

Municipal Forms of Government

An Overview with Commentary

Dr. Lawrence F. Keller
Facilitator
Cleveland Heights Charter Review Commission
December 2017

Forms of governing the city have been a central topic of municipal governance ever since what is called the First Urban Revolution. Following reconstruction, the cities of the Northeast and Midwest went through an astounding period of growth, both in population and wealth. In addition, the cities experienced significant changes in how daily life was led. As the governments of the time had been created for much smaller cities, they proved inadequate to the task of dealing with major changes that were occurring. Initially, political parties became the typical municipal government. However, they tended to be ineffective if not corrupt in governance.

In light of the often rampant corruption in city government, reformers proposed new structures or forms of municipal governance. The first was a strong mayor form of government modeled after the national government. Public authority or power was divided between an elected mayor and a large city council typically elected from wards or districts. Most had a second chamber to council which was abolished over time. The next form, created to deal with the emergency conditions confronting Galveston, Texas, after its nearly complete destruction by a hurricane in 1900, was the commission form of municipal government. This form created a commission that had all the powers of government. The form has no separation of authority or power, making the commission as a body the legislature, and individual commissioners as administrators. Commissions were elected in non-partisan elections and had 5 to 9 members, promoting consensus after deliberation.

The collective nature of the executive made administrative coordination difficult. Richard Childs proposed adding a city manager appointed by the commission. The city manager would have all the administrative authority, such as appointing all other administrators, developing a budget and managing the public service. Staunton, Virginia, empowered the office of city engineer to be a “general manager” in 1908 and Sumter, South Carolina, adopted the form with an office of city manager in 1912. Currently over half of all cities have the Council-Manager form of government in some variation. Most of the other cities have some variation of the Strong Mayor or Weak Mayor form of governments.

The distribution of forms of government vary state by state. For example, 67 cities in Ohio have a Council-Manager form while all Colorado cities but Denver have a Council-Manager form. There is also variation within sections of a state, with many cities in southwest Ohio having a Council-Manager form. Most larger cities have a Mayor-Council form, with exceptions such as Dallas, San Antonio and Phoenix, while mid size to smaller cities tend to have a Council-Manager form.

Preference for a form of government often depends upon how citizens want their government to operate. Specifically, how legislative and executive offices relate, the authority granted to each, qualifications for offices, how members of council are selected, etc.

I will summarize the various forms in terms of the key aspects of the system. I will also note hybrid systems based on both forms of government. The overview concludes with the extraneous variables that make it difficult to connect form of government with outcomes, that is, the state of the city. Diagrams of the forms of government are at the end of the document.

Mayor-Council (MC)

Council

Historically, was based on parties and favored wards or districts. Usually had a large number of members as represented the ethnic diversity of the early industrial cities. Chicago currently has a 50 member council all from wards. Cleveland has 17 wards, with the number adjusted according to the population of the city. Many MC cities now have smaller councils with some elected at large. Boston has 13 members, 4 at large and 9 from districts. Columbus city council has 7 members, all at large. Some in Columbus are currently looking at changing the structure of council to include some districts/wards.

Roles

Council is legislative body, passing ordinances which are law. In addition, as the MC system has separation of powers, Council also serves as a check on the Mayor. This form of government is modeled on the federal government and in the Ohio statutes is called the federal model. Used in cities with active political parties with partisan elections.

Mayor

Typically, a partisanly elected chief executive. May be the head of a local city party as well as the chief executive. The qualifications for office are usually a certain age and being a registered voter of the city.

Council-Manager (CM)

Council

Historically, favored smaller non-partisan councils, 5 to 9 members, elected at large. Research had argued that 9 was the maximum number who can express diversity but could deliberate and reach a consensus. Many cities used proportional representation (PR) to include diversity of opinion and groups. Cleveland used PR when it had the CM system from 1924 to 1934 and Cincinnati used PR from 1924 to 1957. Under PR, voters rank candidates for council from first choice to last choice. If a candidate gets the proportion of first choice votes she/he is elected. For example, if the council has 7 members, any candidate having $\frac{1}{7}$ plus 1 of first choice votes is elected. Until 1957, the council candidate in Cincinnati with the most first choice votes presided over council and had the title of mayor. Cambridge, Massachusetts, still uses PR to elect the council.

Roles

In contrast to the MC system, the CM system has no separation of powers. Council selects the executive, a city manager, who serves at its pleasure. This is similar to Ohio school boards which select a school superintendent who serves at the pleasure of the board. Typically coupled with non-partisan politics. The council is the law making body and has all the policy authority of the city. There is no veto as there is no political chief executive. A CM system separates functions not powers.

In terms of authority, mayoral offices come in two (2) flavors, strong mayor and weak mayor. Strong mayor has appointment, budget and veto authority. A strong mayor appoints administrators, sometimes with the approval of council for all or some directors of departments or for some offices, such as Law Director. Strong mayors also send a proposed budget to council, called an executive budget. However, budgets can only be funded by ordinance of council. Finally, a strong mayor can veto ordinances with council able to override a veto by a supra-majority vote.

Weak mayoral offices lack all three of the above powers. Weak Mayor may preside over council. Many mayoral offices have some but not all of these powers. The actual power of any mayor depends upon what control she/he has over the party, his/her political popularity and general political ability. Also depends upon whether council can operate effectively as a political body.

Relation of Council to Mayor

As the MC system has separation of powers, the chief relationship between the council and mayor is political. They are a check on each other. This doesn't preclude working together by any means but if they don't operate as political checks then one or the other can dominate the government.

In many if not most American cities, one party dominates. Thus, the relationship between council and mayor is often mediated by party politics. The relationship is similar to a governor and the state legislature. This requires partisan political skills of the

City Manager

The city manager, if the system operates professionally, that is, the city manager is selected in an open search, has qualifications. Typically, the qualifications are a graduate degree in a management field, such as public administration, and some years of management experience. Larger CM cities may require having served as a city manager previously, often informally.

The city manager has all the administrative authority, such as appointment and budget. The manager appoints all administrators, sometimes with the approval of the council. As the city manager serves at the pleasure of the council, council approval is not as necessary as in a MC system. Often the city manager was recruited from another city or even state. Most charters require the city manager to become a resident within a period of time after appointment.

Relation of Council to City Manager

As the city manager is appointed by and serves at the pleasure of the council, they are expected to work together. Some have conceptualized the relationship as similar to the Board of Directors and the CEO of a corporation. A city manager under such a relationship should create an efficient administrative system and help create strategies for dealing with community issues and problems. If the CM system has a mayor, the mayor can play critical roles. A mayor, no matter how selected by the system, can be a facilitator for the system. In this role, the mayor can help to organize the council politically as well as expedite the interactions

mayor as well as management talent. An effective mayor is able to know when to be a partisan actor and when to be a system chief executive. This distinction is not easy to make conceptually or to carry out, but is critical to the effectiveness of governance under a MC system. Similarly, council needs to make such a distinction, choosing wisely when to be political and when to act institutionally.

Final Comments on the MC System

A major issue with the MC system is the quality and background of the mayor. Many mayors lack an administrative background, especially in the public sector – as do many governors and presidents – and may not be able to administer government effectively. A mayor needs to know how to select effective administrators while keeping political concerns and needs in mind. A council must be able to play both political and policy roles. This has proven quite difficult, with a popular incumbent in a strong mayoral office often dominating governance. Training of councilmembers is necessary in both MC and CM system but the training must have a different perspective and content based on the form of government. A “good” councilmember is a different “animal” in each form reflecting the differences in the forms of government.

of the city manager and the council. The mayor can also be a strong political presence in the community, articulating the issues the community faces and implementing politically the selected strategies with the city manager to deal with those issues.

Final Comments on CM System

As the council has very different roles under the CM system than the MC system, training can be critical. Councilmembers need to be able to supervise relations with the city manager without interfering with effective governance or politicizing the relationship. This is where an effective facilitative mayor is important. The council also needs to hire a city manager professionally and perceptively. This requires a council to ascertain the issues facing the community, translating those into a job description for a national search for a city manager and then hiring a city manager based on how the skills and experience of the city manager applicant align with the community needs.

The city manager needs to be an effective administrator as well as play cooperative public roles as mediated by a mayor and the council. These are tricky roles to play but are critical to effective governance.

Hybrid Forms of Government

Some cities have a hybrid form of one of the forms of government. The hybrid can be MC or a CM system basically. The intent is to have more professional administration in MC systems and more political partisan leadership in a CM system. Thus, a MC may have an office titled, Chief Administrative Office (CAO). The CAO is often selected by a mayor with or without the consent of council. Typically, the mayor can fire the CAO, that is, the CAO serves at the pleasure of the mayor. For example, Shaker Heights has, by ordinance, a CAO. The CAO is appointed by the mayor with the approval of council. However, the CAO serves at the pleasure of the mayor.

In contrast, the mayor of Cincinnati appoints a city manager, subject to the approval of city council, who serves at the pleasure of the mayor and council. Because the city manager is appointed by and serves at the pleasure of the council, this is a hybrid form of CM. The Cincinnati Charter provides for similar authority of the city manager that exists in a CM system.

Shaker Heights has had success with its hybrid. I have not seen a study of how successful the hybrid in Cincinnati has been. Prior to the change in the Cincinnati Charter, the city had been churning through city managers, with some serving a year or less. In contrast, the CAO's in Shaker Heights have often served for decades and been very active, including serving as President, of the Ohio City Management Association.

Two system diagrams on the final page illustrate hybrid systems. The other diagrams illustrate the MC and CM systems.

Other Considerations

Many factors go into making a city successful. Defining successful itself is not easy, as different people define success differently. At a basic level, success is being sustainable in population, wealth and finances. Though form of government is important in making a sustainable city, other factors are also major influences. Some can be affected by form of government some cannot. For example, after the 1960's, many could move for climate. Thus, cities such as Denver and San Diego became popular places to move to with little regard to form of government (during the period of most movement one had a MC and the other a CM system). Movement on the scale it happened can lead to favorable demographics which attracts even more younger people while spurring economic development.

Historically, some cities had fortuitous economic development. Early Cleveland had Rockefeller which led to Standard Oil having its headquarters located there. Standard Oil played major roles in community development, funding community programs and organizations. A city can reach an economic level that can attract immigrants in spite of a legendary corrupt form of government. Chicago is an example, where stories about the vagaries of voting abound.

In other cities, a form of government becomes part of the local culture and persists as part of history. Not only is form of government significant, but so is the presence of a “civic core.” A core is a talented diverse group of people who are active in community governance. They serve on boards and commissions such as planning and charter review commissions. Their rewards are in the service they offer. A form of government should cultivate such a group and provide meaningful opportunities for their services. Professional governments prompt and facilitate a civic core best.

Finally, any form can work if it attracts “good” people. Good in this sense means both talent and ethics. This attraction is important when considering form of government.

See comments on the two communities by a couple of professors who talked about the governments in the Plain Dealer series on the two cities. (I must confess I am one of the professors.)

[Lakewood Cleveland Heights Governments](#)

System Diagrams of Forms of Government

Figure 1
Strong Mayor System

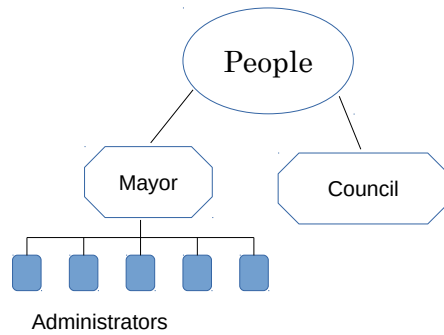


Figure 2
Weak Mayor System

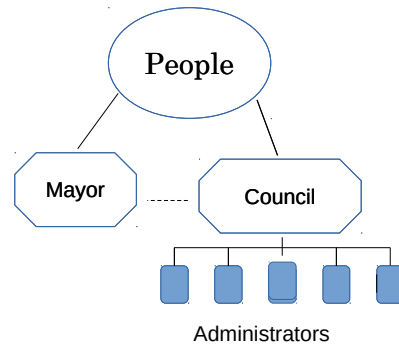


Figure 3
Hybrid Mayor System

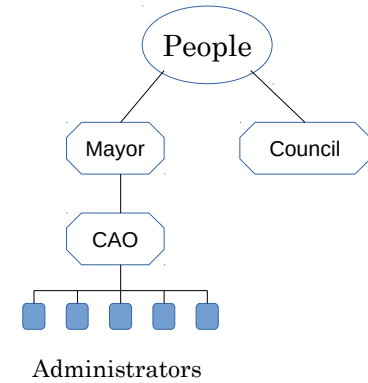


Figure 4
Council-Manager System

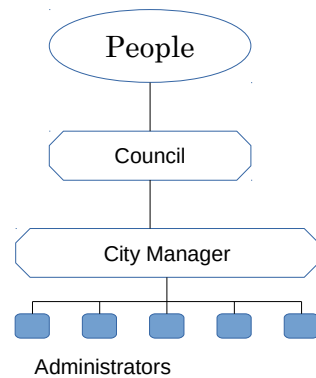


Figure 5
Hybrid Council-Manager System

