
Local Government and the States is an examination of local government’s relationship with the states and the ongoing intergovernmental conflict that exists between these two levels of government. The book looks at the interaction of local communities from the viewpoint of “home rule.” Berman begins by looking at the wide-ranging contact between the layers of American government (federal, state, and local). Local government and its relationship with state government has developed and changed over time. Berman examines the discord between large city governments and state governments in the United States. He notes that “disputes between the states and their local governments resemble those between the sovereignty-sharing states and the federal government. Just as states claim ‘states rights’ in trying to fend off what they see as an overextension of federal power . . . localities rally behind the cry of ‘home rule’ to protect themselves from state actions they feel are intruding on their sphere of activity” (p. 6). He frames the issues facing local government policymakers and administrators by focusing on authority, revenue, and state takeovers, taking a long look at the issues facing the restructuring of local government. Berman makes a case that supports movement toward enhanced local autonomy.

To respond in an effective manner to the myriad of political, social, and economic transformations and restrictions, local governments need to retain more autonomy. Since the mid-1980s, the states have not placed increasing local aid high on their list of priorities. Increasingly, local governments are called upon to provide a safety net for their citizens in addition to the traditional role as providers of basic services such as police and fire protection.

True home rule provides broad powers to municipalities to carry out their functions. As exercised under the majority of states, home rule provides local governments with a degree of freedom from state interference. Home rule allows officials to solve local problems. “Proponents of local authority also contend that local autonomy produces good public policy because it encourages initiative and experimentation and also places authority in the hands of those best prepared to develop solutions to unique local problems” (pp. 4–5).

Berman sees home rule as somewhat of a last stand for the preservation of local government. Because local government is a creature of the state, as we know from Dillon’s Rule, local governments continue to have to request permission from the state to embark on even the most mundane actions. Home rule is in danger because the environment under which it operates is
replete with state mandates, prohibitions, obstructions, and the threat of state takeover. Berman notes that local officials have seen states move into areas where local decision makers previously had the last say. In addition, local governments have lost in their competition with state government over control of financial resources. Both state and local governments seek new revenues to offset federal funding reductions and to balance budgets. Local governments confront the probability that states will reduce their aid dollars and transfer costs to them when faced with budget problems of their own. In times of fiscal stress, local governments can expect tough going politically at the state level. Berman notes that while costs are shifted to the local governments, they can generally expect an increase in revenue authority rather than direct aid to offset increased costs. This buck passing puts local officials in the hot seat when they go after new valuation procedures, the inclusion of intangible assets as assessable property and increases assessments and taxes.

Increasingly, states intervene in local affairs for any number of reasons. In Philadelphia, a proposed closure of fire stations by Mayor John Street was met with legislation from Harrisburg preventing the closure of fire stations without first performing various studies. Pennsylvania governor Ed Rendell, himself a former mayor of Philadelphia, vetoed the bill, citing its infringement of home rule. However, legislatures will continue to intervene, thus constraining local officials to placate interest groups. Berman believes that local governments need to be more proactive to survive. They should involve their citizenry in supporting their local government from state interventions into home rule territory. While some may see them as alarmist, Berman’s cautions that the prospect for home rule is not good are seemingly supported by regular developments in the arena of state and local relations.

This book contributes to our understanding of intergovernmental relations and federalism. It would be useful to both undergraduate and graduate students of political science. It provides an excellent overview of the past, present, and possibly the future of “home rule” for local governments. Berman provides a strong bibliography for anyone seeking to do research on this subject. Those seeking a foundation for understanding the relationship between state and local governments will find this book invaluable.

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