

Florida Forms of County Government



Florida County Map, Florida State Capitol, and Pinellas County Sign



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Executive Summary

Florida counties operate under two main forms of government: charter and non-charter. Of the state's 67 counties, 20 have adopted charters, giving them greater structural and operational flexibility, while 47 remain non-charter counties, more tightly bound by state statute. Charter counties, which include 73% of Florida's population, tend to be more urban and populous—with a median population of 624,173, compared to 46,519 for non-charter counties.

Pinellas County was the first county to adopt the commission-administrator form of government in Florida. This occurred even before the constitutional revision in 1968, which allowed counties to adopt charters. However, Pinellas did eventually adopt a charter form in 1980. With 971,218 residents and the highest population density in Florida (3,548 people per square mile), the county still operates under the county administrator form, the most common structure among charter counties (17 of 20). Two charter counties have adopted a chair-administrator model (Orange and Duval/Jacksonville), and only one (Miami-Dade) uses an elected county executive.

Scholars have extensively examined the distinctions between traditional and reformed forms of county government, particularly the differences between systems led by an appointed executive (e.g., council-manager / council-administrator) versus those with an elected executive (e.g., mayor-council). It is important to note that in this document (and in practice) the terms county administrator and county manager are used almost interchangeably. For example, while the state created the county manager form of government, many charter counties (including Pinellas County) have a county administrator. However, there is no consistent body of empirical evidence identifying one form as definitively superior. Notions of the "best" form of government often depend on how success is defined—whether in terms of efficiency, effectiveness, transparency, or other criteria. Ultimately, the most appropriate structure is often a matter of local context and community values.

The remainder of this document provides a history of county governments in the US and Florida including the development of county government structures in Florida over time. It also provides details on the different types of county government structures allowed in Florida.

History of County Government

Counties are one of America's oldest forms of government, dating back to 1634 when the first county governments were established along the eastern shores of Virginia. The organization and structure of today's 3,069 county governments are chartered under state constitutions or laws and are tailored to fit the needs and characteristics of states and local areas.

Counties are diverse in structure and how we deliver services to our communities. In general, states authorize and set the roles and responsibilities of county governments.

Despite the long history of counties in the English settlements of North America, the US Constitution did not provide for local governments. They left the matter to the states. Subsequently, counties evolved as units of local government and administration, but their importance from state to state varied depending on the economic, social, and political conditions of the area.

After World War II, growth, suburban development, and the government reform movement boosted the role of local governments. Those developments set the stage for post-World War II urbanization. In the 1970s and 1980s, a rise in the number of federal programs and unfunded federal mandates put pressure on counties to centralize our administrations and hire additional professional staff to guide operations. The changes in structure, greater autonomy from the states, rising revenues, and stronger political accountability ushered in a new era for county government. Counties began providing an ever-widening range of services. These trends continue today.

What is a county?

A county government is an organized entity with governmental character which covers the area of a county or county equivalent. County governments have sufficient discretion in the management of their own affairs to be independent general-purpose units of government. Most often, a county government provides services to residents in both unincorporated and incorporated areas of the county. There are 42 counties that are city-county consolidations across the United States, but there is only one in Florida – Duval County/City of Jacksonville.

Dillon's Rule Vs. Home Rule Counties

The two basic doctrines on county authority, Dillon's Rule and Home Rule, often coexist within the same state.

Dillon's Rule counties must obtain state approval for any changes in the government's structure, function or fiscal organization. The concept of Dillon's Rule stems from a court decision in 1872. Judge John Dillon of the Iowa Supreme Court ruled that counties (and other local governments) possess only the powers explicitly granted by the state through the state legislature or state constitution. In *Atkins v. Kansas*, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the Dillon decision. For example, Arizona state law dictates that counties with at least 175,000 residents must have a board of

supervisors with five members, while counties with fewer residents must have a board with three members.

Home Rule counties manage local affairs, generally with more autonomy from the state legislature. Typically, the three areas of autonomy often granted by the state are: organizational structure, functional discrepancy, fiscal freedom (adjusting local revenues, issuing bonds, etc.). Many states have a mix of these two formats. Florida has established mixed/flexible format in which home rule is optional.

Elected County Executive and “Reformed” Government Form

Most counties operate under the traditional commission form of county government. The “traditional” commission form of county government in the US is identified by the fact that each commissioner was elected and oversaw a department or departments within the organization. While most states still have this form of government, over 40% have shifted to either the county administrator or elected executive form of government since the turn of the 20th century. The separation of powers principle undergirds the reformed county governance system, similar to the president and Congress at the federal level.

As of November 2024, only 696 out of 3,069 (23%) county governments operate under the elected county executive form of government. However, the vast majority of these are in states that mandate this system, including Hawaii (4), Texas (254), Arkansas (75), Tennessee (95), and Kentucky (120) for a total of 548. Thus, 79% of all counties with an elected executive are in a state that requires this form of government while the remaining 21% have chosen it voluntarily.

Appointed County Administrator/Manager

The county administrator is typically the top appointed career official of the county. Administrators serve the county’s legislative body by carrying out the policies and procedures established by its members. Generally, the administrator oversees the daily operations of the county government, including the formation of the county budget and management of programs and services. Administrators may also partner with the private sector, nonprofits, academia, and others for the benefit of the community. 1,300 counties (42%) have an appointed administrator.

Note that much of this information came directly from the National Association of Counties 2024 County Government Primer (National Association of Counties, 2024).

Florida Statutes Governing County Structure

History of Florida Counties

Pre-1956

The origin of Florida's counties dates to its time as a territory, when it was initially divided into two counties: Escambia and St. Johns. Since then, in accordance with the broadening population of the state, Florida added more counties before stabilizing at 67 in 1925. During this time the counties in Florida were not given broad powers and were seen more as arms of the state government (Dillon's Rule). Any major changes had to be approved by the Florida Legislature.

1956-1968

As the parts of Florida became more urbanized, some counties began to request more autonomy from the state. In 1956, **Dade County** requested permission from the state to allow for home rule with an elected county executive (Mayor). The state approved the change, and it went into effect in 1957.

Although we could not find the original special act authorizing Pinellas County to adopt a commission-administrator form of government, it likely occurred in 1963 or 1964. Pinellas County voters, with the approval of the Florida Legislature, approved a referendum adopting the commission-administrator form of government on November 3, 1964, and it went into effect on January 1, 1965. **Pinellas County became the first commission-administrator form of government in Florida in 1965.**

In 1968, **Duval County** and the City of Jacksonville consolidated through the Jacksonville Consolidation Act approved by the Florida Legislature. It included the structure of a strong mayor form of government in which the elected mayor also served as the administrative head.

Constitutional Revision - 1968

Florida put forth an effort for a constitutional revision. This comprehensive overhaul replaced the 1885 Constitution and is officially known as the Florida Constitution of 1968. It was ratified by Florida voters on November 5, 1968, and the new constitution became effective on January 7, 1969. Among other changes, it established clear distinctions between charter and non-charter counties, thereby enhancing local government autonomy.

Since that time, 18 counties have adopted the charter form of government. Dade and Duval/Jacksonville were effectively grandfathered into the charter form with the constitutional revision. Pinellas County adopted their charter later. To date, Florida has 20 charter counties, which collectively are home to 73% of the state's residents. A full timeline of charter implementations is included in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Timeline of Charter County Implementations

County	Charter Implementation	Notes
Miami-Dade	1957	A Special Act of the Florida Legislature created a strong mayor form. (pre-constitutional revision).
Duval/Jacksonville	1968	The Jacksonville Consolidation Act of 1967 combined the city and county and created a strong mayor form. (pre-constitutional revision)
Volusia	1971	The first county in Florida (Jan., 1971) to implement home-rule charter after the 1968 Florida Constitutional Revision.
Sarasota	1971	Second county in Florida (Nov., 1971) to implement home-rule charter after the 1968 Florida Constitutional Revision.
Broward	1975	
Pinellas	1980	Previously adopted commission-administrator form – the first to adopt this form. (allowed by special act of legislature in 1964).
Palm Beach	1985	
Hillsborough	1985	
Charlotte	1986	
Alachua	1987	
Orange	1987	
Seminole	1989	
Clay	1991	
Osceola	1992	
Brevard	1995	
Lee	1997	
Polk	1998	
Leon	2002	
Columbia	2003	
Wakulla	2009	

Florida Constitution

Article VIII, Section 1 of the Florida State Constitution created political subdivisions of the state called counties. This section provides for the following:

- (c) Allows counties to establish, amend, or repeal a charter upon the vote of the county electorate.
- (e) Establishes that each county shall have a governing body called commissioners composed of five or seven members (unless a charter provides otherwise).

- (f) Describes powers of counties not operating under a charter. It indicates these counties shall have the power of local self-government, “but an ordinance in conflict with a municipal ordinance shall not be effective within the municipality to the extent of such conflict.”
- (g) Also allows charter governments to have all powers of local government consistent with general or special law. However, “the charter shall provide which shall prevail in the event of conflict between county and municipal ordinances.”

Amendment 10 (2018)

In 2018, Amendment 10 to the Florida Constitution was approved by the electorate. It required all 67 counties to elect their sheriff, tax collector, elections supervisor, and clerk of courts. Several Florida counties had at least one of these positions appointed based on home-rule charters, such as Miami-Dade and Volusia Counties, whose top law enforcer was appointed, not elected. However, there is still a provision in the constitution to allow some duties of the clerk of the circuit court to remain under the county commission including being the ex officio clerk of the board of county commissioners, auditor, recorder, and custodian of all county funds. Counties can retain some or all of these duties if approved by a vote of the electors or pursuant to Article V, Section 16.

Florida Statutes

Florida Statutes, Title XI, Chapters 124 – 164 provide more detail on the powers of counties within the state. Of particular interest to this discussion are the descriptions of county administrations for non-charter and charter counties found in Chapter 125 Part III (County Administration) and IV (Optional County Charters).

Non-Charter Counties

Florida Statutes established the county administrator role for non-charter counties between Chapters 125.70 – 125.74. It’s interesting to note that the legislature included a written purpose for establishing this position in non-charter counties. Based on the language, it seems the legislature had a strong feeling about creating this form of administration. It’s also interesting to note that the legislature specifically called out “urbanized counties” as needing this form of government, although the legislation never limited it to these locations. The purpose ([F.S. 125.71](#)) is paraphrased here.

It is the legislative intent that it is necessary to authorize a form of county administration that best assures an adequate and efficient provision of services to the citizens in this state, that provides for coordinated administration of county departments to better protect the health, welfare, safety, and quality of life of the residents in each of the more urbanized counties, and that... enables the board of county commissioners to perform freely, without unnecessary interruption, its fundamental intended purpose of making policies

within the framework of law applicable to county government in this state. It is the further legislative intent to provide a formula and structure for the economic and efficient conduct of county affairs by making the county administrator established by this act responsible for handling of all things necessary to accomplish and bring to fruition the policies established by the board of county commissioners.

This professional, appointed position is the only head administrator role envisioned for non-charter counties. Chapters 125.73 and 125.74 go on to describe the role, appointment, qualifications, and removal of county administrators. The statutes indicate this person shall be appointed by at least three commissioners, and “be responsible for the administration of all departments of the county government which the board of county commissioners has authority...”

[Chapter 125.74](#) lists the responsibilities of the county administrator. We have listed some of them below.

- Carrying out and enforcing the policies and directives of the county commission.
- Report actions taken pursuant to directives from the county commission.
- Provide information and advice to the county commission.
- Prepare an annual budget and budget process.
- Supervise the care and custody of county property.
- Recommend classification and compensation plans.
- Create and maintain policies and procedures.
- Hire personnel, except department heads, which require confirmation by the commission.
- Negotiate contracts.
- Attend all meetings of the commission.

Charter Counties

Charter county organizations are described in Title XI, Chapter 125, Part IV, which includes Chapters 125.80 – 125.88 in the Florida Statutes. [Chapter 125.84](#) lays out three forms of government under the optional county charters including **county executive form**, **county manager form** (although some counties call it county administrator), and **county chair-administrator plan**. In the county executive form, this position is elected. The chapter further states that the county executive, “shall exercise the executive responsibilities assigned by the charter.” This position also has veto power for county ordinances. In the county manager form, this position is appointed by the commission and exercises the executive responsibilities assigned by the charter. In the county chair-administrator plan, there is an elected chair of the commission who only votes in cases of a tie of the board of commissioners. However, there is also a county administrator who is appointed only by the county chair. Additionally, the elected chair and the appointed administrator share executive responsibilities.

County Organizational Distinctions in Florida

As indicated in the previous section, there are 67 counties in Florida. The main distinction between these are charter and non-charter counties. Twenty (20), or 30%, are charter counties. Forty-seven (47), or 70%, are non-charter counties. This section breaks down these counties in a little more detail.

Charter Counties

Due to their authority for home rule under Florida Law, charter counties can have some nuance to them even within their three forms of government: county executive, county manager, and county chair-administrator. It's also important to note that in many instances, the term county manager and county administrator are interchangeable. The same is sometimes true for county executive, mayor, and commission chair. All charter counties are listed below including demographic information and which form of government was chosen by the electorate.

Table 2. List of Charter Counties and Characteristics

County	Population	Land Area (in Sq. Mi.)	Population Density	Form of Government	Commission Size	Non-Interference Clause
Alachua	296,313	875.64	338.40	County Manager	5	Yes ²
Brevard	653,703	1,014.97	644.06	County Manager	5	Yes
Broward	1,981,888	1,202.73	1,647.82	County Administrator	9	Yes
Charlotte	210,645	681.12	309.26	County Administrator	5	Yes
Clay	236,365	604.61	390.94	County Manager	5	Yes
Columbia	72,155	797.55	90.47	County Manager	5	Yes
Duval/Jacksonville	1,062,593	762.65	1,393.29	County Chair-Administrator	19	No
Hillsborough	1,560,449	1,021.89	1,527.02	County Administrator	7	No
Lee	827,016	781.01	1,058.91	County Manager	5	Yes
Leon	302,197	668.43	452.10	County Administrator	7	Yes
Miami-Dade	2,774,841	1,899.90	1,460.52	County Executive	13	Yes
Orange	1,511,568	902.02	1,675.76	County Chair-Administrator	7 ¹	Yes
Osceola	451,231	1,327.55	339.90	County Manager	5	No
Palm Beach	1,545,905	1,964.30	787.00	County Manager	7	Yes
Pinellas	971,218	273.71	3,548.35	County Administrator	7	Yes
Polk	826,090	1,797.76	459.51	County Manager	5	Yes
Sarasota	479,027	556.00	861.56	County Manager	5	Yes
Seminole	493,282	309.38	1,594.42	County Manager	5	Yes

County	Population	Land Area (in Sq. Mi.)	Population Density	Form of Government	Commission Size	Non-Interference Clause
Volusia	594,643	1,101.31	539.94	County Manager	7	Yes
Wakulla	37,313	606.42	61.53	County Manager	5	Yes
Median	624,173	837	716		5	

¹Orange County will be increasing the size of its commission to 9 in 2026.

²Non-Interference Clause is in county code as opposed to charter.

Note. Population estimates are derived from BEBR Estimates of Population from April 1, 2024. Land area in square miles was obtained from the U.S. Census Bureau, 2020. Population density is population divided by land area.

As shown above, only one county out of the 20 charter counties in Florida chose the county executive form (Miami-Dade). Two have the hybrid model of chair-administrator (Duval/Jacksonville and Orange). All others (17) have the county manager form of government. Also, Duval/Jacksonville is the only consolidated city-county government in the State of Florida.

Within these 20 governments, there are variations in the legislative-administrative structure. We have provided a breakout of those below based on current county charters. These differences are shown below in Table 3.

Table 3. Differences in Charter County Leadership Structures

County	F.S. Charter Type	Mayor	Mayor as Executive	Mayor Elected by Commission	Mayor Elected by Electorate	Mayoral term (in Years)	Notes
Broward	County Manager	Yes	No	Yes	No	1	
Duval	County Chair Administrator	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	4	Mayor appoints a CAO who reports to the mayor.
Miami-Dade	County Executive	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	4	No CAO or Administrator. Mayor is chief executive.
Orange	County Chair Administrator	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	4	Mayor appoints County Administrator, confirmed by the commission and serves at the pleasure of the Mayor.

County	F.S. Charter Type	Mayor	Mayor as Executive	Mayor Elected by Commission	Mayor Elected by Electorate	Mayoral term (in Years)	Notes
Palm Beach	County Manager	Yes	No	Yes	No	1	
Pinellas (and all other charter counties)	County Administrator or Manager	No	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	
Volusia	County Manager	County Chair operates like ceremonial mayor	No	No	Yes (County Chair)	4	County Chair is elected county-wide for 4 years (like in Orange) but is more ceremonial in nature (like in Broward).

As shown above, 14 of the 20 charter counties (including **Pinellas County**) adopted the county administrator (or manager) form of government with the legislative branch led by a county chair who is elected for a 1-year term by the rest of the commission. This position is the ceremonial head of the county with a leadership role on the board of commissioners.

Palm Beach and Broward Counties also operate under the county manager form of government, but with a distinctive twist. Rather than using the title of "chair," they refer to their ceremonial head as the "county mayor." Despite the different title, this role remains largely symbolic. The mayor is selected by fellow commissioners for a one-year term and holds no significant administrative authority beyond that of county chairs in similar systems.

Duval/Jacksonville and Orange Counties chose the county chair-administrator plan in which their mayor is elected by the electorate for a 4-year term but splits administrative duties with an administrator that they hire and serves at their pleasure. Duval/Jacksonville's rules go so far as to indicate that he/she can request reports from department heads and may from time to time share them with the rest of the elected board. While the board is not hampered by a non-interference clause, this could create a bottleneck of information in which the mayor gets to decide what is brought before the council for decision-making purposes and what is not.

Miami-Dade County is the only county to have chosen the county executive form of government. In this form, the mayor is elected to a 4-year term by the electorate and serves as the chief executive of the organization. There is no professional manager.

Volusia County holds a unique position among Florida's counties. Although it follows the county manager form of government, it operates as something of a hybrid between the traditional county manager and elected executive models. Like other counties with a manager structure, the county council (equivalent to a county commission) appoints a county manager

who serves at their pleasure and oversees day-to-day operations. What sets Volusia apart is its county chair: unlike most counties where the chair is selected by fellow commissioners, Volusia's Chair is elected countywide to a four-year term. However, despite being directly elected by voters, the chair's role remains largely ceremonial, consistent with the function of chairs in other county manager systems.

Non-Charter Counties

The 47 non-charter counties in Florida are more uniform in nature due to their structure being defined by the State of Florida. However, there are some counties that still do not have a county administrator. Non-charter counties have the option to adopt the County Administration Law of 1974, which allows for the appointment of a county administrator responsible for the county's daily operations. However, not all non-charter counties have chosen to appoint a county administrator. It's important to note that some of these counties, while not formally adopting the county administrator system, have employed a county coordinator to perform similar duties.

Both Union and Franklin Counties employ a county coordinator. While the coordinator acts in a similar fashion to a county administrator, the county commission still controls much of the administrative approvals usually handled by an administrator.

Lafayette and Liberty Counties have not yet adopted the county administrator form of government and operate without an appointed executive. Instead, most of the day-to-day operations are handled by the clerk of court. Until recently, Calhoun County operated under a similar form but recently adopted the county administrator form and hired their first county administrator in December 2024.

In comparison to charter counties, non-charter counties represent counties with significantly smaller population sizes. We compared the population sizes between the two forms of government. Because the data were not normally distributed, we used a non-parametric test to compare the groups (median population). The results showed a statistically significant difference in population sizes between charter and non-charter counties. Specifically, charter counties (median population = 624,173) tend to have much larger populations than non-charter counties (median population = 46,519).

Note that much of the information in this section was originally sourced from various Florida Association of Counties documents. However, we have updated the information and analysis since the original publication of some of these documents were at least five years old.

References

National Association of Counties. (2024, November). *2024 county government primer: A short primer on our history, definitions, structures and authorities*. NACo County Governance Project