

# Designing City Governments for Success



*Responses from Dr. Kimberly Nelson and Dr. Jered Carr to additional questions about city forms of government*

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**1. If a “strong mayor” city such as New Orleans wanted to retain, but optimize, its form of government, what areas should it consider and what pitfalls should it avoid?**

**Kim:** New Orleans’ charter has previously been modified to enhance the professionalism of the city government. For example, mayoral appointments of department heads must be approved by the council. I am not sure whether additional incremental changes would affect performance.

A pitfall to avoid is creating a full hybrid form of government, one in which it is impossible to discern whether there is separation or unification of legislative and executive authority. For example, assigning the mayor a significant formal role on council in a mayor-council government – voting, committee assignments, etc. – would cause a blurring of forms.

**Jered:** I would add that another pitfall to be avoided is underestimating the importance of the policy leadership a strong mayor is able to provide the government, particularly in the presence of significant political conflict over policy priorities.

**2. How are chief administrative officers (CAOs) like city managers, and how are they different? How can a city strengthen the CAO’s role – or requirements for the position – to increase the likelihood of effective outcomes for citizens?**

**Kim:** This really depends on the municipality. Some places in the country model the CAO position to be nearly identical to a city manager in roles and responsibilities, and the difference is primarily that the mayor retains the role of chief executive officer (CEO). In other places, especially those with strong mayors, the CAO works at the direction of the mayor, who also hires and fires the CAO.

One good study that looked at the differences in city manager/CAO roles and responsibilities is: Ammons, David N. (2008). City manager and city administrator role similarities and differences: Perceptions among persons who have served as both. *The American Review of Public Administration*, 38(1), 24-40.

**Jered:** I agree that the Ammons article is a good source for understanding basic differences in these roles in general. Also, as a general matter, effective outcomes for residents are more likely when the individuals in these roles have the professional

experience appropriate for the role, sufficient autonomy from elected leaders over operational decisions, and productive relationships with the mayor and council. These outcomes in part are the product of rules, but also require the establishment and maintenance of norms that support constructive relations.

**3. How do city councils vet candidates for city manager and how big a role does politics play? What are some of the best practices for attracting qualified candidates and selecting someone who can serve the city's needs?**

**Kim:** Typically, a council discusses its priorities for a city manager and uses that to craft the job description. Some city councils also use feedback from staff to help in this process. In a city the size of New Orleans, this is usually done in consultation with a local government management search firm. The search firm will reach out to potential candidates who fit that list of priorities. I think it is important that city leaders consider how to make the best impression on potential candidates. The search process is really a matching process. It is not just about the candidates selling themselves to the council and to the public, it is also about the city officials convincing candidates that the city is a great place to work. The best managers want to work somewhere they can make a difference and where council has potential to reach consensus more often than not.

**Jered:** The only thing I would add to what Kim said about the ability of the council to reach consensus is that the climate of the council is an important factor in attracting candidates and retaining them over time. Did the opening result from the election of new council members seeking a change in direction for the city? Was the previous manager dismissed because of a consensus on the council about poor performance or by a slight majority of council members? Or did the previous manager retire after many years and she and her team enjoyed broad and deep support from the council?

**4. How much independence and authority are typical for a city manager of a large city? What decisions and actions can the city manager take without the council's approval?**

**Kim:** The amount of independence and authority varies based on charter provisions. The manager does not have independent authority to make policy. Managers have independent spending authority for small expenditures – usually \$25,000 or less. Higher expenditures must go through the budget process. Managers usually have authority to appoint department heads, draft the budget, and run daily operations. They do not serve on council but attend meetings to answer questions, advise council, and guide staff presentations to council. Managers are obligated, legally and ethically, to follow through on council directives unless the manager believes that directive is illegal.

**Jered:** I would add that it is important to keep in mind that the relationship between the council and manager must be managed. Mutual trust and respect are important to protecting the independence needed. Trust and charter rules are important to defining the responsibilities of each and how they will work together, but norms supporting a productive working relationship must be cultivated over time.

**5. Is there any data on the average length of service for the city manager of a large city?**

**Kim:** There is no recent data. A 2003 article stated: “The average tenure of managers in a council-manager city has been lengthening over the decades. In the 1960s, the average was 3.5 years; in the 1970s, it was 4.4 years; in the 1980s, it was 5.4 years; and in 2000, it was 6.9 years” (Watson and Hassett 2003, p. 73). Though these numbers are low, some managers spend 30 years or more in one place. Per their code of ethics, managers should stay in one place no less than two years. Of course, they are at-will employees and may be removed by the council at any time.

**Jered:** Something to keep in mind is that conflict on the council, whether based in differences in policy preferences or personalities, impacts turnover. As Kim noted, we do not have reliable data on this issue, but it is reasonable to assume a city that experiences significant and ongoing political conflict might see higher turnover in this role. I have known many managers who served multiple decades as city manager, but these were cities with relatively low political conflict and stability in council membership, where the same people served on the council election after election.

**6. New Orleans’ neighbor, Jefferson Parish, has an elected parish council and an elected parish president. Generally speaking, the Jefferson Parish president has less executive power than the New Orleans mayor, e.g., contracting authority resides with the council. How does the Jefferson Parish system fit into the spectrum of Mayor-Council and Council-Manager governments – is it a hybrid of the two, or is it more of a mayor-council with a strong council, like Los Angeles or Chicago? And do you have any observations or comments on the elected parish president and perceived “strong” council forms of governance in the parishes surrounding Orleans?**

**Kim:** Parishes are the equivalent of counties in other states. Given the functional and structural differences, it is difficult to make comparisons between counties and municipalities. In particular, many of a parish/county’s functions are required by state government and separately elected constitutional officers exist in parishes/counties and not in municipalities. Even when there are other elected officials in municipalities, such as clerks or attorneys, they work under the purview of the council.

Throughout the country, there is a continuum of authority granted to chief executives; the variability is enormous. I would not describe Jefferson Parish as a hybrid because the separation between executive and legislative functions is retained.

**Jered:** I do not have a lot to add to what Kim said, other than to note that over the last few decades, many county governments that were created with appointed executives have strengthened the executive by making it an elected position. I do not know the history of Jefferson Parish and the others enough to offer thoughts about the effectiveness of their governance structures.

**7. Few large cities (populations of 250,000 or more) have attempted to change their form of government in the past decade. Why do you think this is the case? Is it easier for small cities to change their form of government?**

**Kim:** According to the data that I keep on municipal government change, since 2000, there have been 12 attempts to change form of government (2 are in Sacramento) in large cities. Four were successful. There are more small cities than large, so more attempts to change, but the proportion is similar, and the process is the same. The referenda often occur as special elections or in odd-number years, so turnout is usually low, and the decision typically turns based on a handful of votes. If public sentiment is generally negative towards the government or the effort for change is well-funded and well-publicized, it is likely to be successful.

**Jered:** A couple of reasons come to my mind. The first is that this kind of issue typically does not have huge salience with the public, absent a major event that highlights limitations in the current form. Given this, change of form does not get on the agenda very often. Also, changes in form of government are typically perceived as creating a large change in the local government. Major changes in city charters (aka “local government constitutions”) usually required an accelerating event as mentioned above. Cities are more likely to adopt provisions that will produce less comprehensive change.

**8. Is there any comparison to city government structure in other countries?**

**Kim:** The council-manager form (a U.S. creation) has been widely adopted in Europe. Comparisons with the U.S. can be found in some books, but most other countries have stronger national government that makes comparison difficult. This book is a good comparison with Europe: <https://upittpress.org/books/9780822957850/>.

**Jered:** I agree with Kim on both counts. There is a lot of interest in our council-manager form and comparisons across nations are difficult given fundamental differences in fiscal and other aspects of autonomy. There can also be critical differences in accountability mechanisms in nondemocratic settings. In China, for example, accountability is to officials in higher levels of government, rather than local residents.

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