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GENERAL INTEREST

Municipal Reform in Mayor-Council Cities: A Well-Kept Secret

H. George Frederickson, Brett Logan, and Curtis Wood

THE ERA OF American municipal reform that began just before the beginning of the 20th century is thought to have reached its apotheosis mid-century. Since then, patronage has been largely stamped out. Kickbacks on contracts, once commonplace, are now unusual. Boss-mayors with long-term tenures and precinct-based party support are now rare. The council-manager form of city government, sometimes regarded as the ultimate expression of municipal reform, is now common. Unlike turn-of-the-century political and intellectual leaders such as Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Luther Gulick, contemporary leaders seldom talk or write about municipal reform. These days, issues of municipal reform appear to be of interest mostly to city managers and those who study and teach city management. For these and other reasons, it is assumed that the era of municipal reform is over.

In fact, municipal reform is all around us, manifest in modern reforms that deal with new and different problems. Modern reforms take essentially two forms. The first, and the most well known (Frederickson 1995), is the reform of cities with council-manager legal or charter platforms—a much-studied favorite of research scholars (Svara 1999; Protasel 1995; Newland 1995). These reforms have mostly

to do with changes in council-manager city structures to make them more politically responsive and include adaptations such as directly elected mayors, full-time paid mayors, staff for mayors, council members elected by district, full-time paid council members, staff for council members, and in some cases mayoral involvement in budget preparation and department head selection and direction.

Much less well known are the municipal reforms under way in cities with mayor-council legal or charter platforms. In this analysis of the modern form of municipal reform, the comparative growth of the two dominant forms of city government is considered. Reforms that occurred in mayor-council cities during the Progressive era and the post-Progressive era are then discussed. In the conclusion, observations regarding the results of contemporary reform in mayor-council cities are made and reform results are compared with modern patterns of reform in council-manager cities.

The Progressive Era

Structure of Government

By the time the U.S. Constitution was ratified, all 13 states had a separation of executive and legislative powers and a system of checks

and balances among the branches of government. The Constitution set up essentially the same governmental model for the national government, and as cities formalized their boundaries and jurisdictional characteristics they too adopted the separation-of-powers model. By the 1850s, virtually all American cities were governing themselves on the basis of what came to be called the mayor-council form of government (Adrian 1988).

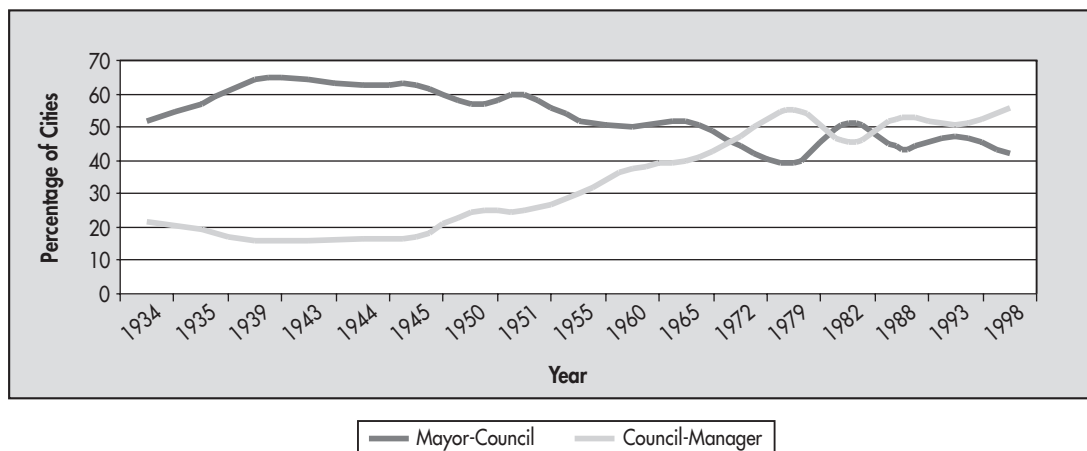
“By the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, decentralized and fragmented municipal governments became prime targets for domination by centralized political party machines. From the perspective of the reformers, machines would fill in any existing power vacuum and create order out of chaos” (Renner and DeSantis 1993, 57). As a result, reformers turned to the executive (i.e., mayor) for leadership. As the 19th century ended, the trend was toward stronger mayors (Griffith 1974). But another and more important movement was just beginning—the municipal reform movement.

The goal of the municipal reform movement was to rid cities of graft, corruption, patronage, and the spoils associated with city bosses and political machines. The reform movement agenda included civil service (merit) systems for hiring public employees, compet-

itive bidding among firms for government contracts, the secret ballot, fair election practices, nonpartisan elections, short ballots, at-large elections, initiative and referendum measures, and the council-manager form of government (Renner and DeSantis 1993). The reformers were remarkably successful in changing the political structure of American municipal government. “The overwhelming majority of all jurisdictions have adopted at least some of the municipal reform agenda” (Renner and DeSantis 1993, 58). “The use of professional management, merit personnel systems, the executive budget . . . have surely not varied randomly among the various forms of city government” (Adrian 1988, 3).

Among the reforms of the Progressive era, none was more sweeping and dramatic than the concept of the council-manager city government. Distinctly different from the separation-of-powers logic of city government, the council-manager structure essentially eliminated the mayor as an independent political leader. The full executive-administrative functioning of the city was delegated to a professional city manager appointed by and responsible to the entire city council. As Figure 1 shows, the council-manager form of government grew steadily throughout the first 75 years of the 20th century, replacing the mayor-

Figure 1. Total Mayor-Council and Council-Manager Cities



council model as the most popular form of city government in the 1970s (ICMA 1934; 1935; 1939; 1943–45; 1950; 1951; 1955; 1960; 1965; 1972; 1979; 1982; 1988; 1993; 1998).

In the early stages of the development of the council-manager form of government, some mayor-council cities also began to make changes—changes that have received much less scholarly attention. As cities became more urban and heterogeneous and the scope of local government services expanded, city organizational structures became more complex and technical. As a result, many mayor-council cities recognized the need for more professional leadership to manage the day-to-day operations of the city. Heavy demands on the time and effort of the mayors of large cities, especially because of their dual role as administrative heads and political leaders, led to the creation of chief administrative officers (CAO) (Schluz 1949).¹ Charles Adrian pointed out 40 years ago “that the CAO post seems to have been established largely for two reasons—as a compromise between the manager plan and the strong mayor government, and as a means of providing for professional administration without eliminating the mayor as the symbolic head and chief policy maker of the city” (Adrian 1961, 446). In 1931 San Francisco was the first mayor-council city to hire a professional CAO (Adrian 1988). With the success and continuing expansion of the office of chief administrator in mayor-council cities, the differences in professionalism between mayor-council and council-manager cities began to diminish (Adrian 1988).

Civil Service

Consistent with the view that government should be run on business principles, municipal reformers sought to reorganize public employment into a system based on qualifications and performance rather than family relationships, friendship, or political party affiliation (Schiesl 1977). “The most acrimonious debates over civil service procedures occurred before 1900; after 1910 the procedures were generally discussed without much conflict, and

by 1920 civil service procedures were accepted as the proper way to conduct city business” (Tolbert and Zucher 1983, 24).

The Post-Progressive Era

Structure of Government

The increased use of appointed professional CAOs and longer terms for both mayors and council members in mayor-council cities indicate a trend toward greater political stability and greater administrative effectiveness. The number of mayor-council cities that have added the position of CAO has increased dramatically since 1972 (ICMA 1972; 1979; 1988; 1993; 1998).² In 1972, 24 percent of mayor-council cities had a CAO, but by the end of the century more than 50 percent had a CAO. These results show that many mayor-council cities acknowledged that the mayor needed professional assistance in the executive function.

A survey by the Public Administration Program at North Carolina State University in 1997 provides data indicating that the roles and responsibilities of city managers in council-manager cities and CAOs in mayor-council cities are more alike than is often presumed and that it is evident that the council-manager form has been used as a model for the reform of mayor-council cities.³ Table 1 describes the percentage of mayor-council and council-manager cities that authorize the chief executive officer (i.e., either the city manager or CAO) to perform budgetary and management duties (Svara 1999). Although it is clear that city managers have more administrative and budgetary authority and responsibility than do CAOs, the difference in executive authority between the two positions is not as great as is presumed.

Table 2 shows the self-reported scores of city managers and city administrators in the 1997 survey. Five different activity dimensions were measured on a 100-point scale, with 100 indicating the most importance, 50 indicating moderate importance, and 0 indicating very little importance (Svara 1999). The survey results show little perceived difference in the

Table 1. Budgetary and Management Duties of the Chief Executive in Mayor-Council and Council-Manager Cities

Responsibility or Duties of Chief Executive	Mayor-Council Cities (percent)	Council-Manager Cities (percent)
Propose budget	82	95
Administer budget after approval	73	80
Supervise all or most department heads	73	98
Reorganize departments	57	87

Source: Svava (1999).

Note: Numbers are percentages of mayor-council and council-manager cities that vest authority in a chief executive officer (i.e., city managers in council-manager cities or chief administrative officers in mayor-council cities) to perform budgetary and management duties.

Table 2. Scores for City Managers and Chief Administrative Officers in Five Activity Areas

Dimension	Chief Administrative Officers in Mayor-Council Cities	City Managers in Council-Manager Cities
Policy innovation	71	74
Political adviser	57	56
Adviser without political advice	66	67
Classical manager	63	63
Organizational coordinator	70	72

Source: Svava (1999, Table 2).

Note: Numbers are the self-reported scores of city managers and chief administrative officers based on a 100-point scale, with 100 indicating that the dimension is the most important, 50 indicating moderate importance, and 0 indicating little importance.

roles played by city managers and CAOs in all five policy and administrative areas.

A closer look at the responsibilities of the CAO in mayor-council cities indicates that the CAO is gaining more responsibility in appointment and budgeting power—two staples of the city manager’s position in a council-manager city. Although it is more common for city managers in council-manager cities to develop the budget, increasingly the CAO is assuming more responsibility for it in mayor-council cities. Between 1988 and 1998 the percentage of mayors that developed the budget—a traditional duty of the mayor in mayor-council cities—dropped from 40 percent to 30 percent (ICMA 1988; 1993; 1998). During that same period, the percentage of CAOs in mayor-council cities that were responsible for the budget increased from 25 percent to almost 30 percent. Furthermore, the percentage of cities in which the mayor and CAO jointly developed the budget increased from around 3 percent in 1988 to more than 10 percent in 1998. City managers and CAOs were also asked to rate their influence in budgeting. On a 100-point scale, city managers gave themselves a rating of 92, and CAOs gave themselves a rating of 88 (Svava 1999).

There is also a slight trend in CAOs having either direct authority to appoint department heads or shared authority with the mayor or the mayor and council. By 1998, 8 percent of mayor-council cities with a CAO had provided for such CAO involvement in the appointment of department heads (ICMA 1998).

There is a common assumption that in mayor-council cities, the CAO is the mayor’s hand-picked assistant. Evidence shows, however, that the CAO is usually selected either by the council and mayor together or by the council. By 1996 the CAO was selected jointly by the mayor and council in 51 percent of cities with a CAO, by the council in 38 percent of cities, and by the mayor in only 11 percent of cities (Svava 1999).

It is also a common misconception that CAOs in mayor-council cities have no experience in city administration. In fact, only 10 percent of all CAOs held a job in the private sector prior to their appointment, and more than 50 percent had served in another city prior to their current position. In larger mayor-council cities, 59 percent of CAOs held a similar position in another city prior to their current job (Svava 1999).

Another major trend in mayor-council cities is the increasing length of the mayor's term of office. In 1934, 34 percent of mayor-council cities had a four-year mayoral term. By 1982, 62 percent of mayor-council cities had four-year mayoral terms (ICMA 1934; 1982). Longer mayoral terms in mayor-council cities demonstrate a trend toward a more stable administrative government, particularly when the mayor has extensive executive responsibility. Longer mayoral terms in mayor-council cities are comparable to the relatively long tenure of city managers in council-manager cities.

The length of council member terms in mayor-council governments has also increased steadily (ICMA 1934; 1935; 1939; 1944; 1945; 1950; 1951; 1955; 1960; 1965; 1982). The trend toward longer council terms in mayor-council cities promotes continuity and stability and is usually associated with increased administrative effectiveness and increased support by mayors and city council members for the city administration.

Civil Service

"By 1935, over 450 cities across the United States had enacted some type of civil service legislation. Thus, by 1935 the transformation of city government from a politically based system to a bureaucratically based system was well under way" (Tolbert and Zucker 1983, 23). By 1938, 674 cities operated under merit systems (Belsley 1938). Eighty percent of cities with populations over 100,000 operated under at least a partial civil service plan, and whether or not a city had civil service provisions had more to do with size than form of government (Zinc 1939).

In 1939, amendments to the Social Security Act required every state to establish a merit system. By 1963 Iowa, New York, and Ohio required all cities to adopt a civil service system. At the same time, 51 percent of cities in other states had implemented civil service requirements (Wolfinger 1984). By 1990, 24 states required all cities in their respective state to adopt civil service systems based on merit (ACIR 1993).

Today, most state constitutions have provisions patterned after the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments of the U.S. Constitution that prohibit discrimination in employment in all state and local governments. Most cities have enacted employment antidiscrimination legislation patterned after Title VII of the Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972 (Gottfried 1988).

Civil service reform has profoundly affected all cities, regardless of form or structure. The move away from the spoils system toward the merit-based civil service during the 20th century is a clear sign that mayor-council cities have become more professional and administrative.

Purchasing, Bidding, Budgeting, and Auditing Standards

Over the last 50 years many states have adopted laws requiring cities to establish accounting and auditing standards, budgeting and finance rules, purchasing procedures, and bidding requirements. In addition, the General Accounting Standards Board (GASB) has promulgated generally accepted accounting principles that are followed by most cities. The Government Finance Officers' Association (GFOA) recognizes cities for following recognized budgeting, financial, and accounting principles and standards. There are 880 cities that participate in the Distinguished Budget Presentation Awards Program, and 70 percent of all cities with populations over 50,000 participate in the Certificate of Achievement for Excellence in Financial Reporting (CAFR) program offered by GFOA (2001). State laws, the GASB mandates, and the budgeting and financial reporting programs offered by GFOA have made cities more professional, transparent, and accountable.

Several other aspects of management reform in mayor-council cities have been driven by the states. By 1990, 39 states required purchasing standards for cities, 22 states required cities to use competitive bidding, 35 states required cities to follow uniform accounting standards, 38 states required cities to conduct

an independent post-audit, 25 states required cities to file their annual budget with the state, 21 states reviewed the municipal budget, and 32 states authorized the auditing of cities within the state (ACIR 1993).

By 1990, 37 states permitted cities constitutional home rule, and 34 states permitted home rule by statute, thereby allowing cities the authority to modify state budgetary, purchasing, and accounting laws. Typically, however, cities follow state law, or if they amend the state law they apply the law in a stricter fashion. Cities in Kansas, for example, may exempt themselves from a state law if the state law is not uniform to all cities in the state; however, when cities in Kansas charter out from the state law, they usually enact provisions stricter than the state law.

In a 1997 review of legal factors affecting local home rule authority, Timothy Mead, a legal scholar on home-rule powers for cities, concluded that “from virtually any perspective, local governments are legally powerless in the face of judgments by other levels of government” (cited in Krane, Rigos, and Hill 2001, 14). The national government and the states insist in many instances that cities implement civil service mandates, competitive bidding and purchase controls, and other key elements of managerial reform.

Conclusion

In the past 20 years, much of the study of American local government has focused on reforms in council-manager cities, sometimes referred to as the “reform of the reform” (Hansell 1999). Less well known—and a generally well-kept secret—are the equally important structural changes in mayor-council cities designed to increase their efficiency. Most prominent among these reforms are merit-based civil service systems, bid and purchase controls, auditing requirements, longer mayoral and council terms, and most important, the rapid growth in the use and powers of a CAO.

It is increasingly evident that the council-manager and mayor-council categories are

woefully inadequate as descriptors of modern reform in American cities. These statutory categories mask very important reforms and trends that have affected all cities regardless of form of government. A five-part schema has been developed to better explain the pattern of changes in American cities (Frederickson and Johnson 2001). In that schema, pure mayor-council cities are called political cities because of structural characteristics that emphasize city politics, and mayor-council cities that have adopted the reforms described in this article are categorized as adapted political cities. Most mayor-council cities fall into the adapted political category, which includes the following characteristics: separation of political powers between the mayor and council, mayoral executive authority over city departments, a CAO with most of the responsibilities of managing the city on a day-to-day basis, some council members elected at large, and an established civil service and bidding system. In the day-to-day operations of the adapted political city, the mayor has a great deal of structural power to enforce his or her policy and executive preferences but tends to delegate to the CAO supervision of the day-to-day functioning of the city administration. As a result, many of the CAOs in adapted political cities function like city managers, and many of them have previously served as managers in cities with council-manager charters (Svara 1999). In such settings, the relationship between the mayor and the CAO is often described as very cooperative (Svara 1999).

The evidence indicates that reformed mayor-council cities (i.e., the adapted political cities) tend to resemble their adapted administrative counterparts. It is important not to push claims of similarity too far. Adapted political cities rely on a separation-of-powers platform. Although more efficient and better managed than political cities, adapted political cities nevertheless exhibit the political give-and-take of checks and balances. Serious policy and political differences between the

mayor and council members may be common in adapted political cities but are less common in adapted administrative cities. Also, the mayor continues to be the chief executive officer in adapted political cities.

American cities are highly adaptive, malleable, and responsive institutions. They seldom change entirely from mayor-council to council-manager forms. Although they change incrementally, they do so at a surprisingly rapid pace (Frederickson and Johnson 2001). When seen in the longer term, the aggregation of incremental structural adaptations in mayor-council cities tells a modern story of reform as important in its own way as the better-known story of municipal reform in the early 20th century.

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Notes

1. Administrative offices in mayor-council cities are referred to by a variety of titles, including chief administrative officer, chief executive officer, deputy mayor, or chief business officer.
2. The ICMA surveys are sent to all cities with populations over 2,500.
3. The sample was drawn from cities that had an appointed administrative officer and included all cities with populations of 50,000 and above and one in four cities randomly chosen from a sample of those cities with populations of 2,500–49,999. The final data set included 485 chief administrators from council-manager cities and 172 from mayor-council cities with populations of 2,500 or more. The response rate was 59 percent. ICMA assisted the University of Kansas in selecting the sample.

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