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August 2008 · Volume 90 · Number 7

Cover Story



Taking Stock of the Council-Manager Form at 100

by James H. Svara and Kimberly L. Nelson

In 1908, a single city adopted what would eventually become the council-manager form of government. In 2008, more than 3,500 cities with populations exceeding 2,500 persons and more than 370 counties use the form. Beyond the direct effect of introducing a new structural option for the organization of local government, this new form also elevated the option of appointing a centrally located generalist administrator in other forms of government. Almost half of mayor-council governments and more than half of the commission and town meeting governments have a chief administrative officer (CAO) or city administrator, and such a position is often found in elected county executive governments as well.

With the hundredth anniversary of the establishment of the city manager position in Staunton, Virginia, which ultimately led to the council-manager form of government, it is appropriate to take stock of what the form means, its current status in local government, and its continuing significance. Some suggest that the time of substantial growth is over (and reversals may be coming) and that changes in structure and politics make the council-manager and mayor-council forms indistinguishable.

Furthermore, there are signs of unease among local government managers about the future of professionalism. The arguments presented here are that form continues to make a difference and the use of the council-manager form is still growing. Despite challenges that the council-manager form and professionalism generally face in local government, the future is bright.

There has been much emphasis recently on the supposed “blurring” of distinctions between forms, “adaptation” of forms, and development of “hybrid” forms. The impression is created that the changes that are occurring in the structures of local governments have erased the distinctiveness of form.

Most notably, H. George Frederickson, Gary A. Johnson, and Curtis H. Wood argued in 2004 that a breakdown of two contrasting models of local government based on “traditional” and

“reform” elements had by the 1990s altered forms of government: “the fusion of these two *models* had resulted in the dominant modern *form* of American local government, the adapted city.”¹ These impressions affect how practitioners themselves perceive what is happening to their world.

The environmental scan developed for the ICMA Strategic Planning Committee, for example, concluded that “numerous studies suggest that the council-manager form of government has been adapted continually.” Commentator Alan Ehrenhalt has argued that mayor-council and council-manager forms are “merging,” and he asserts that an increasing number of cities “have jumbled the systems together so thoroughly that it’s impossible to put them in any category at all.”²

All these statements confuse “form” and “plan” or “model.” The original reform *model* consisted of the council-manager form and the electoral practices of choosing the mayor within the council, selecting councilmembers at-large, and using a nonpartisan ballot. This combination was contained in the second Model City Charter and also was commonly referred to as the council-manager plan. Changes in electoral practices are important, but they do not alter the form of government itself.

The council-manager form can be and is combined with a wide range of structural features. Beyond direct election of the mayor and district representation, most counties including those with the council-manager form use partisan elections, and cities in Europe that use parliamentary systems that approximate the council-manager form usually have active political parties.

The form can create a balanced relationship between politics and professionalism regardless of how the political dimension is organized. The image of instability and corrosive change in the council-manager form is not warranted. The idea that forms themselves are unimportant or indistinguishable can be challenged on conceptual and empirical grounds.

The debate over form of government continues because American local governments have a choice of which form they will use. The United States is unusual among countries in the world with widespread use of two major forms of government based on different constitutional principles. The overwhelming majority of cities do not change their form, but circumstances can arise in any local government that puts the question of changing form on the public agenda.

The council-manager form is still competing with the mayor-council or county executive form for the support of elected officials and citizens (and vice versa). Advocacy of the council-manager form is no longer a crusade to reform corrupt and incompetent governments. Most cities and counties are highly professionalized at the departmental level. Many cities with mayor-council governments have CAOs.

Proponents make the case that distinct advantages can be attained with the council-manager form because of the essential features of this form compared with the mayor-council form. To understand the claims that can be made in support of the council-manager form, it is important to review the essential features of the major forms as practiced in the United States and other countries.

Features That Differentiate Forms

There are three major features that differentiate the mayor-council and council-manager forms of government, and all three can be traced back to the origins of the form. Analogous to the distinction between presidential and parliamentary systems, the first feature is the allocation of authority.

The council-manager form places all governmental authority in the hands of the council, with certain functions assigned by law, charter, or convention to the manager appointed by the council. Authority is unified in the collective leadership body of the council. To the early reformers citing the practice of English local government, eliminating separation of powers and strengthening the council was as important to the council-manager form as the creation of the manager's position.³

The relationship between the council and the manager is based on this allocation of authority. Despite all the words that have been written and spoken about the *separation* of politics and policy from the administration, the unique feature of the council-manager form is the *interaction* of councilmembers and administrators in both policy and administration. As intended by drafters of the model city charter in 1915, the form ensures that a professional perspective will be presented to the council by the manager on all policy decisions and that council oversight can be directed to any administrative action.

With separation of powers, the mayor can limit the policy advice given to the council and can shield staff from council oversight.⁴ In the mayor-council form, mayors can also have a substantial impact on the amount and quality of professional advice they receive and share with the council and on the level of professionalism that is present in the administrative organization. In contrast with the council-manager form in which the council has authority over the manager, the mayor in the mayor-council form is a separate and independent executive.

The second feature that differentiates forms is how executive responsibilities are assigned to an elected or appointed administrator. In the council-manager form, executive functions are the responsibility of the city or county manager even if some functions on occasion are shared with other officials. In parliamentary-style local governments in northern Europe, the mayor or other top political figure commonly shares executive authority with the top administrator, but this administrator is still the chief executive officer.

In the mayor-council form, executive responsibilities are exercised under the authority of the mayor. A central coordinating administrative position can be created—a CAO—but in contrast with the clear delegation of executive authority to the city manager, the assignments to the CAO may be determined by the will of the executive mayor.⁵ In contrast, the council-manager form ensures the linkage of executive responsibilities with a professional top administrator.

When a top administrator is present in the local government form, the third distinguishing feature is whether the administrator is responsible to the entire council or to the mayor. Responsibility to the entire council is an essential characteristic of the council-manager form and helps to ensure

both transparency and a focus on the public interest rather than the political interests of a single elected official.

Along with its endorsement of the council-manager form, since 1969 ICMA has also supported CAOs and other generalist administrators in mayor-council cities or elected executive governments in counties. The presence of a CAO does not create a hybrid form in the sense of altering the basic features of the governmental structure. CAOs are universal in the cities of European countries that use the strong-mayor form—France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Germany—and in English cities that elect executive mayors.

Executive authority is still divided from legislative authority and assigned to a mayor who may in turn delegate assignments to the CAO. Most CAOs appointed by the mayor consider themselves to be agents of the mayor. Council confirmation of the CAO adds accountability to the council as well as to the mayor and helps make the CAO a bridge between the mayor and council but does not change the essential features of the form.

A possible hybrid can be found when the council is solely responsible for appointing the CAO—the situation in about one mayor-council city in four that has a population greater than 10,000 and in a higher proportion of smaller cities. The conditions of unified authority and responsibility of the CAO to the council can be found when the CAO is appointed by the council.

The presence of an elected mayor in the council-manager form does not create a hybrid so long as most executive responsibilities are assigned to the manager and the manager is responsible to the council as a whole. In a small number of council-manager cities—approximately 20 American cities with populations greater than 10,000—the mayor has been formally “empowered” with a greater role in developing the budget and selecting the manager and, in a few cases, removing the manager.

In Long Beach, California, for example, the mayor can veto the council’s selection or removal of the manager; and in Cincinnati, Ohio, and Columbus, Georgia, only the mayor can initiate removal of the city manager. These practices may represent a hybrid because the manager is aligned with the mayor alone for continuation in office.

When only the mayor can initiate termination of the manager, it is possible that the manager will seek to serve the mayor rather than the entire council and, therefore, be more a CAO than a city manager. Although this specific practice is still extremely rare, observers should continue to monitor its impact.

In sum, the essential differentiating characteristics of the major forms of government in the United States continue to depend on how authority is allocated between the council and the executive, the assignment of executive functions, and the reporting relationship of the top administrator. The cities and counties that fall within one form of government or the other may demonstrate extensive variation in specific formal and informal practices but share the basic defining characteristics.

Status: Use of Council-Manager Form and CAOs

Figure 1. Use of Major Forms of Government and Change, 1990–2007.

The use of the council-manager form has expanded dramatically and continuously throughout its history. Some suggest that the dramatic growth is over, and there has been a widespread impression that the form is losing ground in large cities. Even when examining changes since 1990, however, it is obvious that use of the council-manager form has increased. Overall percentages of cities using the major forms and other forms of government are presented in Figure 1.

All U.S. cities over 2,500 in population	1990	2007	Change		
	% (number)	% (number)	% (number)	Cities smaller than 10,000	Cities larger than 10,000
Mayor-council	54.5% (3,645)	43.5% (3,131)	-14.1% (-514)	-515	1
Council-manager	36.2% (2,420)	48.9% (3,520)	45.5% (1,100)	574	526
Other	9.2% (617)	7.5% (543)	-12.0% (-74)	-47	-27
Total	100.0% (6,682)	100.0% (7,194)	7.7% (512)		

There continues to be extensive growth, with a 45 percent increase in the number of council-manager cities. In cities under 10,000 population, there has been a large-scale decline in the use of the mayor-council form and a corresponding increase in council-manager cities, suggesting that many cities are converting their forms. In cities over this population size, the number of council-manager cities has also increased substantially along with stability in the number of mayor-council cities.

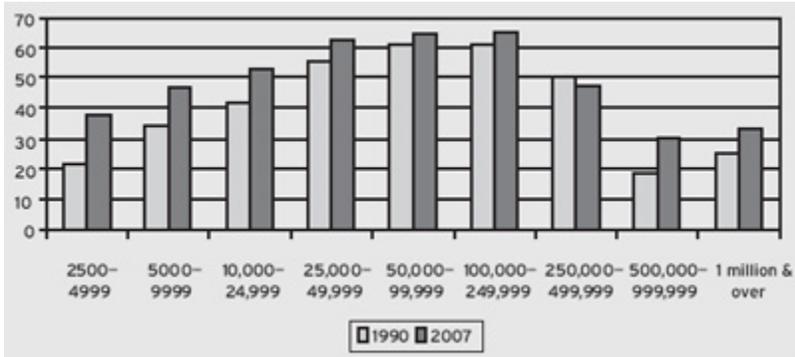
Source: *The Municipal Year Book* 1991 and 2008. The number of cities under 10,000 was 3,914 in 1990 and 3,926 in 2007. The number of cities over 10,000 was 2,768 in 1990 and 3,268 in 2007.

The expansion has occurred in cities of all sizes. Council-manager governments represented a slightly larger share in all but one of nine city size categories in 2007 compared with 1990, as indicated in Figure 2. An absolute majority of cities between 10,000 and 250,000 in population use the council-manager form, council-manager cities have a plurality over mayor-council and other forms in cities between 5,000 and 9,999, and the two forms are almost evenly divided in the cities between 250,000 and 500,000 in population.

The mayor-council form has a higher share of the cities with fewer than 5,000 and more than 500,000 inhabitants, although the number of council-manager cities is growing in these cities as well. Since 1990, the council-manager form has been replaced with the mayor-council form in nine cities with populations of more than 100,000: Fresno, California; Hartford, Connecticut; Miami, Florida; Oakland, California; Richmond, Virginia; St. Petersburg, Florida; San Diego, California; Spokane, Washington; and Toledo, Ohio. The council-manager form replaced the mayor-council form in Cedar Rapids, Iowa; El Paso, Texas; and Topeka, Kansas.

Abandonment of the council-manager form was rejected during this period in nine cities. With these crosscurrents of change, there is no clear trend in the use of form in large cities. The council-manager form is used in 55 percent of these cities, and with expected demographic changes there will be more cities over 100,000 population and more of them will use the council-manager form in the future.

Figure 2. Percentage of Cities Using the Council-Manager Form by Population Category, 1990 and 2007.



To get an accurate measurement of the use of CAOs in mayor-council cities, we have combined the

responses to surveys with other data sources. When all mayor-council cities over 10,000 population are examined, it can be seen that 48 percent have a CAO.⁶ About half of these CAOs are appointed by the mayor with the approval of the council, one-quarter are appointed by the mayor alone, and one-quarter are appointed by the council and in many respects are the functional equivalent of city managers, as noted previously.

In addition, 597 of the mayor-council cities under 10,000 population in the 2001 Form of Government survey have a CAO. Overall, the use of CAOs has probably increased since 1990.

Significance of Form

City and county managers have always made a contribution to the administrative competency and standards for service delivery, on the one hand, and to the policy direction of their governments, on the other. During the past century, managers have advised elected officials on the issues that are challenging their communities—from expanding the services provided by the local government in early decades to promoting sustainability by managing growth, preserving resources, and advancing social equity at the present.

A variety of studies document that form of government makes a difference in process and performance. As is normally the case in social science research, the differences are not black and white, but there are tendencies that are related statistically to form of government.

Mayors in council-manager cities are more likely to be facilitative leaders and enhance the performance of all officials, although these mayors are less likely to be visionaries and policy initiators. Councils perform better at handling their governance responsibilities—setting goals and priorities and overseeing administrative performance. City managers are more capable than executive mayors at providing professional advice to elected officials and supporting the council’s policy making and oversight. There is a greater degree of cooperation and less conflict among officials.

Studies show that when council-manager cities are compared with mayor-council cities the council-manager cities are more likely to have greater efficiency, sounder finances, and stronger management performance. They have greater representation of minority groups in staff positions. Council-manager cities are more likely to pursue long-term goals, use strategic planning, base service delivery on need and other professional standards, have ethics codes and boards, integrate management functions, and adopt innovative management practices.⁷

In these comparative studies, there is usually no distinction between mayor-council cities with and without a CAO. It seems likely that the mayor-council cities with CAOs will occupy an intermediate position between council-manager cities and mayor-council cities without a CAO.⁸ Comparing the perceptions of persons who have served as both CAOs and city managers, scholar David Ammons concludes that “professionalism tends to be advanced by the appointment of a city administrator and advanced even further by the appointment of a city manager.”⁹

Conclusion

The council-manager form is growing and continually incorporating new practices to strengthen democratic leadership, citizen involvement, and administrative effectiveness.

When the basic principles that define the council-manager form are used as points of reference, it is evident that the form has demonstrated flexibility while it has preserved its basic characteristics.

The council-manager form and other forms based on parliamentary principles operate with various combinations of electoral features and differing degrees of shared executive authority with the mayor. Still, they incorporate the essential features of unified authority, assignment of executive responsibilities to the professional top administrator, and accountability of the administrator to the entire council. At the same time, the use of a chief administrative position is slowly expanding in local governments that use elected executive forms of government although the United States lags behind European countries in which such a position is universal.

The external forces working on all local governments are the same—increased media pressure, fracturing of interest groups, and a decline in social capital that ties groups to each other and to the community. Furthermore, the changes in the orientation of elected officials—more assertive mayors and more activist and constituency-oriented councilmembers—are similar in all governments.

All local governments need the same qualities—leadership, responsiveness, and administrative effectiveness—as Ehrenhalt has argued. How localities achieve and sustain these qualities is likely to be shaped by their structural features and the principles on which they are based.

The council-manager form does not automatically produce good government without the appropriate contributions by elected and administrative officials. If, however, one is choosing the form of government most likely to produce sound, long-term governance; effective

implementation and service delivery; capable management; and transparent, ethically grounded, and citizen-oriented processes, the council-manager form is the preferred choice based on its essential structural features. The experiment of 1908 continues to offer a distinct constitutional option in American local government.

Notes

¹H. George Frederickson, Gary A. Johnson, and Curtis H. Wood, *The Adapted City: Institutional Dynamics and Structural Change* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 2004), 7. (Italics added.)

²Alan Ehrenhalt, "The Mayor-Manager Merger," *Governing*, October, 2006, www.governing.com/articles/10assess.htm.

³James H. Svara, "The Structural Reform Impulse in Local Government," *National Civic Review* 83 (Summer-Fall 1994), 323–347.

⁴In a 2001 council survey, roughly three councilmembers in five gave the mayor-council mayors only satisfactory or poor ratings for providing information about policy options and supporting the council's oversight function. James H. Svara, *Two Decades of Continuity and Change in American City Councils* (Washington: National League of Cities, 2003)

⁵Among CAOs, the scope of responsibilities and ability to professionalize administration varies with the method of the CAO's appointment. James H. Svara, "Do We Still Need Model Charters? The Meaning and Relevance of Reform in the Twenty-First Century," *National Civic Review* 90 (Spring 2001), 19–33.

⁶A complete count of cities has been achieved for cities over 10,000 in population by using the 2001 ICMA survey results as a base, adding the National League of Cities database, and checking with other cities that are missing from the databases. Because cities with CAOs are more likely to respond to surveys, the apparent percentage of cities with CAOs in the results of the form of government surveys is inflated.

⁷James Keene, John Nalbandian, Robert O'Neill, Jr., Shannon Portillo, and James H. Svara, "How Professionals Can Add Value to Their Communities and Organizations," *PM*, March 2007, 32–39.

⁸Karl Nollenberger ("Cooperation and Conflict in Governmental Decision Making in Mid-Sized U.S. Cities," in *The Municipal Yearbook 2008* (Washington, D.C.: International City/County Management Association, 2008) finds intermediate levels of cooperation and conflict in mayor-council cities with CAOs compared with council-manager and mayor-council cities.

⁹David N. Ammons, "City Manager and City Administrator Role Similarities and Differences: Perceptions Among Persons Who Have Served as Both," *The American Review of Public Administration* 38 (2008), 39.

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The article "Taking Stock of Form and Structure in County Government" is scheduled for publication in the December 2008 issue of *PM* magazine.