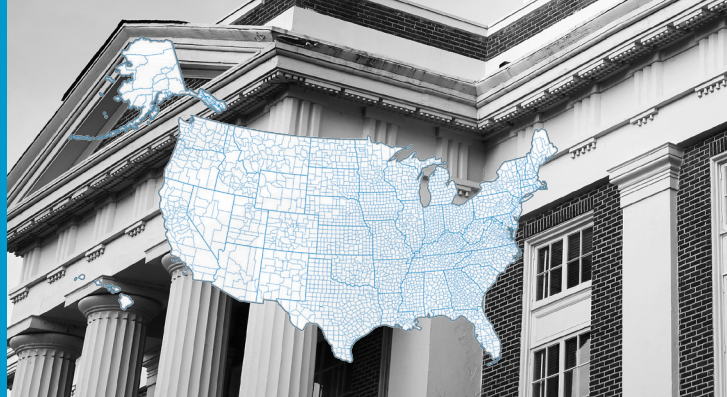


# AN OVERVIEW OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATION

## APPOINTED COUNTY ADMINISTRATORS

EMILIA ISTRATE AND CECILIA MILLS

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## KEY FINDINGS

Counties are responsible for providing core services, such as human services, criminal justice, public welfare and infrastructure, to communities of all sizes across America. More than 39,000 county elected officials invest \$482.1 billion annually to serve 307 million county residents across the country. Counties are able to provide a vast array of services through the work of 3.3 million employees.

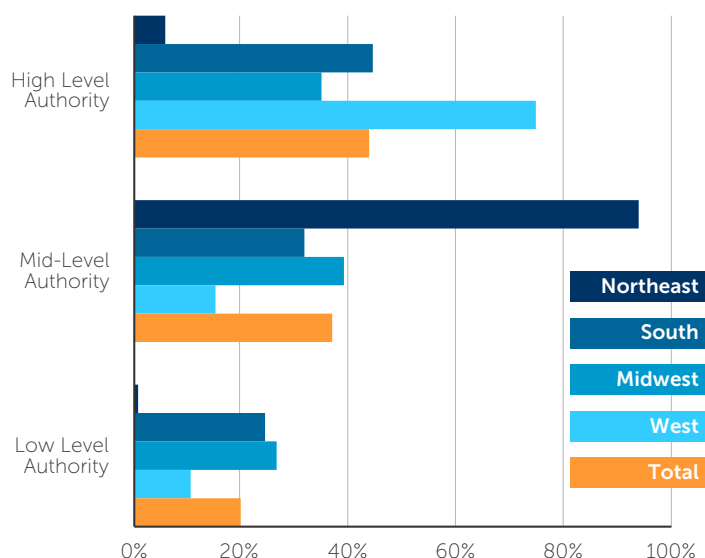
To help with the increasing complexity of county activities and the range of responsibilities, many county boards appoint county administrators. “County administrator” is a function with various titles and fulfilled by different county positions around the country. Most often, county administrators implement the board’s policy, run the daily operations of the county and prepare the annual budget. This analysis examines the occurrence of the function of county administrator and manager (called “county administrator” hereafter) and finds that:

### 1 COUNTY ADMINISTRATORS PLAY A MAJOR ROLE IN OVERSEEING COUNTY OPERATIONS.

Depending on the county governance structure and state statutes, administrators’ powers and duties vary substantially across counties. Forty-four (44) percent of the 1,322 county administrators have a high level of authority, appointing and removing all or most county department heads, supervising county departments, the budget preparation and the day-to-day operation of the county. This trend is more pronounced in the West, where three quarters of county administrators play this role (See Fig. 1). Another group of county administrators, about a

**“County administrator” is a function with various titles and fulfilled by different county positions around the country.**

**FIGURE 1. LEVEL OF AUTHORITY OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATORS BY REGION, AS OF MAY 2015**



Notes: National classification based on Roger Kemp, *Forms of Local Government: A Handbook on City, County and Regional Options* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2007). For clarification purposes, this analysis uses the terms “high level authority”, “mid-level authority” and “low level authority” instead of “county manager”, “chief administrative officer” and “county administrative assistant” types identified in the mentioned study. Connecticut and Rhode Island do not have county governments.

Source: NACo analysis, as of May 2015

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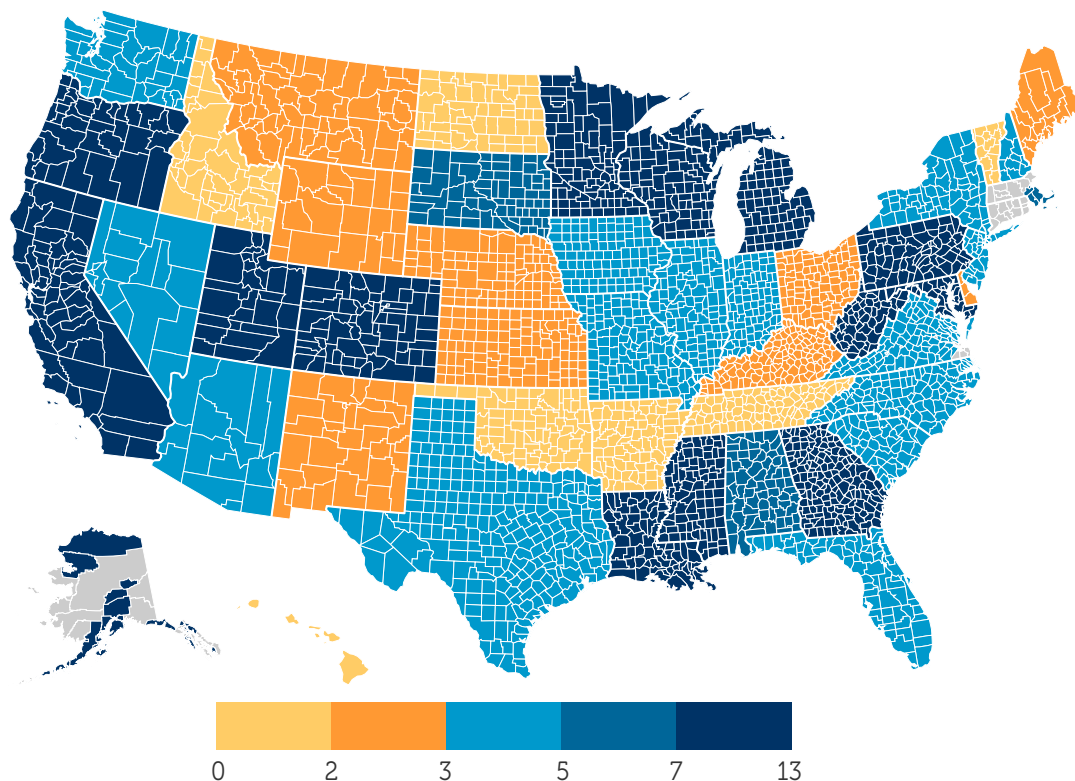
**44%** OF THE 1,322 COUNTY ADMINISTRATORS HAVE A HIGH LEVEL OF AUTHORITY

third of them, are in charge of the daily operations of the county and the preparation of the annual budget, but cannot appoint and remove most department directors and have no direct supervisory authority over some county departments. The overwhelming majority of county administrators in Northeast fit this description.

The rest of the county administrators are authorized to ensure administrative action on the county board policies, prepare draft ordinances and reports and provide administrative coordination between county departments.

**2 COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR IS A FUNCTION FULFILLED BY 115 DIFFERENT TITLES AND POSITIONS AROUND THE COUNTRY.** County boards can hire positions focused on county administrator duties or they can appoint one of the other county positions as a county administrator, in addition to their main function. "County administrator" and "county manager" are the most popular titles amongst the appointed county administrators who perform county administrator duties primarily, but they may have more than 100 other titles from "chief administrative officer" to "county director." The titles of appointed county administrators who perform the county administration duties in addition to their main obligations vary widely, but most often they are "chief clerks." Other positions in a county may be appointed to take on administrator duties, such as the current highway commissioner in Menominee County, Wi. County administrators in Pennsylvania have the widest variety of titles, 13 in total (See Map 1).

**MAP 1. NUMBER OF TITLES OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATORS, AS OF MAY 2015**



\*Parts of Alaska and Massachusetts colored in grey do not have county governments.

Note: Connecticut and Rhode Island do not have county governments.

Source: NACo analysis, as of May 2015. To see the titles of county administrators by state, please consult the state level profiles available on NACo's County Explorer interactive: [explorer.naco.org](http://explorer.naco.org).



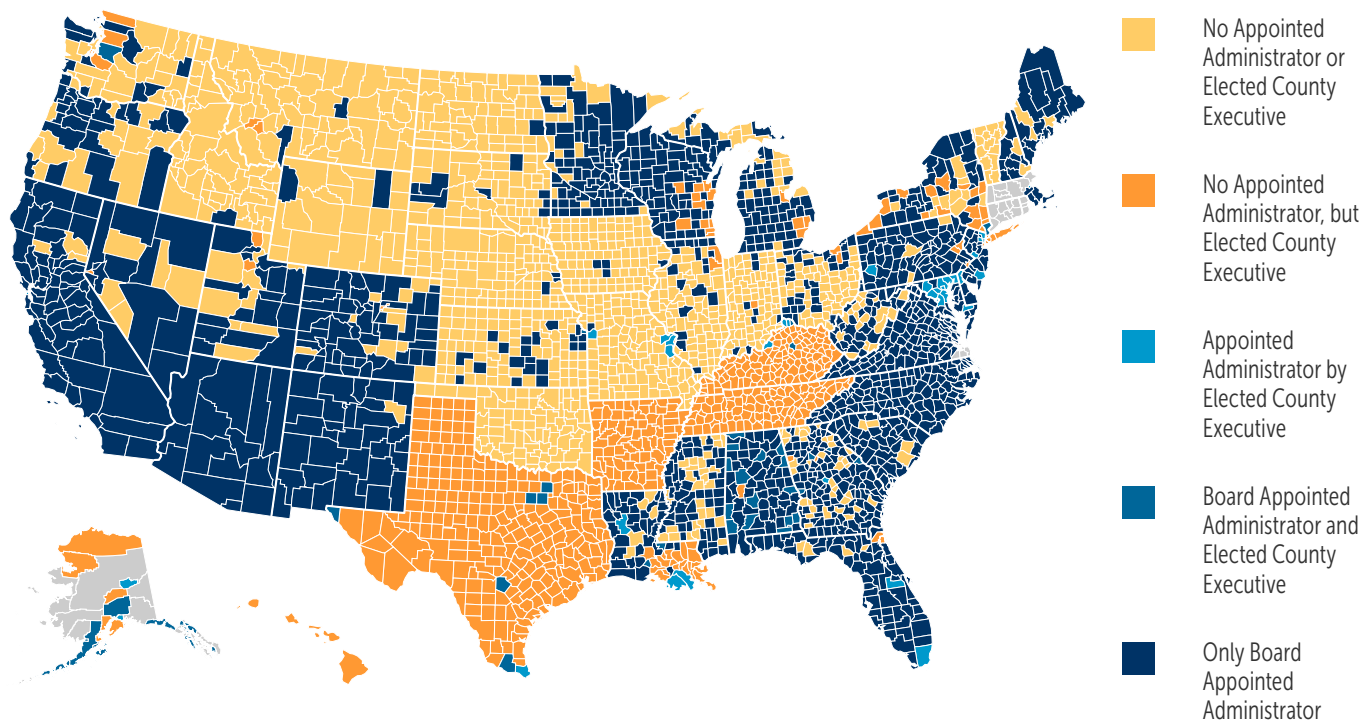
**3 NEARLY HALF OF COUNTIES APPOINT ADMINISTRATORS.** Forty-three (43) percent of counties (1,322) have an appointed administrator, with the majority of them located in the South (See Map 2). The overwhelming majority of county administrators are county board appointed, with a small number appointed by elected county executives. Northeastern counties are most likely to appoint an administrator, with almost three quarters employing an administrator. In contrast, the administrator function is not common in Midwestern counties; only 30 percent of these counties make use of this function. In seven states (Arizona, Delaware, Maryland, Massachusetts, North Carolina, New Jersey and Virginia), all counties appoint administrators while none of the counties in five other states (Arkansas, Hawaii, Oklahoma, Tennessee and Vermont) have this function.

**43%** OF COUNTIES (1,322) HAVE AN APPOINTED ADMINISTRATOR

**IN 7 STATES** ALL COUNTIES APPOINT ADMINISTRATORS

The absence of an appointed county administrator does not indicate necessarily that the county elects an executive for administration. While 40 percent of Southern counties do not have appointed administrators, but elected executives, the majority of Midwestern and Western counties do not employ either administrative function. County size partly explains this situation. Counties of varying sizes, from

## MAP 2. OVERVIEW OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATION – APPOINTED COUNTY ADMINISTRATORS IN THE 3,069 COUNTIES, AS OF MAY 2015



\*Parts of Alaska and Massachusetts colored in grey do not have county governments.

Note: Connecticut and Rhode Island, parts of Alaska and Massachusetts do not have county governments.

Source: NACo analysis, as of May 2015



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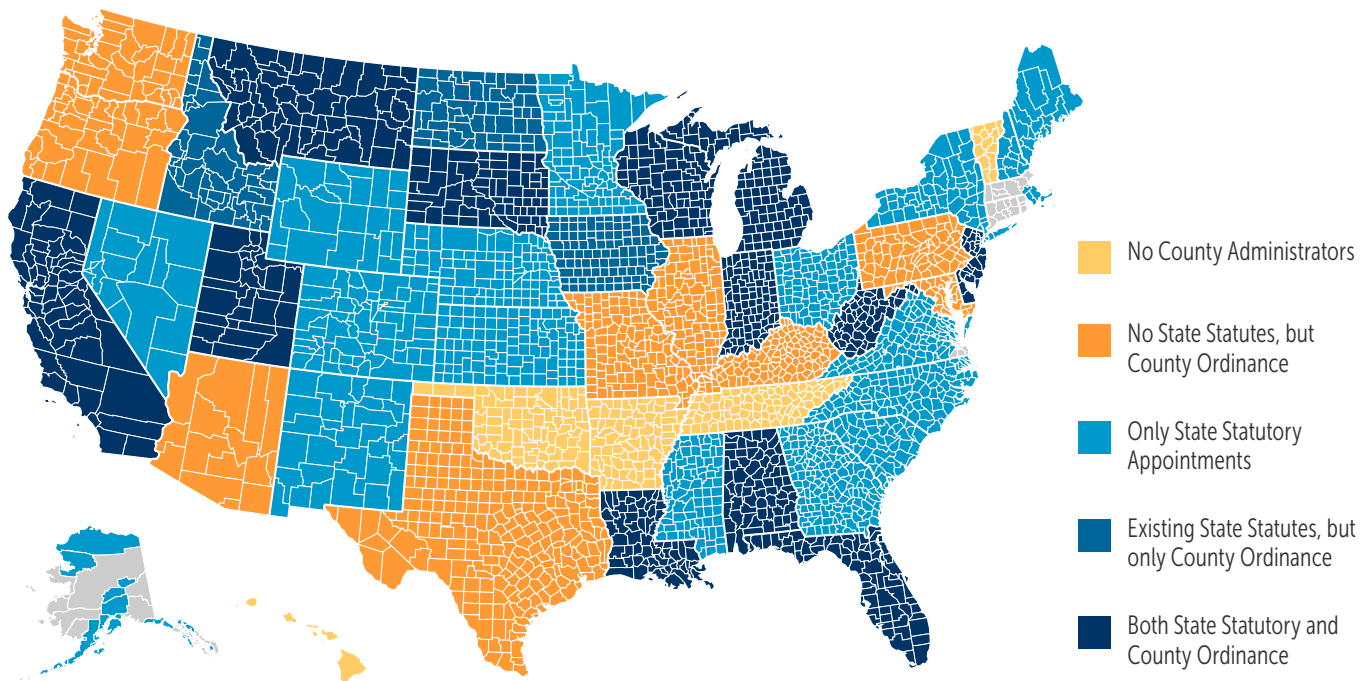
Petroleum County, Mont. (485 residents) to Los Angeles, Calif. (more than 10 million residents) appoint county administrators. However, small counties — with less than 50,000 residents — are more likely not to have either an appointed administrator or an elected executive. Almost half of small counties do not use these administrative functions, instead relying on executive management by the county board and other elected constitutional officers.

### 4 THE MAJORITY OF STATES HAVE STATUTES THAT ALLOW COUNTY BOARDS THE RIGHT TO APPOINT A COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR.

Thirty-four (34) of the 43 states with appointed county administrators have current statutes sanctioning this function. The statutes range from only allowing the county board the right to appoint a county administrator (California, Colorado, Georgia and Nebraska), specifying it for a certain county (Delaware and Maine) to full description of a county manager form of government (in states such as Alaska, Florida, North Carolina and Virginia). In some states, such as West Virginia, the statute has been amended over time, going from approval for the county board to appoint the position in 1967 to creating a county manager form of government in 2008.

**34  
OF THE  
43** STATES WITH APPOINTED  
COUNTY ADMINISTRATORS  
HAVE CURRENT STATUTES  
SANCTIONING THIS FUNCTION

### MAP 3. COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR — ENABLED BY STATE STATUTE OR BY COUNTY ORDINANCE, AS OF MAY 2015



\* Parts of Alaska and Massachusetts colored in grey do not have county governments

Notes: Some of the county administrator positions in West Virginia are based on the 1967 statute and none of them are based on the 2008 statute. Connecticut and Rhode Island do not have county governments

Source: NACo analysis of state statutes and interviews with state associations of counties and county administrators and managers, as of May 2015. For more information about specific statutes by state, please consult the state level profiles available on NACo's County Explorer interactive: [explorer.naco.org](http://explorer.naco.org).



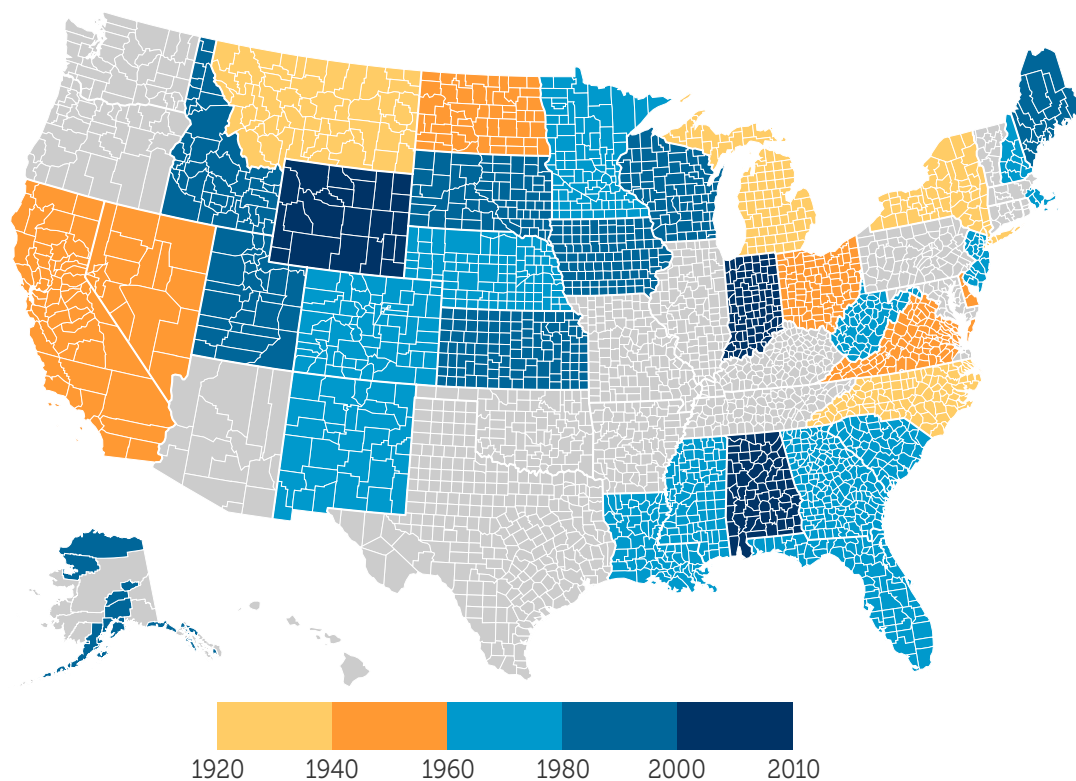
Counties can choose not to use the state statute for appointing administrators. In 16 states (such as Alabama, Florida, New Jersey and South Dakota), some counties decided to appoint administrators through county ordinances and not state law (See Map 3). Further, in three states (Idaho, Iowa and North Dakota) none of the counties used the statute, but appointed administrators based on county ordinance. These are often appointments with more limited authority than under the state statute. In the absence of enabling state law in nine states, county boards appointed administrators by county ordinance or by board hiring decision (such as Arizona, Illinois, Maryland and Pennsylvania).

**Counties can choose not to use the state statute for appointing administrators.**

## 5 THE TREND TOWARDS APPOINTING COUNTY ADMINISTRATORS ACCELERATED IN THE 1970S AND 1980S.

Some of the first state statutes sanctioning the appointment of county administrator appeared as early as 1920s in North Carolina and Michigan. The number of these state statutes started to rise in the 1950s and 1960s, but reached its peak in the 1970s and 1980s. For example, 13 states passed statutes that sanction county boards the right to appoint a county administrator in the 1970s and 1980s (See Map 4). Sometimes, the states were merely

### MAP 4. STATE STATUTES SANCTIONING THE APPOINTMENT OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR — TIMELINE, AS OF MAY 2015



\*States colored in grey do not have enabling state statutes. Parts of Alaska and Massachusetts colored in grey do not have county governments.

Note: Connecticut and Rhode Island do not have county governments.

Source: NACo analysis of state statutes and interviews with state association of counties and county administrators and managers, as of May 2015. For more information about specific statutes by state, please consult the state level profiles available on NACo's County Explorer interactive: [explorer.naco.org](http://explorer.naco.org).



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**13**  
STATES

**PASSED STATUTES THAT SANCTION COUNTY  
BOARDS THE RIGHT TO APPOINT A COUNTY  
ADMINISTRATOR IN THE 1970S AND 1980S**

catching up with the reality on the ground. In 14 states, counties appointed administrators by county ordinance before the state statutes were passed. For example, the first South Carolina county to appoint an administrator (Charleston County) took action in 1949, almost 30 years before the state law.

The timeline of the first county administrator in the state mirrors closely the state statutes' trajectory, with the bulk occurring in 1970s and 1980s. In 19 states the first county administrators appeared in the 1970s and 1980s. The rapid increase in population and the expansion of county responsibilities partially explain this result. The rise in the number of federal programs and unfunded federal mandates between 1970s and 1980s also put pressure on counties to centralize their administration in the hands of professionals (See Figure 2).

County administrators run the county operations efficiently, ensure counties provide quality services to their residents and keep counties resilient in the face of unexpected changes. County boards appoint county administrators to assist them in the management of the county operations and implement the county board's policy. County administrator



NACo members march to U.S. Capitol to rally against unfunded mandates in 1994

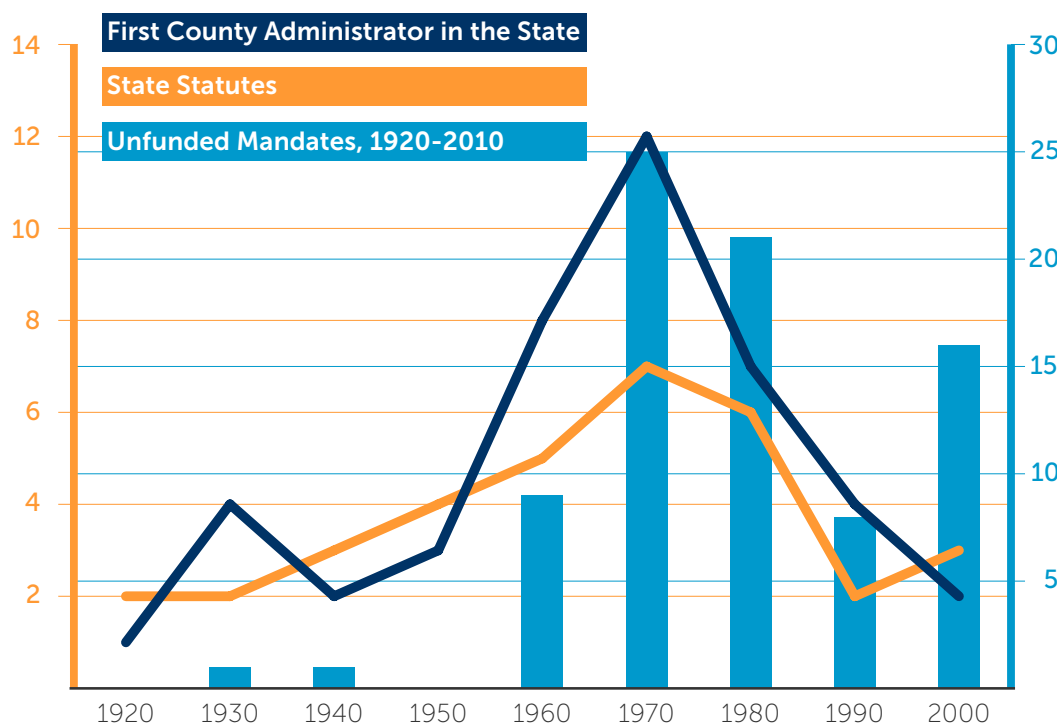


is a function with many possible titles, fulfilled by various positions with different levels of authority. They vary tremendously around the country and same titles can carry different responsibilities depending on the county. Most states have enabling statutes for county boards to appoint administrators, but often counties use county ordinances to create this function. With increasing county populations and county responsibilities, combined with the dramatic rise in the number of federal programs and unfunded federal mandates in the 1970s and 1980s, a growing number of counties opted to transfer and consolidate the daily management responsibilities under a county administrator structure.

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## FIGURE 2. THE MOVEMENT TOWARDS APPOINTING COUNTY ADMINISTRATORS

Timeline of the First County Administrator in the State and First State Statute Sanctioning the Appointment of County Administrators, as of May 2015



Note: In 1993, the U.S. Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations identified 63 federal statutes considered imposing "major" restrictions or costs on state and local governments. After 1996, CBO identified 18 enacted mandates with costs over the threshold (based on the 1996 Unfunded Mandates Reform Act definition).

Sources: NACo analysis of state statutes and interviews with state association of counties and county administrators and managers, as of May 2015. For unfunded mandates by decade: U.S. Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (ACIR), *Federal Regulation of State and Local Governments: The Mixed Record of the 1980s*, A-126 (Washington, DC: ACIR, 1993) cited in Congressional Research Office, *Unfunded Mandates Reform Act: History, Impact, and Issues*, 2014; Congressional Budget Office, *A Review of CBO's Activities in 2014 Under the Unfunded Mandates Reform Act*, 2015. For more information about specific statutes by state, please consult the state level profiles available on NACo's County Explorer interactive: [explorer.naco.org](http://explorer.naco.org).



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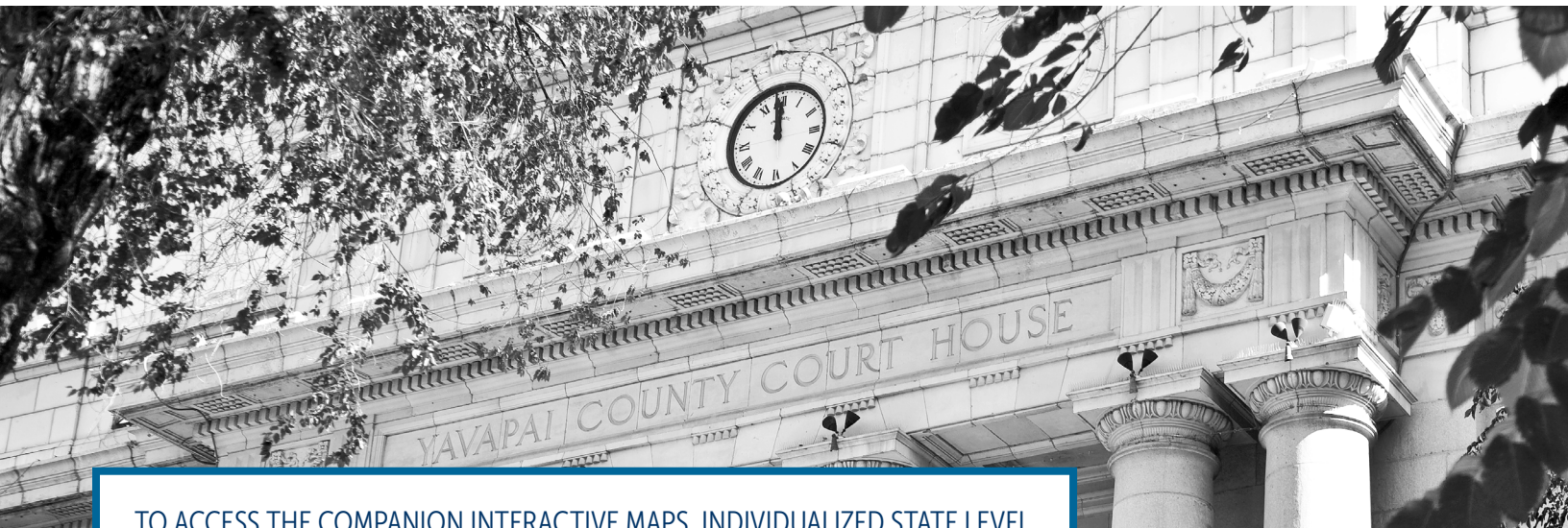
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### ABOUT NACo

The National Association of Counties (NACo) unites America's 3,069 county governments. Founded in 1935, NACo brings county officials together to advocate with a collective voice on national policy, exchange ideas and build new leadership skills, pursue transformational county solutions, enrich the public's understanding of county government and exercise exemplary leadership in public service.



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