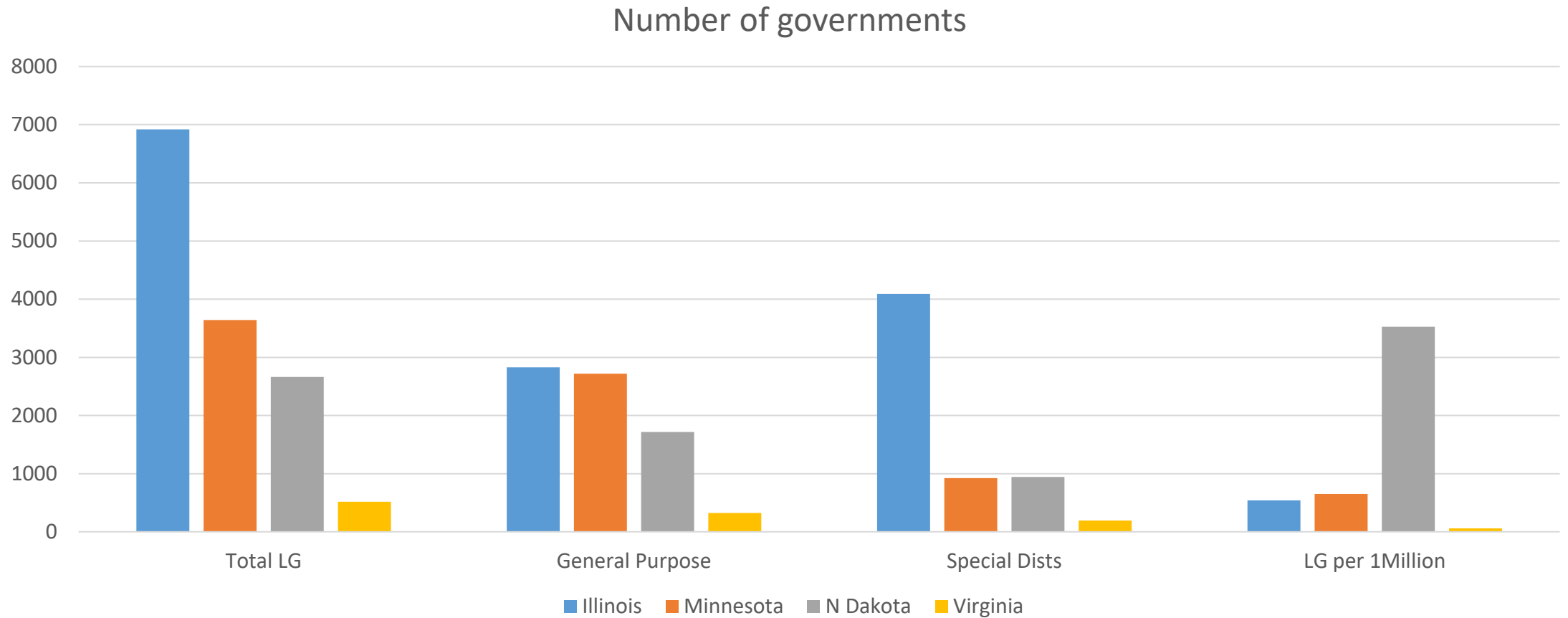
# Virginia: typical of local governments

- Relies on the Commonwealth for authority
- Like half of states, under Dillon Rule
- General laws tell how local government works usually but localities sometimes get special authority
- States can dictate what localities must spend, how they can tax, how much state will support them
- Virginia uses “reform” structure of government, with Board of Supervisors or City Council elected to make policy decisions
- Variation in leadership, method of election, timing

# Unique Virginia (or nearly so)

- Independent cities
  - Colonial roots
  - Annexation
  - Reversion to town
- School Board selection options: election/appointment
- School Boards lack taxing authority
- Recent movement to reduce differences between cities and counties

# Virginia: Unusual local government



# History of County Government

- Modeled after British shires
- County courts: multi-functional
  - Implementing royal/colonial law
  - Collect taxes
  - Address public issue between legislative sessions
  - Serve as courts to conduct trials
- Virginia localities differed from New England
  - Pattern of settlement differed
  - Economic/Social differences
    - Virginia: large land grants from Crown
    - New England: Religious congregations fleeing established Church of England
    - Plantations vs. small farms/trades and crafts
    - County government of landed elite in VA
    - Congregational principles with towns as centers of government life

# History continued

- Virginia's unique city/county separation
  - Plantation economy on waterways produced inefficient markets
  - Cities granted special representation and powers
  - Urban vs. rural distinction between cities and counties
  - Cities to annex parts of counties as they developed
  - Counties provide more basic services to rural areas
- Blurred distinction over time
  - Post WW II housing boom spills over city limits
  - Southeast VA counties: Can't beat cities? Join 'em
  - Annexation frozen due to issues of race, growth of suburbs
  - Today: Arlington (8,500/sq.mi.) is county, Suffolk (199/sq.mi.) is city

# Forms of county government: Variations on a theme

- Basic model: Board of Supervisors elected to serve administrative and legislative roles
- Board serves as administrative subdivision of the state
- Board also serves as legislative body for the locality
- Administrative role almost always delegated to full-time professional
- All Boards of Supervisors exercise the legislative role
- Virginia offers several alternative forms



# Alternative forms of county government

- Traditional form: default, utilized by most counties
- Option 1: County Executive form: Albemarle and Prince William
- Option 2: County Manager Form: Henrico County
- Option 3: County Board Form: Scott, Carroll, Grayson and Russell
- Option 4: County Manager Form: Arlington
- Option 5: Urban County Executive Form: Fairfax
- Option 6: County Charters: Chesterfield, Roanoke and James City
- Board of Supervisors is elected/hires professional administrator

# Boards of Supervisors

- All options include elected Board of Supervisor
- Generally allow election of 3 to 11 member Board
- Elections from districts of roughly equal population
- All or some Board members may be elected at-large
- Handful of larger districts elect Chair at-large
- Partisan election is the default process for Board of Supervisors
- Many candidates are elected independent of party
- Board elects Chair and Vice Chair annually

# Powers and Responsibilities of Board

- Serving to administer state-assigned responsibilities
- Major role today is legislative, including:
  - Developing a budget to pay for county services and functions
  - Assessing taxes and fees to cover costs of services and functions
  - Providing mandated and discretionary funding to School Board
  - Providing for public health, safety and welfare
  - Regulating land use in the county for public and private purposes
  - Providing public amenities desired by county population

# Chairman of the Board

- Elected from among the Board members, except when form allows for direct election
- Term may be one year or more, depending on the policies of the Board. Chair can be re-elected.
- Chair is the chief elected officer of the county
- Charged with conduct of meetings
- Signature authority for county actions