

## Summary - County Government Structure in Virginia

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As is stated in Chapter 2 of the Eighth Edition of the VACo Virginia County Supervisors' Manual, and in accordance with the Code of Virginia, §15.2-1400, each of the 95 Virginia counties have a board of supervisors, who are the governing body at the local county level. The boards are elected by their county constituents, and elections take place by district or at-large, or by a combination of the two processes. The board size may be as small as three members or may be comprised of as many as 11 members. The responsibilities of the board of supervisors varies by each county's structural preference, as well as the presence or absence of a county administrator and staff.

Constitutional officers serve in each of the Virginia counties. Constitutional officers are elected at-large by their county constituents, and the state of Virginia has a direct partnership with each county, through the Compensation Board, in compensating these officers. Constitutional officers include the clerk of the circuit court, treasurer, commissioner of the revenue, commonwealth's attorney, and sheriff.

Virginia statutes authorize seven forms of county government in the Commonwealth that counties can choose from, as a foundation from which county policy is developed and services are provided.

### The Seven Forms of County Government in Virginia:

- The Constitutional or the Traditional Form
- The County Executive Form
- The County Manager Form
- The County Board Form
- The County Manager Plan
- The Urban County Executive Form
- The Charter Form

### The Constitutional or the Traditional Form of County Government

85 of the 95 Virginia counties have adopted the constitutional or the traditional form of government and are currently operating in accordance with this structure. The constitutional or the traditional form of government was created in 1870 during the Reconstruction Constitution. Chapter 6 in the Fourth Edition of Virginia Government and Politics, published by the University of Virginia, highlights that one of the pivotal results of the Reconstruction Constitution of 1870 was that a board of supervisors would replace the county courts as an alternate governing body in Virginia counties. This ended a long era for county courts, who held the governmental authority at the county level dating back to the colonial period. County courts were no longer permitted under the new constitution.

Following the creation of the constitutional or traditional form of government in Virginia, six additional forms of county government have also been formed since the Reconstruction Constitution of 1870. They are referred to as optional or alternative forms of county government.

### The Six Optional Forms of County Government in Virginia:

- The County Executive Form
- The County Manager Form
- The County Board Form
- The County Manager Plan
- The Urban County Executive Form
- The Charter Form

### **The County Executive Form of County Government**

The Virginia General Assembly enacted legislation in 1932 allowing for the optional county executive form of government. It was created in the interest of fostering centralized administration and organizational proficiency.

Albemarle and Prince William counties adopted the county executive form of government.

#### ***Specific characteristics of the county executive form of county government:***

- The board of supervisors is comprised of three-nine members, and the chair may be, through a referendum, elected at-large by the voters.
- The board of supervisors' role is to govern, determine county policies and supervise the execution of said policies.
- A county executive must be appointed and is responsible to the board of supervisors for the administration of county policies and procedures.
- Under the county executive form of government, a director of finance replaces the offices of the constitutional officers of treasurer and commissioner of revenue.
- There are mandatory county government departments in this form of government: Finance, social services, law enforcement, education, records, and health. Other departments may be added as deemed necessary by the board of supervisors.
- The constitutional officers are the sheriff and deputies (in the absence of a police department), the clerk of court and the commonwealth's attorney. All are elected at-large by their constituents.
- Apart from the constitutional officer positions, the county executive is responsible for vetting candidates for all other county officer and staff appointments. The board of supervisors then appoints candidates for these positions, based on the county executive's endorsements.
- The county executive does not have a role in endorsing the members of the school board. The board of supervisors is responsible for appointing members to the school board, as well as determining the size of this board, if the school board is not elected by county constituents. The board of supervisors also appoints members to other county boards, including the planning commission and board of social services.

### **The County Manager Form of County Government**

The optional county manager form of government was also included in the 1932 legislation executed by the Virginia General Assembly and was the result of a growing interest of fostering centralized administration and organizational proficiency in Virginia county government.

Henrico is the sole Virginia county operating under the county manager form of government.

#### ***Specific characteristics of the county manager form of county government:***

- The board of supervisors is comprised of three-nine members. The voting process may be one of two options. The board of supervisors may be elected from magisterial or single member districts, with one member elected at-large. Or, through a referendum, all members of the board of supervisors may be elected at-large.
- The board of supervisors establishes county policies and procedures. A county manager must be appointed and is responsible to the board of supervisors for the administration of county business.
- The constitutional officers are the sheriff and deputies (in the absence of a police department), the clerk of court and the commonwealth's attorney. All are elected at-large by their constituents.
- Under the county manager form of government, a department of finance and a director of finance replace the offices of the constitutional officers of treasurer and commissioner of revenue.

- The county manager directly appoints all county officers and staff, and within the parameters already determined by the county, determines the salaries of these positions. The county manager's role is also to manage property tax assessment, tax collection, procurement, county buildings, property maintenance, social services, correctional and public health affairs.
- County constituents elect the school board by popular vote from every election district. More than one member of the school board may be elected from each district. The size of the school board may be increased if the board of supervisors deems it necessary.
- A county attorney's office may be formed by the board of supervisors in the county manager form of government. The county attorney reports to the county manager.

### **The County Board Form of County Government**

The county board form of government was formed in 1940 by legislation enacted by the General Assembly, as yet an additional optional county government structure. The county board form of government blends aspects of the traditional form, county manager form, and county executive form of government.

Carroll, Grayson, Russell, and Scott counties have adopted the county board form of government.

#### ***Specific characteristics of the county board form of county government:***

- The board of supervisors is comprised of one supervisor elected at-large, and the remaining supervisors elected from each county district.
- The county administrator, county officers and county staff are appointed by the board of supervisors. Or, the board of supervisors can choose to give the county administrator, or other approved department leaders, the hiring power for the county officer and staff positions.
- Under the county board form of government, the constitutional officers' traditional functions remain intact.
- The county school board, county board of social services, and a county health official are also appointed by the board of supervisors.
- The board of supervisors is responsible for instituting a department of extension and continuing education in the county.
- County administrators are responsible for five mandatory functions in the county board form of government: 1) advising the board of supervisors on county matters; 2) keeping the board of supervisors informed on the financial health of the county; 3) in the absence of a county clerk, formulating and presenting the annual county budget; 4) duly examining claims against the county before they are presented to the board of supervisors, except those mandated to be duly examined by the school board; 5) satisfying all claims submitted against the county.

### **The County Manager Plan of County Government**

Arlington County operates under the county manager plan of county government.

#### ***Specific characteristics of the county manager plan of county government:***

- Only counties with a population density of five hundred (500) people or more per square mile are eligible to adopt the county manager plan of county government.
- There are five members of the board of supervisors, and all are elected at-large.
- While the county manager is largely considered to be at the administrative and executive helm of the county, the county leader is the chair of the board of supervisors. The four other members of the board of supervisors, as well the five constitutional officers, are the only other elected officials of the county.

- The county manager’s position is approved through a referendum and is dependent on the satisfaction of the board of supervisors.
- Annexation must include the whole county, and county voter approval is mandated for this process.

**The Urban County Executive Form of County Government**

Fairfax county operates under the urban county executive form of government. Only counties with a population exceeding 90,000 may adopt this optional form of county government.

***Specific characteristics of the urban county executive form of government:***

- Five-eleven districts may be established in the county. The chair of the board of supervisors is elected at-large and all other board members are elected in single member districts. All members of the board of supervisors share equal rights and responsibilities.
- The board of supervisors must appoint an urban county executive to administer county business. The urban county executive also vets county officer and staff candidates for the board to select from in making additional county appointments unless the board delegates these appointments to the department heads.
- Under the urban county executive form of government, a director of finance replaces the offices of the constitutional officers of treasurer and commissioner of revenue.

**The Charter Form of County Government**

Starting in 1985, Virginia counties were granted the right to apply for a charter through the Virginia General Assembly. Since 2018, only three Virginia counties are operating under the charter form of government: Chesterfield, James City, and Roanoke.

***Specific characteristics of the charter form of county government:***

- Charters provide counties enhanced flexibility, to respond to unique local requirements in customizing their county government structure.
- Counties have the option to operate their charters under the Uniform Charter Powers Act or develop their own government body structure within their charter, and define the authority and responsibilities included within their charter, as well.

**More Information**

More information is available in the Eighth Edition of the VACo Virginia County Supervisors’ Manual, published by The Virginia Association of Counties; and in Virginia Government and Politics, published by the University of Virginia.

**Details of Virginia Counties**

The following table outlines:

- How many members serve on each county board of supervisors
- How many magisterial districts exist in each county
- The voting method in each county

County	# of Supervisors	# of Magisterial Districts	Voting Method
Accomack	9	9	By district
Albemarle	6	6	By district
Alleghany	7	7	By district
Amelia	5	5	By district
Amherst	5	5	By district
Appomattox	5	5	By district
Arlington	5	1	All elected at-large
Augusta	7	7	By district
Bath	5	5	By district
Bedford	7	7	By district
Bland	4	4	By district
Botetourt	5	5	By district
Brunswick	5	5	By district
Buchanan	7	7	By district
Buckingham	7	7	By district
Campbell	7	7	By district
Caroline	6	6	By district
Carroll	6	5	5 districts, plus 1 elected at-large
Charles City	3	3	By district
Charlotte	7	7	By district
Chesterfield	5	5	By district
Clarke	5	5	By district
Craig	5	5	By district
Culpeper	7	7	By district
Cumberland	5	5	By district
Dickenson	5	5	By district
Dinwiddie	5	5	By district
Essex	5	4	4 districts, plus 1 elected at-large
Fairfax	10	9	9 districts, plus the Chairman elected at-large



County	# of Supervisors	# of Magisterial Districts	Voting Method
Fauquier	5	5	By district
Floyd	5	5	By district
Fluvanna	5	5	By district
Franklin	7	7	By district
Frederick	7	6	6 districts, plus the Chairman elected at-large
Giles	5	5	3 districts, plus 2 elected at-large
Gloucester	7	5	5 districts, plus 2 elected at-large
Goochland		5	
Grayson	5	4	4 districts, plus 1 elected at-large
Greene	5	4	4 districts, plus 1 elected at-large
Greensville	4	4	By district
Halifax	8	8	8 districts, plus a tiebreaker at-large
Hanover	7	7	By district
Henrico	5	5	By district
Henry	6	6	By district
Highland	3	1	All elected at-large
Isle of Wight	7	5	By district
James City	5	5	By district
King and Queen	5	5	By district
King George	5	4	4 districts, plus 1 elected at-large
King William	5	5	By district
Lancaster	5	5	By district
Lee	5	5	By district
Loudoun	9	8	8 districts, plus the Chairman elected at-large
Louisa	7	7	By district
Lunenburg	7	7	By district
Madison	5	1	All elected at-large
Mathews	5	1	All elected at-large

County	# of Supervisors	# of Magisterial Districts	Voting Method
Mecklenburg	9	9	By district
Middlesex	5	5	By district
Montgomery	7	7	By district
Nelson	5	5	By district
New Kent	5	5	By district
Northampton	5	5	By district
Northumberland	5	5	By district
Nottoway	5	5	By district
Orange	5	5	By district
Page	6	5	5 districts, plus the Chairman elected at-large
Patrick	5	5	By district
Pittsylvania	7	7	By district
Powhatan	5	5	By district
Prince Edward	8	8	By district
Prince George	5	2	With multiple seats in each district
Prince William	8	7	7 districts, plus the Chairman elected at-large
Pulaski	5	5	By district
Rappahannock	5	5	By district
Richmond	5	5	By district
Roanoke	5	5	By district
Rockbridge	5	5	By district
Rockingham	5	5	By district
Russell	7	6	6 districts, plus one elected at-large
Scott	7	6	6 districts, plus one elected at-large
Shenandoah	6	6	By district
Smyth	7	7	By district
Southampton	7	7	By district
Spotsylvania	7	7	By district

<b>County</b>	<b># of Supervisors</b>	<b># of Magisterial Districts</b>	<b>Voting Method</b>
Stafford	7	7	By district
Surry	5	5	By district
Sussex	6	6	6 districts, plus a tiebreaker at-large
Tazewell	5	5	By district
Warren	5	5	By district
Washington	7	7	By district
Westmoreland	5	5	By district
Wise	8	4	4 districts, 2 supervisors in each district
Wythe	7	7	7 districts, 1 district elected at-large
York	5	5	By district