

Are Elected Executives Needed to Achieve Accountability to Citizens? Performance Issues and Form of Government in Large U.S. Cities

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For most of its history, the council-manager form of government has been noted for the high level of accountability that it achieves. In formal terms, there is a clear line of reporting and control from staff and departments to a chief executive officer—called the city manager in the U.S. and some other countries—, from the chief executive to the mayor and city council, and from the elected officials on the council to citizens. The council-manager form is used in over half of American cities over 10,000 in population. Most of the other cities use the mayor-council form of government. In this form, the mayor is an elected executive who directs the administrative organization.

The contrasting prospects for accountability could be simplistically summarized as follows. Council-manager cities have a council in charge that can choose the best person to be manager and insist that he or she provide information to demonstrate that high performance standards have been met, and the council can remove the manager if he or she fails to do so. The strong mayor-council city, on the other hand, has ongoing conflict between the mayor and council that obscures responsibility and impedes performance and accountability, and the mayor often faces an ungovernable and unmanageable set of semi-autonomous city departments run like fiefdoms.

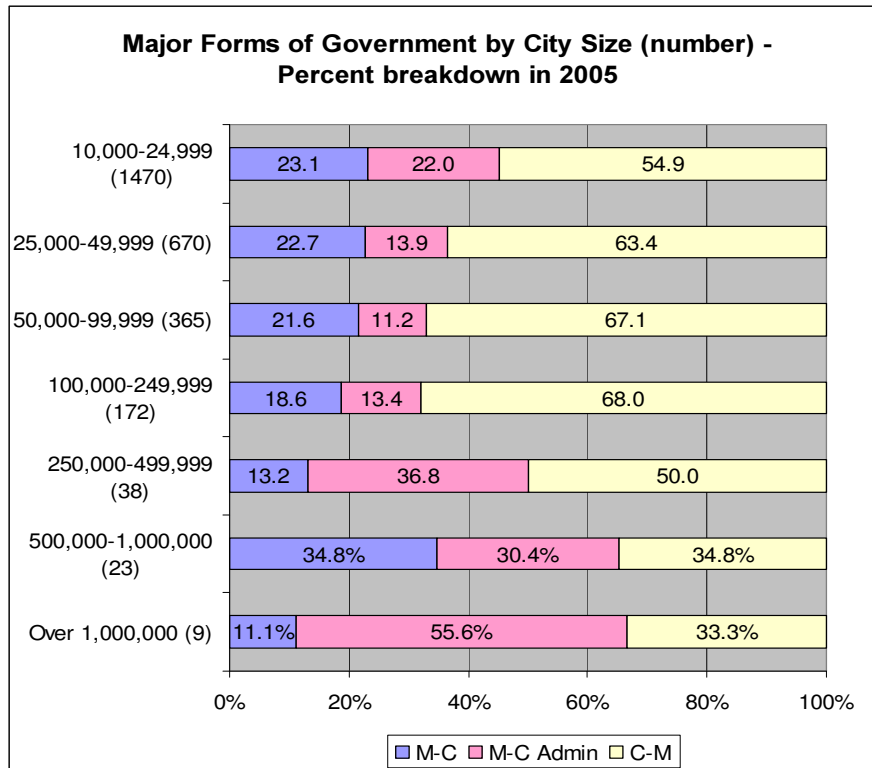
In view of these characteristics, it is surprising to observe that in a number of large council-manager cities, the rallying cry for change in the city charter has been a lack of accountability in the form of government. Furthermore, at the national level in the U.S. and in other countries, it is common to find arguments that link accountability and improved performance to strong elected leadership. This paper will explore how accountability is related to and differs with form of government, particularly in large American cities.

One Country, Two Forms

The United States is unique in the world because of the widespread use of two different forms of local government. It was formerly true in Germany when *lander* in North Germany used a form with an appointed executive—now all *lander* have elected executive mayors—, and it is true to a small extent now in England where eleven cities have adopted a form with a strong elected mayor. In U.S. cities over 10,000 in population, 41% use mayor-council form (and almost half of these have a chief

administrator position) and 59% use council-manager form. The latter, although sometimes viewed as being found predominantly in small cities, is used in half or more of cities in size categories up to 250,000 in population and in about a third of the largest cities, as indicated in Figure 1.

Figure 1.



Source: Merged data from the ICMA Form of Government Survey of 2001 and the National League of Cities membership database in 2005, prepared by Dr. Kimberly Nelson, North Illinois University.

The mayor-council form is based on separation of powers between the mayor and the council, whereas the council-manager form unifies governmental authority in the council with the mayor as presiding officer and member of the council. It vests executive power in the appointed city manager who is responsible to the entire council, although a small number of cities are giving the mayor some additional powers vis-à-vis either the mayor and/or the council (Frederickson, Johnson and Wood 2004)

Meaning of Accountability

Accountability has a dual meaning. In the controlling sense, it refers to holding persons to account for their actions. Accountability in this sense is based on authority and power. It is this meaning of the term that leads Robert Behn (2005) identifies this rule of accountability: “Everyone wants to be the accountability holder. No one wants to be the accountability holdee.” The term has a second meaning, however, when one refers to being accountable. Accountability in this sense is based on norms, a feeling of obligation that an actor has to demonstrate that assignments have been completed. When

this meaning of accountability is added to the first, accountability is not just “unidirectional,” as Behn (2000, 196) suggests. We will use both meanings in the analysis of how different institutional arrangements promote each kind of accountability:

- **To hold accountable:** *External* controls that make one liable to being called to account; answerable. It entails giving an account of one's discharge of a responsibility.
- **To be accountable:** *Internal* qualities (or internalized controls) that reinforce the inclination and ability to act responsibly and reliably. It is also indicated by the willingness to provide information and in other ways to support the assessment of performance.

This is the distinction between approaches that focus on “making” the manager manage and “letting” the manager manage (Behn 2000, 30).

Accountability in either sense requires expectations, as Behn indicates, which provide the basis for determining whether performance is satisfactory. By extension, a clear sense of purpose and overarching set of goals provide a context for specific expectations. Without purpose, one may meet the specific expectations that have been established and yet not accomplish much or reduce a problem that was the impetus for the action. In this situation, one finds a major source of confusion about accountability. The actor who meets expectations but accomplishes little may offer the defense—“I did what you told me to do. It is not my fault, i.e., I am not accountable, if my actions did no good.” The consideration of accountability must consider the responsibility for determining purpose and setting the framework for specific actions as well as actions carried out to meet expectations.

Accountability takes place as part of the overall management of the organization. It entails a process for collecting information about performance, assessing adequacy of performance, and providing feedback conveys the results of assessment and indicates the consequences. The method of collecting information and measuring performance can affect performance. The explicit accountability process involves elements like controls, standards, targets, reports, and appraisals. The broader process involves organizational goals, strategies, communication, resource allocation, research, evaluation, and staff development. Presumably, the stronger the general management context and support, the better the accountability process will be.

Finally, accountability requires leadership that focuses on performance as a high priority. They must make it clear that accountability is important to them, they must support the efforts and provide the resources required to improve performance, and they must make certain that performance has consequences—both negative and positive—that are applied fairly to all. Some leaders take on the responsibility themselves for improving performance, and they push their subordinates to take actions that will permit the leader to achieve results or solve problems. The problem with this approach is that if

the leader gets distracted or pursues other initiatives, the attention to performance will flag because there is little commitment to be accountable in a top-down relationship.

In sum, a comprehensive approach to accountability will include the following:

- a. capacity for external control
- b. inclination for internal control
- c. setting mission and goals as a framework for expectations
- d. general management processes
- e. specific accountability processes
- f. leadership

We shall return to these criteria and examine how they relate to different forms of government.

Case for Accountability in the Council-Manager Form

The claim of high level of accountability in the council-manager form is based on both a comparison to forms with separation of powers and on its adherence to basic principles that are linked to accountability. The former arguments are the traditional ones heard in the U.S. In the earlier twentieth century when the form was developed, the record of performance by city governments was weak. Many cities, particularly large ones, were plagued by corruption and incompetence. The prevailing weak mayor-council structures divided authority across many offices and boards. Political parties were important informal mechanisms for knitting together the fragmented authority, but parties were commonly criticized for advancing their own interests and promoting patronage and special favors as the basis for building and maintaining constituent support. The lines of accountability were unclear and the record of accomplishment was weak. By contrast, the council-manager form was designed to improve the governing capacity and to improve performance by unifying all authority in the hands of the city council. The council was small (5-9 members is the common range) and designed to act as a deliberative board of directors. Under the original formulation of the council-manager plan, the mayor who serves as the presiding officer would have been selected from among the members of the council. Actually, the mayor was often directly elected from the earliest times and has typically been elected since the 1970s. With either method of selection, however, the mayor does not have any executive powers. Some large cities have strengthened the position of the mayor vis-à-vis both the council and the manager in the past decade.

The city manager is an appointed executive selected by or answerable to the city council. This official is a “controlled executive,” in the words of Richard Childs (1913) who popularized the plan, a kind of office previously unknown in American local government. There are three key features that promote accountability in comparison to the mayor-council form with its more or less strong elected executive. First, the city manager serves at the pleasure of the city council and can be removed at any time. In

contrast, an elected mayor serves for a fixed term. Second, the city council can exercise continuous oversight of city government performance. Strong mayors often present information selectively to councils about performance. Third, the council-manager form is a unitary model of government with all authority placed in the city council and all administrative authority assigned to the city manager. The mayor-council form is characterized by separation of powers with checks and balances between the mayor and council that can lead to blame-shifting, limitations on the mayor's administrative authority, and impasse. The separate powers can also lead to conflicting signals from the mayor and the council to the city administrative staff about what is expected and create a situation in which administrators can play the mayor and council off against each other evading direct control by either (Svara 1990). As Tsebelis (1995) argues about governmental structures generally, when there are two or more "veto players" whose approval is needed to secure change, the bureaucracy is subject to less control than when there is a single veto player, as in parliamentary systems or the quasi-parliamentary council-manager form.

Beyond these three characteristics that are found uniformly because of the inherent features of the two forms of government, there are two other factors that are frequently but not always present. Although the concentration of executive authority in the hands of a strong mayor had been advocated to overcome the fragmentation in the weak mayor-council form in the earlier twentieth century, it was initially uncommon and is still not always found in the mayor-council form. The city manager from the inception of the form had a level of direct control over the administrative process and key functions of personnel and budgeting that were typically not found in mayor-council cities at the time. The formal strength of the strong mayor still varies considerably whereas the city manager functions as a chief executive in a centralized structure, although the mayor is a more centralized and powerful office than it was early in the twentieth century.

Furthermore, the mayor-council form often lacks the presence of a top administrator who works with the mayor to direct the administrative organization. Whereas this office is common in strong mayor cities in Europe, e.g., France, Italy, and Spain (Mouritzen and Svara 2002), and this office continues in British cities that have introduced directly elected mayors (discussed further below), it is found in only half of the mayor-council cities over 10,000 in population. Mayors who often have limited administrative experience and continuously face the challenge of promoting a political agenda—often in the face of opposition from the city council—and at the same time attending to implementation, service delivery, and resource management issues in the departments and among the staff of city government. The presence of a chief administrative officer both expands the capacity of the mayor in the administrative sphere, and also helps to promote consistency across departments. Having several deputy mayors spreads out the workload but does not guarantee central coordination.

There are negative and positive reasons why accountability for performance is maintained in the council-manager form. If something goes wrong in a council-manager city, the city manager is held to account and must take corrective action or face the possibility of immediate removal by the city council. City managers do not have job

protection or rights of appeal nor do they typically have a set of political supporters that permit managers to hold onto the position in a sustained disagreement with the city council.¹ The positive factors are reflected in the tendency in council manager cities to find a positive relationship between the council and manager. City managers are substantially involved in setting the city government agenda and in the formulation of policy, and, therefore, they help shape the goals for which they are responsible. Furthermore, they commonly create a cohesive, proactive administrative structure. Although they often come from outside the city, they share professional qualifications with assistant managers and department heads.

The council-manager form has had the reputation from the beginning of being an approach to organizing cities that promotes competence, effectiveness, and efficiency, and it deserves a stronger reputation than it typically receives for contributing to the formation of a coherent policy agenda. The lingering association between the politics/policy-administration dichotomy and the council-manager form has reinforced the impression that city managers are not involved in policy making. The International City Manager Association contributed to this image from the thirties through the fifties, when it defines the manager's role narrowly. Before and after this period, the shared role in policy was recognized and endorsed but the old attitudes linger. When the forms are compared, it is still not common to hear the argument that the city manager helps elected officials shape sound policy and reinforces continuity in commitment to accomplish policy goals despite changes in membership on the council, but this is an important characteristic of the form that has implications for accountability.

The features of the council-manager form highlight general principles for effective oversight and accountability. Robert O'Neill, executive director of ICMA, has focused on the similarities of the council-manager form and recent recommendations for reforming the structure of corporations. In *The Recurrent Crisis in Corporate Governance*, MacAvoy and Millstein (2004, 3) examine the causes of corporate scandals, in particular "information void" that limits the ability of the corporate board to assess performance. In their view, the only remedy is the separation of the functions of the board of directors, on the one hand, and the CEO, on the other. Combining the Chairman of the Board/CEO functions reduces the likelihood that the top person will keep the board adequately informed about sensitive issues: "We cannot expect the CEO, in his other role as chairman, to prepare the board to evaluate lapses and failures on his part, or on the part of his chosen management." (4) The independent chairman would have the responsibility of ensuring that relevant information on important issues is provided to the board, and the chairman would have the responsibility of creating agendas that would lead the board to critically examine issues, not simply react to current problems that need to be resolved, and provide substantive assessments. They recognize that current

¹ City managers do increasingly have employment agreements or contracts. Although they typically do not specify the length of the term, they do usually include benefits that will be received if fired from the position without cause. The financial costs to the city of firing the city manager may be a deterrent to city councils. The time and cost in finding a replacement is also a constraint.

management is opposed to this change because it reduces the clout of the CEO who no longer has the additional authority of chairman.

O'Neill (2005) connects notes that these same principles promoted by MacAvoy and Millstein—"independent directors, a chairperson who is *not* the CEO, a strong commitment to the oversight role of the board, transparency of action, and a strong commitment to ethics"—are found in the council-manager form. Particularly striking is similarity in the role of the chairman of the corporate board and the mayor in the council-manager form, assuming that the mayor is discharging his or her responsibility to monitor and adjust the relationship between the city council and the city manager (Svara 1994).²

Recent reforms in British local government have stressed somewhat different principles. The form in use through the 1990s was a decentralized committee-leader form of government in which council committees worked closely with departments in city government in shaping policy and delivering services (Mouritzen and Svara, 2002). The majority party leader chaired an executive committee and interacted with an appointed chief executive officer, but central control over the separate functional committees was limited. To improve accountability, strong political leadership is vested in a mayor or cabinet (John and Gains 2005, 5). Most cities chose the cabinet-leader form, whereas eleven cities chose to adopt the elected mayor form. In either approach, the intent was to expand the involvement of the executive in promoting performance. The executive function is separated from the function of assessing performance, which is the responsibility of the city council. The council-manager form in the U.S. provides for the separation of the executive and the review/accountability functions although it differs in the involvement of elected officials in executive activities.

In summary, these longstanding images of the differences between the council-manager and mayor-council forms have contributed to the confidence among members of ICMA and supporters of the council-manager form that it has a built-in advantage when it comes to comparisons of accountability. It is still rare, however, for this difference to be explained in terms of general principles of accountability, as in O'Neill's recent statement. It is more common to rely on the traditional images. Changes roughly since 1990 have produced a dramatic change in perspectives that tarnish the image of the council-manager form as the leader in accountability, on the one hand, and elevate the image of the strong mayor as a leader who promotes accountability, on the other. These arguments will be examined in the next section followed by a preliminary comparison of evidence on accountability practices in American cities. In the final section, a general framework for assessing accountability will be provided, which examines the counter claims.

Problems with Accountability in the Council-Manager Form the Strong Mayor Claim

² This statement does not imply, however, that the executive mayor serves as the chairman of the council in the mayor-council form. As a feature of separation of powers, the presiding officer of the council is usually chosen by the council.

In recent years, there have been many instances of attacks on the council-manager form for its weakness in ensuring accountability, on the one hand, and claims that the strong mayors are better at promoting accountability, on the other. In part, these views build on longstanding argument that the council-manager form cannot handle the challenges of large cities (e.g., Banfield and Wilson 1963). At earlier times, there were few large cities (over 250,000 in population) and no very large cities (over one million) that used the form, so the claim was based more on the logic of the argument than on empirical evidence. At the present time, council manager cities are used in one is three cities over 500,000 in million in population, half the cities between 250,000 and 500,000, and two-thirds of the cities between 100,000 and 250,000 in size, as indicated in Figure 1. Since 1990, in cities over 100,000 in population, there has been a charter change to mayor-council form in Fresno, CA; Hartford, CT; Miami, FL; Oakland, CA; Richmond, VA; St. Petersburg, FL; San Diego, CA; Sioux Falls, SD; Spokane, WA; and Toledo, OH. Abandonment of the council-manager form was rejected in Dallas, TX, Kansas City, MO, and Cincinnati, OH. The only large city that has changed to the council-manager form is El Paso, TX. Local government media analyst Allan Ehrenhalt (2004) notes the overall expansion of the use of the council-manager form and El Paso's decision, but concludes "you have to pay attention to momentum, which is clearly moving in the other direction."

The view is widely held that as cities increase in size and diversity, the council-manager form is less well suited to handle the higher levels of conflict that are found because of inherent features of the form. First, mayors have few formal powers and lack the formal and informal resources needed for effective leadership (Pressman 1972; Bowers and Rich 2000). Second, councils are fragmented and unable to provide cohesive direction to the city manager (Gurwitt 1997). Third, some argue that when city managers do not get clear direction and support from a divided city council, they are unwilling or unable to confront entrenched department heads. In this view, the formally centralized administrative control does not match the reality of urban bureaucracies. Under the terms of the city charter, however, the city council cannot itself select or remove a department head or change the administrative structure.

Taken together, these characteristics can create a situation in which no one is in charge. Former Virginia governor Douglas Wilder promoted change in form of government in Richmond and then campaigned for mayor of Richmond by labeling the city a "cesspool of corruption and inefficiency." Presumably, the structural features of the council-manager form should have prevented these conditions. Not only did the form "fail" in Richmond, it was not viewed as having the capability for renewal. A community activist (quoted in Gurwitt 2005) described the situation in this way:

You name the category — public health, education, employment, the economy — we were hurting and the leadership had not addressed it....No one was accountable. The mayor was saying, "Well, under the statute I preside over meetings and cut ribbons"; the manager was not required to respond to any citizen or citizen issue; and the council was in a situation where you couldn't get three council members to agree on what was for lunch, let alone set benchmarks and hold the manager to those benchmarks.

Gurwitt (2005) suggests that the council-manager form in Richmond and perhaps in general is characterized by “diffuse governance.” The mayor who was selected by council peers had little management authority and no popular mandate. “It was a widespread feeling that the system lacked accountability that jump-started the city’s makeover.”

The flip-side of these criticisms is the claim that an elected executive mayor will strengthen accountability. The charter change in Richmond created a strong executive, one who in the words of a political consultant “the voters can hold accountable in terms of addressing the issues, such as ending corruption, cracking down on crime, improving schools, revitalizing neighborhoods and fighting poverty.” A mayor in Kansas City, Missouri, led an effort to change the form of government in 2001 with a call for making one person directly answerable to the voters for how city government performs. She was dissatisfied with how the city was performing, but rather than changing the city manager, she wanted to change the form to give the mayor more power. In a 2005 effort to change the form of government in Dallas, Texas, proponents of the strong mayor charter argued that only a strong executive can tackle serious problems by focusing the resources on city government to accomplish political goals. A particular area of concern was crime. The claim was made that cities that have addressed the high levels of crime had the force of a strong mayor behind the new strategies (Ramshaw and Grabell 2005). In Dallas, critics charged that the police chief resisted change being pushed by the city manager and secured support from backers on the city council. A letter to voters from a leader of the charter change effort put it this way:

In private business, the CEO has the ability to manage top executives. That’s not the case right now at Dallas City Hall, where even the best city manager must constantly answer to the 14 different council members. The strong mayor proposal will change that by giving the mayor the authority to manage high-level city employees, and improve efficiency at City Hall.

In this view, only a strong political leader has the clout to direct strong subordinates.

A variation on the themes in Dallas and Richmond was sounded in council-manager Fairfax county government in Virginia (Mahtesian 1999). The county manager, who had been a successful innovator in a small and more homogeneous city, encountered difficulty in the high-pressure politics of a county with almost one million residents. In addition, he was often stymied by division on the county council in carrying out his administrative initiatives. A business leader expressed the opinion that blurring of lines between the responsibility of the county executive for operations of government and the county council would lead to support for a change to an elected executive who could stand up to the council members. Although Fairfax was well-run and successful in contrast to the problems of Richmond, the complaint was made that the county manager was not accountable to the citizens and would back away from needed changes when there was resistance from the council.

In local governments with both major forms of governments, the efforts to strengthen the mayor have been promoted as a way to make city government more efficient and accountable (Mullin, Peele, and Cain 2004, 25).

The efforts to strengthen the mayor occur as mayors themselves are focusing more attention on administrative issues. In the nineties in the U.S., a new breed of “managerialized mayors” appeared on the scene that focused on changing the way their governments operate (Flanagan 2004, 206). They often battled the city government bureaucracies over changes in administrative performance and management practices. Giuliani’s efforts in New York were a prime example of how a determined mayor succeeded in changing priorities and eliminating wasteful practices (Siegel 2005). Since 1990, the mayor’s office has been strengthened in a number of large mayor-council cities eliminating some of the old sources of fragmented authority and broadening the scope of authority of city government, in particular, the city takeover of responsibility for public schools in Chicago and New York.

Returning to the recent changes in English municipalities, direct election of the mayor increases focus of the mayor for program implementation and making things happen in city government. Direct election gives mayors “a burning focus on this issue,” according to Stoker (2004, 15). Since mayors believe that they will be held “personally responsible if they do not deliver,” there is a “sense of personal ownership of problems and the need to find solutions.” Mayors are more publicly recognized as the “focus for accountability” than is the leader in the cabinet-leader form (16.)

Germany has also seen the strengthening of mayor in provinces that previously used a form with an appointed executive administrator. The mayors who have been elected in these reformed structures devote less attention to party ideology and entrepreneurial visions that appear to be of little interest to citizens. Rather, they focus on “concrete results in smaller projects and policy reform” (Gissendanner and Kertsing 2006, 17). Although the mayor has been strengthened, they also encounter increased difficulty in securing the cooperation of the council. This condition “reinforces the probability that mayors will choose to direct their energies to administrative tasks,” which can be planned and implemented without the council’s support. These “smaller reforms” may, however, be visible and have a direct impact on citizens. Gissendanner and Kertsing offer as an example the creation of one-stop service centres within the municipal administration and cite evidence that citizen-oriented administrative reforms such as this occur more often since the introduction of directly elected mayors. “For all of these reasons,” they conclude, “the better part of wisdom for German mayors is to concentrate on good administration rather than rallying networks around innovative ventures or by leading the council as policy entrepreneurs.”

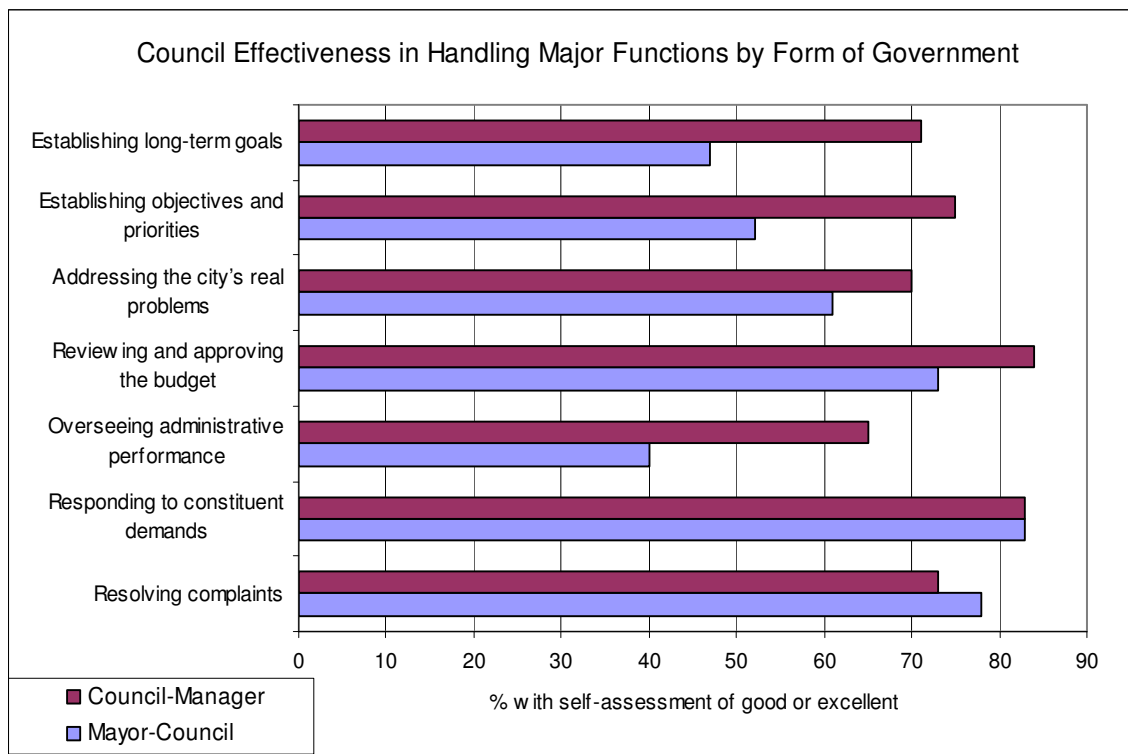
It appears that in the United States and other countries, there is a tendency to rely on mayors as agents of accountability and mayors are focusing their attention of performance issues.

Examination of Evidence

There are no systematic studies that compare the accountability record of cities with mayor-council and council-manager governments. There are some broad indicators that are useful in comparing performance of officials and of cities that use different forms of government.

In a national survey of mayors and council members conducted in 2001, respondents provided a self-assessment of their performance in handling a number of major functions. These draw on their governance role, i.e., goal setting, setting objectives and priorities, addressing the city needs, budget review, and overseeing administrative performance, and on their representational role linking citizens to government by responding to demands and helping to resolve complaints. The results are presented in Figure 2, which presents the percentage of council members divided by form of government who assess their council's performance as good or excellent in handling each function.

Figure 2.



Source: Svava (2003)

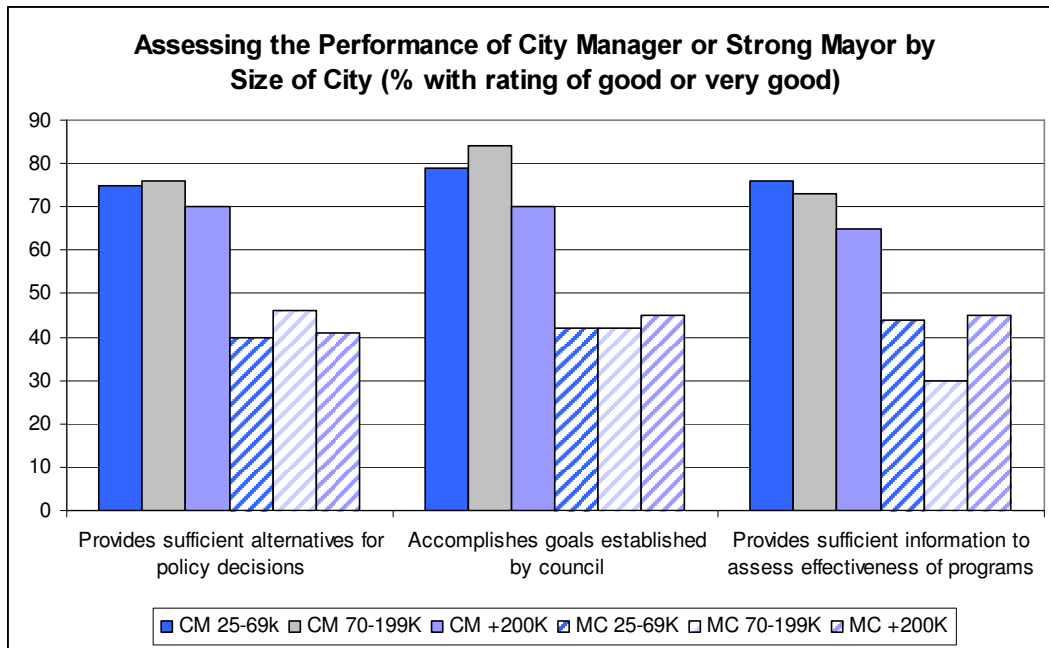
There are consistently higher ratings for handling the governance functions in council-manager cities, particularly in the broad steering activities and in overseeing performance. Setting goals and objectives provide the context for expectations used in assessing performance and oversight is the process of conducting reviews. There is less difference in performance in responding to the city's problems and reviewing the budget, and virtually no difference in handling the representational functions. Whereas elected officials in council-manager may have once stressed a detached oversight role over

attention to constituent demands and complaints, this perception is apparently no longer warranted.

When council members offer an overall assessment of their effectiveness, both sets of elected officials are positive, but those in council-manager cities are more likely to feel that they excel. In these cities, 84% view their effectiveness as excellent or good compared to 74% in mayor-council cities, but 35% of the former choose the top rating compared to 13% of the latter. In the large cities (over 200,000,) the difference is even more pronounced. Whereas 45% of those in council-manager cities view their performance as excellent, this view is held by only 9% in mayor-council cities.

It is also possible to use results from this survey to compare the performance of the strong mayor and the city manager in interacting with the council. Council members were asked to assess the ways that each type of executive works with them in policy making and evaluation. The executives support policy making by providing alternatives for policy decisions, and they may demonstrate willingness to accomplish the goals that council members set. In addition, they directly support council oversight by providing information on performance. City size may affect how the executive carries out these tasks. The information presented in figure 3 is the percent of respondents who give the executive a rating of good or very good for three council-related functions, divided by form of government and by city size.

Figure 3.



Source: Svava (2003)

There is consistent advantage in the ratings provided to the city manager compared to the strong mayor. The first and second measures may be an unfair comparison. By the norms of the form, city managers are supposed support the council in its policy making activities and carry out its decisions, and large majorities of council members rate the

manager’s performance as positive in these areas. Less than half give the same rating to strong mayors who are presumably guided by the normative expectation that they will promote their own policy agenda. Still, the mayor’s behavior—as well as resource differences between the strong mayor and the city council—weakens the council’s capacity to play an active role in policy making. It could be argued, however, that the expectation to provide information to support oversight should be the same in either form of government. The council is limited in its ability to handle the accountability function—a role explicitly assigned in British local government—if it does not receive adequate information about programs and services. It is also noteworthy that the performance of the city manager in the large cities is given a slightly but consistently lower rating by council members compared to managers in smaller cities. This finding may indicate greater tensions in the relationship between elected officials and the city manager than in smaller cities.

The difference between the city manager and the elected executive mayor is not as great when examining other aspects of performance that do not involve direct interaction with the city council. Inclusiveness, standards of conduct, and commitment to improving efficiency are all related to accountability. The city managers are consistently rated higher in cities of all sizes in these three indicators of performance, as indicated in Table 1.

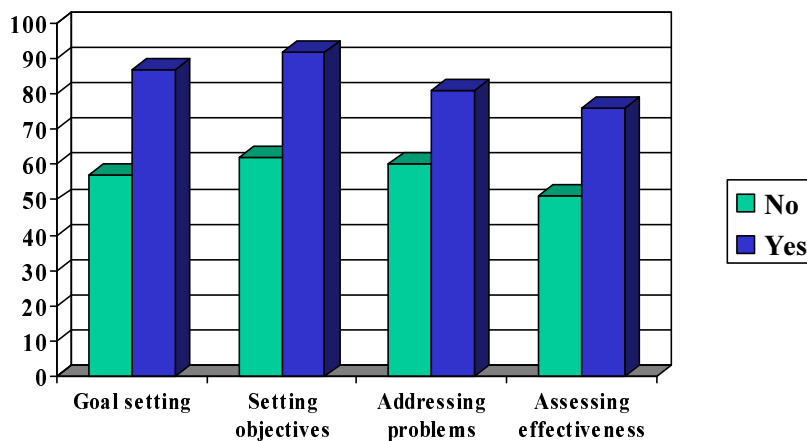
Table 1. Council Rating of Executive Performance by Form of Government:
Percent rating performance of City Manager or Strong Mayor good or very good

| City Size | Total | | Small | | Medium | | Large | |
|---|-------|----|-------|----|--------|----|-------|----|
| | CM | MC | CM | MC | CM | MC | CM | MC |
| Insures that city government is open to participation of all groups in the community. | 76 | 64 | 76 | 66 | 76 | 62 | 80 | 55 |
| Maintains high standards of personal conduct for self and staff. | 90 | 61 | 91 | 64 | 87 | 60 | 95 | 52 |
| Seeks to improve efficiency of city government. | 86 | 61 | 88 | 64 | 84 | 54 | 70 | 59 |

There is somewhat greater variation by size of city than found in the first set of measures. The ratings of strong mayors generally drop as the size category increases. The city manager scores are more consistent except for the lower rating for promoting efficiency in large cities. The difference between the manager and mayor efficiency ratings is smallest in these cities, suggesting somewhat greater council dissatisfaction with efficiency gains. It is interesting, however, that city managers receive their highest score compared to other city managers for opening up city government and for maintaining high standards for self and for staff in large cities.

When the mayors in the two types of cities are compared, there is an advantage for mayor-council cities. Despite their difference in formal resources for leadership, it is possible for mayors in either form to be visionary leaders who promote new initiatives in the city. These initiatives may either be new policy goals or provide the framework for performance objectives. This dimension of leadership is central to the facilitative style that is consistent with the features of the council-manager form. Facilitative leaders improve the goal setting performance of the city council, improve the understanding and coordination of political and administrative roles, and promote clear communication between the council and the city manager (Svara and Associates, 1994). In the 2001 survey, only 42% of the council members (excluding mayors) in council-manager cities consider their mayor to be a visionary leader compared to 57% in mayor-council cities (Svara 2002). Although formal powers are not required to be visionary, more of the officials in the strong mayor office have this quality (or more persons with this quality are enticed to run for a strong mayor office). When a leader with vision is present in council-manager cities, there is a consistently higher level of council performance in filling governance functions, as indicated in Figure 4.

Figure 4.
Effects of visionary leadership in Council-Manager Cities:
Percent who rate council performance as excellent/good
when the Mayor is/is not a visionary leader.



The figure suggests the capacity of the council-manager form to partially offset the absence of mayoral leadership. Approximately half of the council members feel that they do a good or excellent job in governance functions even when the mayor is not judged to be a visionary leader.³ Thus, the mayor in council-manager cities can be an effective leader who improves the council's performance in determining expectations and assessing the effectiveness of administrative performance, but such high level leadership

³ When strong mayors are visionaries, the performance of the council is advanced as well, although the council's performance with a visionary strong mayor is approximately the same as that of a council-manager council without a visionary mayor. When strong mayors are not visionaries, council performance is poor.

is found in less than half the council-manager cities. Without it, councils perform well but the full potential for leadership in governance functions is not achieved.

There are other general indicators of differences in performance and innovation by cities with different forms of government. The *Governing* magazine/Maxwell School assessment of city government performance awarded only two A grades, and both went to council-manager cities. The report indicated that Phoenix (A) and Austin (A-) “are committed to rigorous management and performance in all areas of government, leading to countless improvements in delivering services to residents. And both do a good job of involving their citizens in the effort to be effective” (quoted in O’Neill 2005). Overall, the ten council-manager cities in the survey received an average grade of B (3.0), whereas the 25 mayor council cities received just below B-/C+ (2.5).⁴ The grades were virtually the same for the specific item rating managing for results (3.04 versus 2.42).

The adoption of management innovations occurs more rapidly in council-manager cities. For example, in the early nineties, citywide use of strategic planning was more common in council-manager (30 per cent) than mayor-council cities (17 per cent) (Poister and Streib, 1989; Streib and Poister 1990). At the present time, incorporation of e-government provisions is more likely to occur in council-manager cities (Pavlichev 2004). When the Center for Digital Government and the National League of Cities surveyed local governments and ranked the top 10 cities in four population categories for making the best use of technology in operations and constituent service, 83% of the highest ranked cities use the council-manager form (O’Neill 2005). Substantial attention is given in the professional development activities of the International City/County Management Association to educating local government administrators about “best practices” and sharing information about implementing them. Finally, more than half of the 40 cities that received a triple-A bond rating as of December 2003 from both Moody’s and Standard & Poor’s operate under the council-manager form (O’Neill 2005).

Studies of council-manager governments and city managers alone without the comparative dimension have consistently identified the innovative orientation that city managers have. They engage in entrepreneurial activities (Ammons and Newell 1989), and are often the key innovators in their governments (Schneider and Teske 1992.) According to Osborne and Gaebler who was himself a city manager (1992), city managers were the “heroes” in fostering reinvention. Finally, city managers place a strong emphasis on policy and organizational innovation in their work, and they view their influence as greater than that of elected officials (Mouritzen and Svava 2002.)

A survey by Kearney, Feldman, and Scavo (2000) determined that city managers in cities over 10,000 in population give substantial support to the ideas of reinventing government and to many of its practices. They overwhelmingly support viewing taxpayers as “customers” (98%), using third-party contractors (96%), introducing

⁴ <http://governing.com/gpp/2000/gp0glanc.htm>. I calculated the “grade point averages” on a standards 4 point scale. For example, B+ = 3.3, B = 3, and B- = 2.7.

competition into the delivery of services (93%), involving community groups in decision making (77%), and having municipal departments compete against outside contractors (68%). Actions taken in five years before the survey in 1997 include training employees in customer service (81%), training employees to respond more effectively to citizen complaints (78%), and recommending the use of citizen surveys to determine satisfaction with services (63%). They find that the strongest predictor of action is the attitudes of the managers. When city managers believe in the importance of making these changes, they are likely to make recommendations to do so, and factors that have been viewed as obstacles to change, such as a unionized workforce, do not impact action. They suggest that both opportunity, i.e., favorable fund balance and Sunbelt location that is associated with growth, and need, i.e., higher number of employees per capita, increase the likelihood of reinvention action.⁵

The record of strong mayors as change agents is noteworthy. They are innovators who generate popular support and leverage limited political and governmental resources to carry out an agenda of change (see summary in Svara 1990, ch. 3). In the nineties, new local political leaders emerged whose style was shaped by the decline of intermediary organizations and the expansion of the reach and power of the media. Flanagan (2004) contrasts the significant mayors of the past who transformed the governing arrangements of their cities to support their change agenda and current mayors who are likely to be preemptive in style and win office by exploiting weaknesses in existing regimes and attacking the failures of incumbents. The “managerialized” mayors of the nineties represented this latter approach.⁶ They had little organizational support and relied on “direct issue-oriented appeals to the public to sustain governing legitimacy” (206). They had a positive orientation in their insistence that cities could solve their own problems without large amounts of intergovernmental aid, but their shared commitment to scaling back the size of city government and reducing the urban workforce reflected a negative view of city bureaucracies and established interest groups. Flanagan judges that their record is a “mixed bag” (206). With political independence from “the heavy hand of interest groups and political parties,” they could focus on policy reform, “although normally they can only muster sufficient political capital to focus on a single institution and policy, and do little else” (206). To the extent that they attempt to achieve “widespread structural reform in how cities are governed, the more likely they are to fail.”

If this analysis is correct, the scope of reform and improved accountability provided by strong mayors is likely to be narrow. Consistent with the findings of Gissendanner and Kertsing (2006) in Germany and perhaps also the experience with the

⁵ Other key determinates of attitudes are professionalization indicated by membership in ICMA and time in current position with a negative sign. This may suggest that city managers who are mobile are more open to change and perhaps see innovation as a benefit to further career moves, i.e., bureau-shaping behavior (Dunleavy 1991).

⁶ The list compiled by Siegel (2005, 86-88) includes Richard Riordan, LA; Dennis Archer, Detroit; Mike White, Cleveland; Bret Schundler, Jersey City; Thomas Menino, Boston; John Norquist, Milwaukee; Steve Goldsmith, Indianapolis; Richard Daley, Chicago; and Richard Giuliani.

directly elected mayors in England, the strong mayor as innovator is now more like to offer administrative remedies than political visions.

A General Framework: Political and Professional Dimensions of Accountability

The comparison of approaches to accountability improvement in cities with different forms of government appears to be linked to differences in approach to accountability—compelled by superiors and unidirectional versus volunteered or induced and multi-directional. The efforts to expand accountability of the first type are likely to occur in mayor-council cities with an elected executive. The call to “hold one person accountable for change” is heard in the campaigns of preemptive candidates and of groups that promote abandoning the council-manager form of government for the mayor-council form. In this approach, change comes from an aggressive political leader with popular support who reasserts control over bureaucrats and restores the traditional chain of accountability (Behn 2000, 60), even if not using traditional public administration rule-oriented approaches. Such leaders would have to be executive mayors in order to have the independent formal and political resources to act. They challenge the “bureaucracy” in an effort to make the managers manage. Some also seek to make the council members decide, i.e., approve the mayor’s policy agenda, although separation of powers or the presence of another veto player (Gissendanner and Kertsing 2006) limits their prospects of success. Strong mayors can expand the scope of support through regime formation and can even use facilitative methods in dealing with the city council⁷, but these approaches are not likely to be the ones emphasized in either mayoral elections or charter change referenda. Indeed, this approach equates accountability with attacking problems (and those responsible for the problems) used by the mayors as part of their campaign for office and with carrying out the mayor’s policy agenda. In view of this definition, changes in structure and process that will enable the mayor to accomplish his or her goals can be defended (Mullin, Peele, and Cain 2004).

Accountability improvement efforts that stress multi-directionality are more likely to occur in council-manager cities with facilitative visionary mayors, governing councils, and innovative city managers. In cities that take this approach, there is shared responsibility for improving accountability and broad-ranging contributions. The accountability holder-holdee distinction is set aside at times, and many officials are accountable and support accountability. To be sure, there are mechanisms to hold officials accountable, but this compelled accountability is accompanied by accountability that is induced and volunteered because of a shared commitment based on common values and norms—factors that the normative institutionalists considered to be powerful guides to behavior (March and Olsen 1995).⁸ Officials are accountable not only for

⁷ In a current research project to update and revise *Facilitative Leadership in Local Government*, more attention is being given to this possibility with case studies of several mayors in mayor-council cities who use facilitative model and forego the reliance on use of rewards and sanctions.

⁸ In addition, Dunleavy (1991) offers a public choice argument that top administrator can be distinguished from other administrators in involvement in bureau-shaping activities. It is in their interests to promote accountability because it is valued by politicians.

addressing problems and carrying out specific initiatives but also for responsive, consistent, high quality services and progress toward meeting shared goals. Change can come from political leaders who inspire and affirm popular aspirations, from council members who combine governance and representational roles, and from administrators who are committed to the long-term mission of the city and responsive to citizens and service recipients. There is a complementary relationship⁹ between elected officials who provide guidance and oversight (both general and specific) and administrators who provide strategic and policy advice and deliver services, with both guided by their direct relationship with citizens. In brief, advocates of this approach would let the mayor and council govern, let the managers manage, and let the citizens have an active voice and active role—an orientation that shares characteristics with Behn’s (2000, 203-205) ideal of 360 degree accountability. In this situation, changes in structure would be assessed in terms of their impact on the capacity of the government to perform in a proactive and constructive way.

I believe it is not too great a stretch to argue that these differences in the approach to accountability are rooted in differing philosophies about the nature of change in communities. In one approach, change represents remediation and regeneration or renewal. There are problems that must be solved and new goals that must be reached. The political narrative is one of failure and revival, a recurring cycle as one period of improvement is followed by failure and reversal creating the need for another period of renewal.¹⁰ This is a diagnosis and cure orientation that typically requires a surgical approach, i.e., the combined talents of the cancer and cosmetic surgeon.

There is another philosophy less commonly expressed in the U.S. which sees change as making progress toward shared goals. This is a sustainability approach, or in the health analogy, a focus on wellness despite the occasional need for more intensive medical intervention. Although change is viewed as continuous rather than episodic and generally forward-moving rather than up and down, it is still challenging to sustain progress. There can be setbacks and disagreements in this kind of change, and it is possible that new participants will appear who demand that they be included in the re-determination of direction and purpose. It is presumed that common interests and ideals will be sufficient to overcome the challenges, but the formation and development of commitment to goals as well as correcting and at critical times redirecting the pursuit of these shared goals all require leadership—it does not happen automatically or spontaneously. The characteristics of leadership have to match the characteristics of the goals pursued. Shared goals require shared leadership and shared accountability for meeting them.

⁹ I have contrasted a model of complementarity with strict political control, separate roles, or bureaucratic autonomy models. Complementarity is characterized by overlapping roles and some sharing of functions along with certain key values from the other models—responsiveness, distinction, and independence (Svara 2006b).

¹⁰ Of course, this is the theme of countless “westerns” in the United States in which the lone hero takes on the forces of evil in a town and creates a new day for the hapless residents. Are there any movies about social capital in the old west?

These different philosophies have some objective causes but can be based on subjective factors as well. When cities are stressed by conflict or declining resources, change may typically come by tapping into feelings of discontent and pushing initiatives over the resistance of opponents. When a city is constantly in a position of reslicing a shrinking pie, zero-sum views will be common. A recurring cycle of failure following success encourages the use of the preemptive approach. At the other extreme, simplicity and homogeneity support the formation of shared goals. Situations in which there is growth and expanding resources permit change without zero-sum conflicts. In between, however, are many situations that can be viewed in either way. The political debate is in part a disagreement about the approach to change that can and should be taken. The leader who claims that only he or she can be the agent of change using an individualized model of accountability will by definition oppose those who argue for shared accountability.

This disagreement is related to the debate over form of government. The contrasting perspectives on leadership and change align with the alternative forms of government. Presumably there are some cities in which the council-manager form of government cannot work because conflicts are too great, and some cities where the mayor-council form is out of synch with the high level of consensus. In between, there are many cities in which a case can be made for either philosophy of change and either form of government.

In view of the two approaches to accountability (related to the two philosophies of community change), there are choices for officials and citizens to make. The implications and consequences of these choices can be elaborated drawing on the previous discussion.

Choosing the strong elected executive who relies on power-based approach to leadership and presents himself or herself as the key agent of accountability implies the following:

- The meaning of accountability focuses on performance in carrying out the mayor's policy agenda and the mayor's "burning focus" on implementation and making things happen in city government (Stoker 2004).
- There is separation of responsibility for execution by the mayor and responsibility for assessment by the city council, but there is weaker involvement in goal setting and oversight by the council because the council has fewer resources and the mayor can limit the information flow to the council.
- The emphasis is on "making" rather than "letting" the managers manage. The mayor potentially has direct control over any administrative officials, although there is greater potential for administrative evasion of control because of separation of powers.
- The conditions for internal control are weak, and mayors may encounter resistance from administrative departments and organizations of staff members. Administrative staff members are likely to be collectively protective and defensive, although they can be responsive and innovative individually.

- The direct assessment and control of the mayor's accountability is conducted by the voters and limited to the election years, although monitoring of citizen opinions is likely to occur regularly. Using the electoral process provides a "yes/no" measure of accountability based on whether the mayor is reelected. During the lame duck period, the power of electoral accountability is absent.¹¹
- The time perspective for accountability is influenced by the electoral cycle and the mayor's potential length of time in office with or without term limits. Long-standing accountability systems and organizational development commitments that span mayoral administrations are unlikely.
- With a CAO chosen in part to support the incumbent's reelection, the mayor receives narrower policy advice that is partially guided by reelection needs and weaker management support in designing accountability systems than would be the case with an independent CAO.
- The control-oriented approach to accountability runs counter to changes in governance that emphasize decentralization of government and partnerships with actors who are not under direct control of city government.

The claim that the mayor-council form identifies one person to be held responsible is literally the case when the council makes a limited contribution to policy making and has limited information for oversight. The argument is weakened when there is a stand-off between the mayor and the council fostered by separation of powers since each side can blame the other for stalemate. Strong mayors usually have sufficient formal and informal power and superiority in use of the mass media to overcome council resistance, although these advantages reinforce the centralized nature of leadership in this form. The mayor potentially has direct control over any administrative staff members, but is likely to encounter general (and at times focused) resistance from administrative departments and organizations of staff. The scope of control, therefore, is likely to be limited.

Beyond executive-legislative-administrative relations inside government, the expanding involvement of actors over whom city government does not have control in the era of "new governance" raises additional questions about holding one person accountable. The mayor is necessarily dependent on other actors. Strong mayors can take the initiative in forming networks and use their power and resources to offer inducements to recruit network members and sustain their participation. The greatest limiting factor may be the conflict between centralization of leadership and the self-governing nature of networks (Sorensen 2006). The range of networks that can be used for governance and held accountable will be limited by mayors' time and attention despite their resources

Choosing the council-manager form implies the following approaches to accountability:

¹¹ Rudolph Giuliani is often held up as the epitome of the take-charge mayor who gets things done. He was, however, much more self-centered and less effective in his initiatives and distracted by the prospect of running for higher office during his second term-limited four years in office. Many of the reforms of the first term were abandoned and spending priorities shifted to building an electoral base (Siegel 2005).

- There is separation of responsibility for execution by the city manager from responsibility for assessment by the city council, and the council can specify what information it will receive.
- The city manager is directly and continuously accountable for performance, is periodically appraised by the council, and can be removed (or rewarded) at any time.
- There is shared responsibility for accountability with council responsibility for setting goals and policy and for oversight, manager responsibility for advising the council in policy-making and for administration, and formal and informal communication about the manager's performance in terms of goals set by the council. In view of these characteristics, accountability is likely to occur within a framework of mission and goals.
- The time perspective for accountability blends the electoral cycle for the mayor and council and the non-limited time perspective of the city manager. Long-standing accountability systems and organizational development commitments that span the terms of mayors and councils are likely.
- There are favorable conditions for internal control, and the form emphasizes "letting" the manager and staff manage. There is evidence of a normative commitment to accountability and empirical record of supporting accountability on part of city managers. Administrative staff members are likely to be responsive, inclusive, and innovative collectively and individually.
- There are strong general management processes in view of the record of innovation. There is greater emphasis on performance in view of the use of measuring for results. It is likely that there will be greater coherence, consistency, coordination across departments, and continuity in management strategies, in specific accountability processes, and in the use of accountability practices to enhance performance
- More efforts in meeting other standards for effective accountability are likely, although additional research is needed on form-related differences in use of varied rewards (not just money) as well as sanctions, record at linking outputs and outcomes, and experience in promoting synergy in measuring performance.

The council-manager form can not claim that one person is responsible, although it can hold one person accountable by the council's action toward the city manager. Accountability is ultimately in the hands of the mayor and council, i.e., accountability is collective rather than individual, and in normative and practical terms, the mayor, council, and manager have a high level of reciprocity and interdependence for all aspects of the performance of city government. The city manager does not have to answer to citizens, but the mayor and council can insist on receiving answers.

Beyond legislative-executive/administrative relations inside government, the expanding involvement of actors over whom city government does not have control in the era of "new governance" presents challenges to the council-manager form as well. The shared leadership approach is well suited to work with self-governing networks. The

mayor and council members may all be involved in partnerships, and the logic of the form permits the city manager and other administrators to be involved as well. None of the actors can make commitments for the city in the way a strong mayor can, so they must reach collective decisions. The internal methods of monitoring performance and linking accountability to other aspects of organizational management are potentially useful in designing approaches to accountability for networks as well.

In sum, the mayor-council form has focused political executive leadership that is powerful but constrained. The potential for success comes in targeting resources on specific problems, performance issues, and initiatives, and this is focus of accountability. The approach to governance and accountability fits the remediation and renewal approach to community change. An inherent risk in this form is that the mayor will not be capable of meeting the broad demands of leadership in the public, political, and administrative spheres. The remediation promised by a reform mayor is often to clean up the failures of a previous mayor (Svara 2006a), and new mayors often proclaim the need to restore accountability lost under a predecessor who was out of touch.

The council-manager form has shared political and professional leadership. It typically offers new mayors and council members an existing infrastructure of accountability within a framework of existing goals that can be used as the starting point for change. The form has the capacity for high quality goal setting and performance and matches a philosophy of community change that emphasizes sustained progress toward meeting shared goals.¹² This is the focus of accountability, and cities that use the form commonly seek to meet standards of comprehensive and proactive assessment. The form functions better when mayors provide vision and are effective facilitative leaders, although other council members and the city manager partially fill the vacuum when these traits are missing. Still, the form is hampered if there is misalignment among leaders or confusion about goals. These shortcomings can be remedied by methods to strengthen group process if there is a will to use them among elected officials.¹³ The form also suffers if the city manager is an incompetent and allowed to remain in office,¹⁴ although the council can remedy this situation if it uses its authority to remove the manager. In extreme conditions of fragmentation within the council, however, there is no

¹² A standard view is that the form is suitable only for small, homogeneous communities in which shared goals are “naturally” present (e.g., Banfield and Wilson 1963). As I argued in a study of matched moderately large mayor-council and council manager cities, there is a difference in substance, process, and interactions related to form even when comparing similar cities (Svara 1991). The continuing movement of council-manager cities into larger size categories, as indicated in figure 1, also challenges the standard view.

¹³ City managers commonly promote the use of council retreats for goals setting and assessment of progress to both prevent division and uncertainty about goals from occurring as well as to remedy shortcomings in group process. Council members are sometimes not inclined to have retreats or are too divided internally to make them productive.

¹⁴ This is the explanation given for problems in San Diego (Ehrenhalt 2004).

official who can impose order on the situation. Rare as this condition is,¹⁵ it severely hampers performance and undermines accountability when it occurs.

America's two forms of local government provide two different approaches to promoting accountability and performance. The analysis of the nature of accountability and how it relates the logic and the performance record of the mayor-council and council-manager forms suggests that each offers a different approach and a different focus to accountability. Which form and which approach—in part related to basic differences in philosophy about the nature of community change—will continue to be topics for debate in the future. It seems clear, however, that despite the argument heard in the past decade that strong mayors are needed for improved accountability and efficiency, the mayor-council structure does not have a unique claim to be the accountability form any more than the council-manager form did at an earlier time.

¹⁵ Richmond and Hartford appear to be examples of cities with a breakdown of working relationships that extended over a number of years, although Gurwitt (1997) argues that confusion about who is in charge is fairly common.

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