

Introduction to Municipal Governance Structure prepared for “Designing City Governments for Success”



Jered B. Carr
Department of Public Policy,
Management, and Analytics
jbcarr@uic.edu



Introduction to Municipal Governance in U.S.

- Two general forms are widely used:
 - Mayor-Council (often called Strong Mayor)
 - Council-Manager (sometimes called Reform Government)
- Each form incentivizes different benefits:
 - Next few slides offer a basic framework for understanding fundamental differences in the two forms
 - And offers a way to think about potential impact of specific proposals offered to improve performance

Basic Mayor-Council (M-C) Form

- Utilizes a separation of powers structure similar to the national government:
 - Separation of powers creates independent—and often competing—centers of executive and legislative power
 - Elected mayor serves as chief executive officer
 - manages the executive agencies of the government
 - Elected city council is legislative branch
 - responsible for authorizing revenues and expenditures
 - Distributing power and authority across the two branches is intended to check and balance the power of each
 - System is power smashing; obstacle to tyranny

Basic Council-Manager (C-M) Form

- Utilizes a unification of powers structure typical to private corporations:
 - Unifying executive and legislative powers is expected to improve performance
 - Elected city council has legislative and executive authority, mayor serves on council
 - Council sets policy for the government and hires manager to serve as chief executive officer
 - Unification reduces conflict compared to M-C form
 - And permits appointment of CEO based on expertise in public management rather political appeal

The “Political-Administrative” Leadership Dimension

- Basic Mayor-Council form anchors the “political” end of this dimension:
 - Emphasizes inclusive, competitive (political) decision-making process for setting priorities and policy development
- Basic Council-Manager form anchors the “administrative” end of this dimension:
 - Emphasizes insulated (nonpolitical) decision-making process applying expert knowledge to administration
 - And in support of priorities and policy development by council

Most Cities are in the Large Middle

- The public does not seek political or administrative leadership, but both:
 - Political leadership is viewed as critical for promoting responsiveness of the government to the public
 - Administrative leadership is seen as critical for technically competent management of government services
 - We can identify key elements of these forms and how they support these different objectives
 - Communities strike this balance differently

Provisions Affecting this Balance

| | |
|---|---|
| Characteristics of Major Political Offices <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Length of major's term• Mayor's status as full- or part-time official• Length of terms of members of city council• Status of council members as full- or part-time officials• Number of seats on city-council | Election Procedures <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use of party affiliation in city elections• Process used to select/elect the mayor• Process used to elect council-members (e.g. number of districts) |
| Allocation of Administrative Authority among the Mayor, Council, and CAO <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Formal participation of mayor in decisions of council• Power of mayor to veto council decisions• Provision of staff for mayor• Provision of staff for members for city council• Assignment of power to determine contracting and purchasing policies• Assignment of power to determine staffing policies | Allocation of Admin Authority-Continued <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Authorization by charter of appointment of CAO• Assignment of power to nominate/appoint CAO• Assignment of power to nominate/appoint charter officers• Assignment of power to appoint/supervise department managers |

Source: Carr and Karuppusamy, ARPA 2008, Table 1

Affecting this Balance in Mayor-Council Cities

Prioritizing Policy Leadership by Empowering the Elected Mayor

- Empowering mayor in decisions of council
- Empowering mayor to veto council decisions
- Empowering mayor to expand staff
- Empowering mayor to determine contracting and purchasing policies
- Empowering mayor to determine staffing policies
- Empowering mayor to nominate/appoint CAO
- Empowering mayor nominate/appoint charter officers
- Empowering mayor to appoint/supervise department managers

Reducing Mayoral Leadership by Empowering Council or Appointed CAO

- Limiting/excluding participation of mayor in decisions of council
- Limiting power of mayor to veto council decisions
- Mandating/increasing staff for members for city council
- Limiting/excluding power of mayor to determine contracting and purchasing policies
- Limiting/excluding power of mayor to determine staffing policies
- Limiting/excluding power of mayor to nominate/appoint CAO
- Limiting/excluding power of mayor to nominate/appoint charter officers
- Limiting/excluding power of mayor to appoint/supervise department managers

Source: Carr and Karuppusamy, ARPA 2008, Table 1 and Figure 1

Networks & Governance Lab

<https://cuppa.uic.edu/net-gov-lab/>

Department of Public Policy,
Management, and Analytics
College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs
University of Illinois Chicago