

Competing Arguments for Forms of Government in Charter Contests

The Case for the Mayor-Council Form

Arguments/Claims that Support the Strong Mayor-Council Form

- Strong leadership; mayor is “in charge”
- Ability of mayor to form coalitions on the council and in the community by rewarding supporters and sanctioning opponents
- One person who can be held accountable by voters
- Strong mayor provides greater capacity to initiate major policy changes
- Large cities can produce effective political executives
- Ability of mayor to allocate resources to support his/her agenda and to respond to demands of supporters
- Council can be supported by staff to serve as counterweight to the mayor
- CAO can provide administrative expertise

Arguments/Claims that Criticize the Council-Manager Form

- Mayor is figurehead; does not have enough power to set direction, form coalitions, or overcome opposition
- City council is prone to dissension, There is no one who can overcome dissension on the city council
- Diffusion of power, accountability; too many masters
- City manager acquires too much influence; is not properly supervised
- City manager is narrowly focused on improving efficiency
- City manager can ignore the mayor
- City manager turnover; city council can arbitrarily remove manager
- Having city manager does not guarantee competence and high ethical standards
- Form is efficient in small matters but not in taking on major initiatives

The Case for the Council-Manager Form

Arguments/Claims that Support Council-Manager Form

- Mayor is a visionary who provides facilitative leadership and builds partnerships
- Mayor is leader of the council and symbol for the community
- Council is a governing board that focuses on coherent policy making and oversight of administrative performance
- City manager provides policy advice based on objective assessment of trends, needs, and community goals
- There is typically a cooperative relationship between the mayor, council, and manager
- City establishes long-term goals and maintains continuity of commitments
- City administration is innovative and incorporates leading practices
- Decisions reflect universal values such as equality, fairness, social equity, inclusiveness, responsiveness, efficiency, and effectiveness
- City manager is continuously accountable to the council for performance
- Minority groups are empowered as members of the governing body

Arguments/Claims that Criticize the Mayor-Council Form

- Performance of form is too dependent on one person; effectiveness can rise and fall with qualities of the strong mayor
- Mayors lack equal levels of political and executive skills
- Mayors have excessive power and are more prone to corruption; when faced with obstacles, mayors seek more power.
- Council performance as governing board is weak and dominated by the mayor
- Conflict between the mayor and council is common; there is a risk of impasse between the two seats of power
- Professionalism of the CAO depends on whom the mayor appoints; mayor can bypass the CAO and undercut his/her professionalism
- Shortcomings in accountability: separation of powers creates unclear lines of responsibility; review of performance by voters in elections is infrequent; emphasis on election success makes mayor accountable to supporters rather than all voters.

Table 1.
Distribution of Governmental Forms among U.S. Municipalities over 2,500
population, 1984-2008

Form of Government	2008	2002	1998	1996	1992	1988	1984
Council-Manager	3,520 (48.9%)	3,387 (48.5%)	3,232 (48.1%)	2,760 (41.4%)	2,441 (36.5%)	2,356 (35.3%)	2,290 (34.7%)
Mayor-Council	3,131 (43.5%)	3,011 (43.1%)	2,943 (43.8%)	3,319 (49.8%)	3,319 (49.6%)	3,686 (55.3%)	3,686 (55.8%)
Commission	143 (2.0%)	143 (2.0%)	146 (2.2%)	154 (2.3%)	154 (2.3%)	173 (2.6%)	176 (2.7%)
Town Meeting	338 (4.7%)	337 (4.8%)	333 (5.0%)	365 (5.5%)	365 (5.5%)	369 (5.5%)	370 (5.6%)
Rep. Town Meeting	62 (0.9%)	63 (0.9%)	65 (0.9%)	70 (1.0%)	70 (1.0%)	82 (1.2%)	81 (1.2%)
Total	7,194	6,981	6,719	6,668	6,686	6,666	6,603

Note: Totals for U.S. local governments represent only those municipalities with populations of 2,500 and greater. According to the 2002 Census of Governments, there are approximately 12,000 additional municipalities with populations under 2,500.

Source: International City-County Management Association (ICMA) (2002) and ICMA (2008).

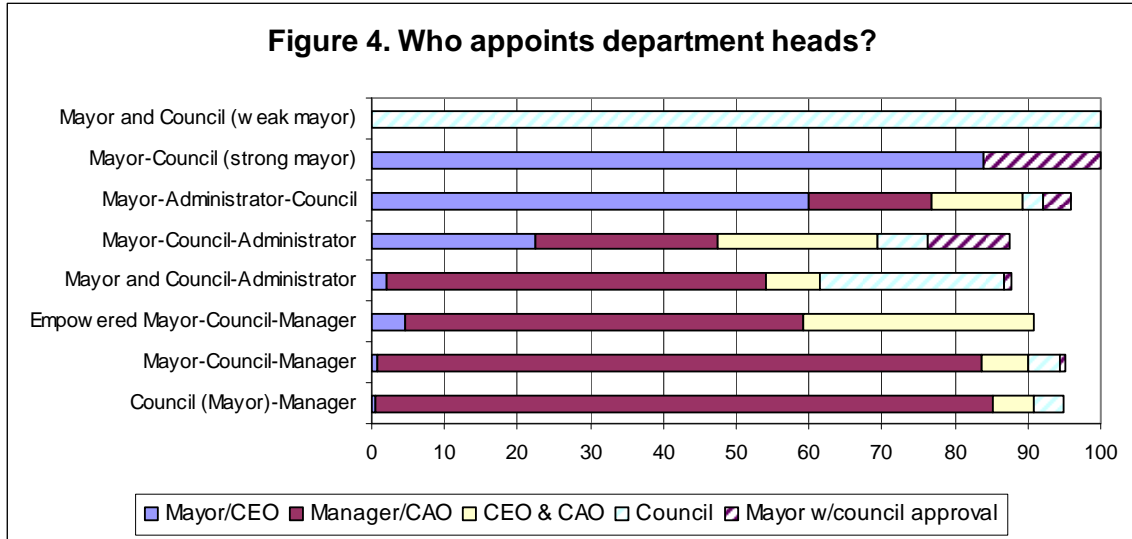
Table 2.
Variations in Forms of Government in Large Cities

<i>Variation in forms v</i>	<i>Population ></i> Over 1,000,000	500,000- 1,000,000	250,000- 499,999	100,000- 249,999	Total
Council(Mayor)-Manager ^a	0	0	0	22	22
Elected Mayor-Council-Manager	3	5	12	93	113
Empowered Mayor-Council- Manager ^b	0	1	2	2	5
Mayor-Council-CAO ^c	2	1	5	8	16
Mayor-CAO-Council ^d	1	7	9	15	32
Mayor-Council (no CAO)	3	5	5	30	43
Total	9	19	33	170	231

Source: Nelson and Svara (2009)

- a. Mayor selected by council
- b. Mayor nominates candidate for city manager and makes budget statement
- c. CAO appointed by mayor and approved by council
- d. appointed by mayor

All cities over 10,000 in population:



In some city categories, percentage is less than 100% because other appointment combinations are used. Mayor and Council (weak mayor) and Mayor and Council-Administrator are not found in cities over 100,000 population.

