

Kansas Government

The state government of Kansas is based in Topeka, which has served as the state capital since 1861. Topeka was named the permanent capital only after considerable disagreement.

The first capital of Kansas was Fort Leavenworth, where territorial Governor Andrew Reeder had his headquarters. Other state capitals during the territorial period were Shawnee Mission, Pawnee, Lecompton, Minneola, Leavenworth and Lawrence. Some of those towns served as the capital several times—the capital changed whenever the territorial leaders decided to move it.

Kansas became a state January 29, 1861. In November of that year an election was held to decide on a capital, and Topeka was selected over Lawrence and several other cities. In later years there were several attempts to move the capital to a more central location, but none came close to succeeding.

A progressive yet cautious spirit has always characterized the government of Kansas. The state has led the country in many important areas. Kansas government has changed to meet contemporary needs; yet it has retained those things that are “tried and true” and that continue to be necessary, effective and efficient.

Kansas is one of the few states in the nation that does not issue revenue bonds to finance general government activities. A “cash-basis law” requires that the state operate strictly on the money available. Bond issues are allowed for capital improvements, such as major roads and buildings.

Kansas leaders have never been afraid to try new ways of doing things. The state pioneered in the use of the direct primary election. It was Senator Bristow, the first United States senator nominated in Kansas under that system, who introduced in Congress the resolution that put direct election of U.S. senators into the U.S. Constitution. Prior to that time senators were not elected by the people, but were chosen by the state legislators.

State government officials are constantly working for economic development in Kansas. Great strides have been made in the last few years, many businesses have expanded, new businesses have located in the state, and numerous new jobs have been created.

Elected officials from Kansas (both state and federal officeholders) have often served in recent years as spokesmen on behalf of farmers. Agriculture is of great importance to the state’s economy, and there has been great concern in Kansas over the problems plaguing farmers.

Kansas led the nation in granting suffrage to women. The first Legislature in 1861 gave women the right to vote in school elections. Suffrage was extended in 1887 to city and bond elections, and in that year a Kansas town elected the first woman mayor in the country—Mrs. Medora Salter of Argonia.

The rights of women were recognized in the original state constitution, which guarantees women equal privileges with men in the ownership of property and control of children. This was a tremendous advance over the rights allowed women in the eastern states at that time. Universal suffrage was granted in Kansas in 1912 by constitutional amendment.

Kansas was one of the first states to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment to the United States Constitution, making ratification March 28, 1972.

Kansas has the traditional three branches of government: executive, legislative and judicial.

Executive Branch

The executive branch includes the elected state officers provided for in the Kansas Constitution: governor, lieutenant governor, secretary of state, attorney general and members of the State Board of Education. Other elected state officers are the commissioner of insurance and state treasurer. All serve four-year terms.

All offices in the executive branch are either directly or indirectly controlled by one of the elective officers, or are special agencies created by the Legislature to function independently within state government.

The executive branch offices exist to enforce or carry out the laws enacted by the legislative branch. The structure of the executive branch has evolved over the years to its present form. Governors and legislators have made changes as necessary through executive reorganization orders, constitutional amendments and legislation.

Major state agencies are now headed by cabinet-level secretaries. In recent years, the efficiency of state government has been increased by combining similar agencies and abolishing antiquated, unnecessary ones.

In 1978, the Legislature adopted a "Sunset Law," which automatically abolishes specified state agencies at certain times. When an agency is due to be abolished, it may only be continued by receiving renewed statutory authority. The Legislature has the power to abolish any state agency (except constitutional offices) at any time.

Legislative Branch

The State Senate and the House of Representatives make up the legislative branch. There are 40 senators and 125 representatives, all elected by the voters of Kansas. Each senator represents approximately 70,986 people and each house member represents about 22,716 Kansans. Senators serve four-year terms and representatives serve two-year terms.

The Legislature, which meets annually, has the responsibility to create, amend or repeal state laws; appropriate money to be spent by state government; review rules and regulations of state agencies and departments; propose amendments to the Kansas Constitution; and approve or disapprove proposed amendments to the federal constitution.

Since the late 1960s, the Legislature has made great progress towards becoming a truly efficient and effective lawmaking body. A "Legislative Improvement Award" was presented to the Kansas Legislature in 1976. The award was given by Legis 50/The Center for Legislative Improvement ". . . to recognize the progress made in strengthening the legislative institution in order to provide better representation for the people of the state of Kansas."

One major reform enacted in recent years is the lengthening and expanding of legislative sessions to allow more time and flexibility. Sessions are now limited to 90 days in even-numbered years and are unlimited in odd-numbered years, although generally they are held to 90 days.

Organizational meetings are now held every other year, following election of new legislators, before the session begins. Legislative officers are chosen at that time, and the meetings give freshman lawmakers a chance to get oriented.

Prefiling of legislative bills between sessions, carry-over of bills from one session to the next in nonelection years, and committee meetings between sessions are reforms that have helped to increase flexibility and provide better workload distribution.

Reconstructing and improvement of support services have been vital elements in the legislative revamping. All legislators now have offices in the Capitol available throughout the year, and clerical services are provided during sessions. The legislative leaders have full-time administrative and clerical staffs. The Revisor of Statutes' Office, the Division of Legislative Administrative Services and other support offices have been strengthened.

Increased pay for legislators has made service in the lawmaking body more attractive to and possible for qualified citizens.

Strong ethics legislation has been adopted to regulate legislative lobbying by special interest groups.

Judicial Branch

The state's judicial system is headed by the Supreme Court with a chief justice and six justices. The other courts are the Court of Appeals, with a chief judge and 13 judges, and 31 district courts. Each judicial district has district judges and district magistrate judges, as prescribed by law.

A major overhaul of the judicial system has taken place in recent years. In 1973 the Judiciary Study Advisory Committee was appointed by the chief justice pursuant to legislative authority. The committee made several recommendations for improvement of the court system, and most of the suggestions were eventually implemented by the Legislature.

The state courts and the district courts have been joined to form the Unified Judicial Department. To ease the workload on the Supreme Court, the Court of Appeals was created in 1977 and made a part of the department.

Part of the court system overhaul was establishment of a nonpartisan method for selection of district court judges. The majority of districts now use this method. However, it was adopted on a local option basis, and several districts have chosen, by popular vote, to elect their judges by a partisan election process.

A major aspect of the court system overhaul is state financing of the entire personnel cost for the judicial system. These costs have traditionally been borne by the counties, but have now been assumed by the state.

Other court system reforms enacted recently are adoption of a Code of Judicial Conduct and establishment of uniform procedures for district courts.

The Supreme Court maintains a regular program of education, sponsoring a variety of seminars on a continuing basis for judges and support personnel in the judicial system.

Local Government

Kansas has 105 counties and 626 incorporated cities.

Kansas cities operate under various forms of government, including the commission form, the mayor-council-manager system, the commission-manager system, the mayor-council plan, the modified mayor-council plan, and the consolidated city/county system.

Local government in Kansas has some colorful history. In the early days of statehood, "county seat wars" took place. Being named the county seat could help to ensure the future of a town, so there was a great deal of competition for that designation. During the county seat wars, records were stolen, ballot boxes were tampered with and shooting and bloodshed took place. In Stevens County six men were killed and the militia was sent in to restore order.