

The Ins and Outs of US City Governance

by Kevin Carter

The crucial job of governing our cities is mired in history and complexity. Here, Kevin Carter describes the US city governance system landscape, past and present.

CITIES IN THE UNITED STATES are almost universally governed by one of two forms of government: The council-manager form or the mayor-council form. Both have important implications for how constituent interests are represented and addressed. This article describes the differing board structures of the forms, how they developed, and what it means for cities.

The council-manager form of government is the most prevalent form among municipalities. Originally known as the *city manager plan*, the council-manager form of government is composed of an elected governing board (i.e., the council) and a professional manager hired by the council. The council also selects, from among its members, a mayor to serve as a ceremonial figurehead for the city. Although reformers such as Richard S. Childs insisted that a mayor chosen by and from the council (sometimes referred to as a “weak mayor”) be the defining factor of the council-manager form of government,¹ today’s National Municipal League endorses hybrid and alternative systems such as those in which a mayor is elected from the city at large and serves in a recognized leadership role.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

“Right actions are those that practical reason would will as universal law.”

Derived from German philosopher Immanuel Kant’s preliminary statement of moral obligation; <http://www.philosophypages.com/hy/5i.htm>

The International City/County Management Association (ICMA) recognizes local governments as a council-manager form if the manager or administrator is appointed by and can be terminated by a majority of the council; has direct responsibility for policy formulation; prepares, presents, and administers the council-approved budget; and has full authority to hire and remove most department heads.²

The council-manager form of government is the most prevalent form among municipalities.

The council, as the other half of the council-manager form of government, is responsible for setting the political agenda, approving the budget, establishing tax rates, and voting on public policy. The council’s size generally ranges from five to nine seats and is elected at large in nonpartisan races.

Alternatively, the mayor-council (also known as the “strong-mayor”) system is the older and more traditional form of government and consists of an elected council with a mayor serving as the chief executive. The mayor-council form of government most closely emulates the federal and state government systems with elected chief executives and legislatures. In the mayor-council form of government, the mayor oversees the day-to-day operation of departments, hiring and firing, preparation and execution of the budget, and, in some

instances, has veto power over the council’s legislation. As with the council-manager form of government, the council in the mayor-council form serves as the legislature, but the members are generally elected from wards. In some mayor-council cities, a professional administrator similar to a city manager is hired to assist with city operation; however, these positions lack the autonomy or responsibility granted to chief administrative officers in council-manager forms of government.

As of 2009, 49 percent of all local governments used some form of the council-manager system while 44 percent had mayor-council forms of government. A third form, the commission form, governs most of the remaining communities. In the commission form of government, council members also serve as department heads in addition to their role as legislators. For example, one council member may oversee the public works department staff, while another oversees parks and recreation.

The rise of the council-manager form of government is a product of the reform movement in the United States. As America entered the industrial age, swelling urban populations—fueled by immigration—required unprecedented infrastructure (e.g., roads, sanitation, clean water, parks, public health, social services, etc.). Political bosses stepped in to provide these services on a mostly partisan basis and primarily to their supporters. These party bosses controlled City Hall through their election to council seats representing specific wards. They used their power to provide special treatment and projects to their constituents. Although responsive to the needs of politicians’ political bases, the spoils system proved to be highly inefficient, often corrupt, and expensive.

In her seminal work on municipal reform, *Morning Glories*, Amy Bridges found that by 1960 the “strong mayor” cities of New York and Chicago spent nearly twice the amount per capita on “common functions” as the council-manager cities of San Antonio and Phoenix and employed twice the number of city workers per 10,000 residents.³

WHEN WE SAY ...

BOARD LEADERSHIP'S mission is "to discover, explain and discuss innovative approaches to board governance with the goal of helping organizations achieve effective, meaningful, and successful leadership to fulfill their missions."

Board Leadership aims to fulfill this mission by engaging its readers in a lively and illuminating inquiry into how board governance can be made more effective. This inquiry is based on three key assumptions:

- Boards exist to lead organizations; not merely monitor them.
- Effective board governance is not about either systems, structures, processes, theories, practices, culture, or behaviors—it is about all of them.
- Significant improvements are likely to come only through challenging the status quo and trying out new ideas in theory and in practice.

Uniquely among regular publications on board governance, *Board Leadership* primarily focuses on the job of board leadership as a whole, rather than on individual elements of practice within the overall job.

Over time, *Board Leadership* will provide a repository of different approaches to governance created through its regular "One Way to Govern" feature.

Here's what a few of the key terms we use mean to us:

- **Innovative:** Creating significant positive change.
- **Approaches to:** principles, theories, ideas, methodologies, and practices.
- **Board governance:** The job of governing whole organizations. □

The reformers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, inspired by the gospel of scientific management, believed that government could and should be run more efficiently using principles of business administration. To achieve these aims, reformers called for the separation and insulation of the task of governing from politics.

However, reformers should not be viewed solely as altruistic seekers of efficiency: The Progressive movement was married to the unfortunate legacy of racism, eugenics, and nativism through the tools of voter registration, literary tests, extended residency requirements, and poll taxes. In *City Politics*, Banfield and Wilson wrote:

Making local government "businesslike" meant "getting rid of politics," which in turn meant curtailing the representation of low-status minorities. In its early years the [council-manager] plan appealed to a good many people as a convenient means of putting the Catholics, the Irish, the Italians, the labor unions, and all other "underdogs" in their places.⁴

The first iteration of reform occurred when Galveston, Texas, adopted the commission form of government in 1901. The commission system achieved many of the aims reformers sought, including centralization and consolidation of the legislative and administrative authorities within a council elected via at-large elections. The commission form of government offered a visible link between the board and the municipal services for which each member was responsible. By 1911, the National Municipal League recommended commission forms of government for cities of 100,000 or less (with the potential to be used in larger cities). Some 500 cities adopted the commission form of government by 1918, within two decades of its creation.

Always eager to promote the reform's businesslike efficiency, Progressives claimed the commission form mirrored a corporation with its board of directors. However, their comparison proved flawed, as Childs, the founder of the council-manager form of govern-

ment, pointed out that there would have to be a manager put under that board to make it resemble a corporation.

Childs remedied the separation of powers question by proposing that an appointed executive manage city administration. A city manager, much like the CEO of a corporation, is intended to allow the council to focus on making political and policy decisions while the manager executes the council's decisions. The council-manager form was especially popular with the businesses it sought to emulate.

Between 1918 and 1923, at least 150 cities adopted the council-manager plan, and from 1947 to 1977, the council-manager form of government grew from 20 percent of all cities to approximately 55 percent. In 1972, the council-manager form overtook the mayor-council form as the most prevalent form. The tremendous growth in the council-manager form of government resulted from the concentrated and renewed efforts for reform and charter revision. Business leaders believed that the council-manager form of government offered the most effective and efficient means to meet the challenges presented by postwar growth—especially in the Southwest, where migrant populations and wartime industry fueled growth—and founded civic and commerce groups that pursued pro-growth policies, including the adoption of a city manager.

One of the first studies to examine the socioeconomic characteristics of suburban communities found that by the 1960s council-manager cities had on average smaller percentages of minority populations, higher percentages of white-collar workers, higher percentages of high school-educated citizens, and greater family incomes. Suburban communities under the council-manager form of government also experienced greater rates of growth (from 1950 to 1960), a higher average percentage of home ownership, and a smaller percentage of elderly residents.

In practice, both the council-manager and mayor-council forms

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increased government accountability and responsiveness to the interests to the interests they represented. Mayor-council cities represented and rewarded the often ethnically homogeneous wards from which the council and mayor built their political bases. For example, the spoils system under Boss Tweed provided patriarchal schools, orphanages, and hospitals with government "donations," primarily to Catholic intuitions at a time of widespread anti-Catholic sentiment.

Conversely, cities with council-manager governments increased the representation and interests of those that supported the reform. The form took root in newer, less racially diverse cities. Reformers found their greatest success in the southwestern United States, where they held larger majorities and the existing political machines were newer and weaker than those established in the Northeast.

Current Charlotte, North Carolina City Manager Ron Carlee offered a compelling explanation that builds from the idea that there may be demo-

graphic factors that could rationally lead to one form of government over another. He suggested that more diverse communities (whether diverse in ethnic, racial, economic, or political composition) may require the sort of visionary leadership that is more appropriate and natural from a mayor in a mayor-council system. Because city managers are barred from taking that type of role, a leadership vacuum may exist in a diverse or conflicted council-manager city; this is especially true if there is no ceremonial mayor or if the mayor is selected on a rotating basis from among the council. Carlee said that political leadership may be needed to "create a harmonious environment needed to sell the vision."

The story of council-manager governments shows how constituents seek to alter the structure of their representation to best promote their interests. Its adoption was as much a response to the disproportionate strength of minority interests as it was about efficiency. The debate over local government structure, which continues today, should therefore be viewed as an element of a larger debate over politics: who gets what, when, where, and how. □

Practice for Delivering Effective Governance (London, UK: BSI, August 2013).

4. *The Financial Aspects of Corporate Governance (Cadbury Report)* (London, UK: Professional Publishing Ltd., 1992).

5. See note 3.

6. *Improving Board Governance: McKinsey Global Survey Results* (New York, USA: McKinsey & Company, 2013).

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Notes

1. Bernard Hirschhorn, *Democracy Reformed: Richard Spencer Childs and His Fight for Better Government* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997).

2. ICMA. *Municipal Year Book 2009* (Washington, DC: ICMA Press, 2009).

3. Amy Bridges, *Morning Glories: Municipal Reform in the Southwest* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

4. Edward C. Banfield and James Q. Wilson, *City Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press and MIT Press, 1963).

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BS 13500

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culture rather than rely on those whom it employs.

For those boards already using Policy Governance or any other system that allows them to meet the Code, BS 13500 will be welcome reinforcement that they are on the right track. For others, we hope it will act as a valuable benchmark for progress. □

Notes

1. <http://www.iso.org/iso/home/about.htm>.

2. <http://www.bsigroup.co.uk/en-GB/standards/Information-about-standards/what-is-a-standard/>.

3. The British Standards Institute has just published *BS 13500: Code of*