

August 2008 · Volume 90 · Number 7

Taking Stock of the Council-Manager Form at 100 **by James H. Svava 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. ...

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 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. ...

[1.] **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.

... 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. 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.

[2.] 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 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. In contrast, the council-manager form ensures the linkage of executive responsibilities with a professional top administrator.

[3.] 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.

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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.

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

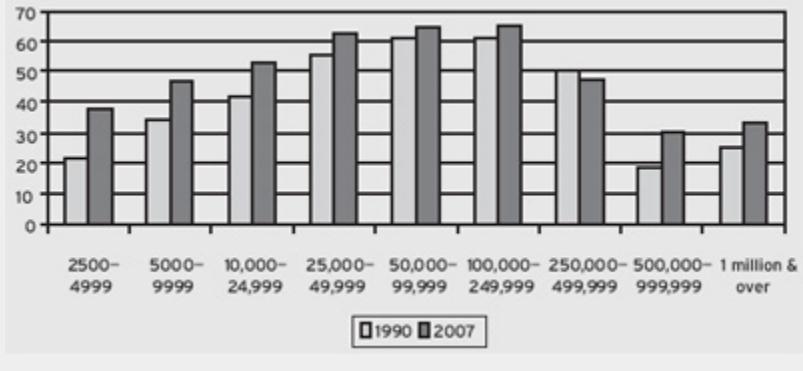
All U.S. cities over 2,500 in population	1990	2007	Change		
	% (number)	% (number)	% (number)	Cities smaller than 10,000	Cities larger than 10,000
Mayor-council	54.5% (3,645)	43.5% (3,131)	-14.1% (-514)	-515	1
Council-manager	36.2% (2,420)	48.9% (3,520)	45.5% (1,100)	574	526
Other	9.2% (617)	7.5% (543)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

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.

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



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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.

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