

Institutional Features of Municipal Government

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Comparing Forms

	Mayor-Council	Council-Manager
Underlying principles	Separation of powers Modeled after the national and state systems of government	Separation of partisan politics from administration Professional management Modeled after U.S. corporate structure
Legislative authority	Council	Council and Mayor
Executive/administrative authority	Mayor (optional CAO)	Manager (who operates as CEO and CAO)
Selection of Mayor	Elected	Elected (or chosen by the Council)
Removal of Mayor	End of term/recall	End of term/recall/removal by council
Conditions for removal of CEO	End of term/recall	Can be removed without cause at any time
Mayor is member of Council	No	Yes
Mayor votes with Council	No	Yes (or only in a tie)

Comparing Forms

	Mayor-Council	Council-Manager
Appointment & removal of CAO	Mayor	Council
Appointment & removal of department heads	Mayor (with or without council confirmation)	Manager (with or without council confirmation)
Appointment of advisory boards	Varies	Varies
Policy development	Mayor can propose	Manager can recommend
Policy advice	Staff	Manager and staff
Policy approval	Council	Council
Veto authority	Mayor sometimes has veto	Mayor rarely has veto (Charlotte)
Policy implementation	Mayor, no role for Council	Manager, no role for Council

Form in the
Largest Cities

Mayor-Council	Council-Manager
New York	Phoenix
Los Angeles	Dallas
Chicago	San Antonio
Houston	San Jose
Philadelphia	
San Diego	

Cities 300,000-500,000 Population

Form of Government	Frequency	Percent
Mayor-council (11 have CAOs)	18	54.5
Council-manager	15	45.5
Total	33	100.00



Size of council (300,000-500,000)

- Most common council size is 7 or 9 members (either form)
- Size varies from 5-26
- In the mayor-council form, 12 all-district and 6 mixed

Mayors (300,000-500,000)

Power/Authority	Mayor-Council	Council-Manager
Full-time	88%	33%
Presiding officer—council	22%	100%
Vote (always)	6%	60%
Vote (tie breaker)	22%	27%
Veto	100%	27%
Appoint CAO	67%	0%
Appoint department heads	61%	0%
Budget formulation authority	56%	0%

Mayor-council mayors



Appointment of the CAO

67% mayor alone

25% mayor with approval of council

8% council



Appointment of Department Heads

61% mayor alone

11% mayor with approval of council



Budget

56% mayor

28% mayor and CAO

11% CAO



CAO

Usually works at
the direction of
the mayor

Many require
hiring based on
professional
qualifications

A few, like Atlanta,
are very specific

What makes a city a true hybrid?

- Cannot determine whether there is separation or unification of powers
- Lacks role balance
- Very few municipalities are true hybrids





Why do cities consider changes?

- Very few wholesale changes in form each year
- Minor changes more common
- Reasons:
 - Tragedy/major event/corruption
 - Charismatic mayor seeking greater power
 - Required to convene charter commission

Summary of Research Findings

Bond ratings—Dove 2017

Innovation—Nelson & Svara 2012

Corruption—Nelson & Afonso 2019

Conflict—Nelson & Nollenberger 2011

Budgetary solvency—Jimenez 2020

Public spending—Coate & Knight 2011

Voter turnout—no studies in the past decade

Other research on form is not about better/worse

The accountability question

In government, accountability is derived from four sources:

- the law
- transparency
- oversight
- professional standards



Other points about form

No form provides a mayor with policymaking authority independent of council

Emergency powers, in all forms, do not allow for major policy change independent of council, unless previously delegated through charter or ordinance

The term “weak mayor” should generally not be used

The NCL Model City Charter endorses the council-manager form with a popularly elected mayor

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