

Mayors of American Cities: An Analysis of Powers and Responsibilities

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Abstract: Using data from a 1987 nationwide survey of U.S. cities of 25,000 population and above, this research analyzes the formal authority and the informal powers associated with the office of mayor. We divide cities by mayor-council or council-manager form. The findings confirm that elected chief executives in mayoral cities possess considerably more formal authority than their counterparts in manager communities, yet informal mayoral powers are quite comparable among these two forms of government. Using ANOVA (GLS), we also predict variations in mayoral power using five demographic and political variables. Among mayor-council cities, location in a central city and large size are the best explanatory variables. For manager cities, regional location and the presence of partisan ballots and ward elections are the best predictors of mayoral power.

Introduction

At least since Robert Dahl's *Who Governs* (1961), scholars have recognized municipal leadership's contribution to urban problem solving. More recently, Ester Fuchs (1992) highlights the mayor's critical role in New York and Chicago fiscal policy making. Without strong mayors, other city officials may become pivotal figures in the search for improved service delivery and a better quality of life for city residents. For years, various studies have identified the city manager as a key policy leader (Adrian, 1958; Loveridge, 1971; Nalbandian, 1990; Svara, 1985). Additionally, Boynton and Wright (1971), Wikstrom (1979), and Protasel (1989) have explored the working relationship between the city manager and mayor, suggesting that the two officials often lead as a collaborative team. Yet despite abundant research investigating the city managers' policy impact and their leadership potential, far fewer studies have exclusively examined mayoral influence.

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, DC, September 2-5, 1993.

American Review of Public Administration Volume 26, Number 1 March 1996

Svara (1987) is undoubtedly correct in asserting that the dominant model of mayoral leadership originates with studies of large mayor-council cities. These executives, who mainly come from strong mayor jurisdictions, exercise strong leadership by combining essential institutional-legal arrangements with a particular personality and leadership style that enables them to cultivate support for their policy agendas. Pressman (1972) clearly relies on this model to evaluate the power and effectiveness of the mayor of Oakland, a council-manager city. He concludes that the mayor had neither the personal inclination nor the formal authority to exercise much leadership. Svara (1987, 1990, Chap. 4), however, contends that it is inappropriate to evaluate mayoral leadership in council-manager cities according to the expectations of the strong mayor model. He offers a contrasting model of leadership—the facilitative mayor—that helps explain how council-manager mayors operate. Thus the effectiveness of urban chief executives depends not only on available formal powers and resources but also on how well such officials can use their personality, style, and political skills to advance their policy goals.

This research should help fill the knowledge gap regarding the powers and responsibilities of American mayors. First, building on previous research by Morgan and Watson (1992), we analyze the formal authority and informal powers available to mayors both in mayor-council cities and in council-manager cities. The study also offers the first large-scale, comparative analysis of mayoral power across these two types of government structures. Second, the research includes a multivariate analysis to identify certain demographic and political characteristics that help account for formal and informal powers of American mayors.

The Search for Mayoral Power

Research on mayoral leadership often focuses on the interaction between the office characteristics and the personality and style of individual mayors. Such studies sometimes offer typologies of mayoral style. Drawing on research in 20 communities, Kotter and Lawrence (1974) identify five styles of mayoral leadership: ceremonial, caretaker, individualist, executive, and entrepreneur. The authors thought most big-city mayors were caretakers, ceremonialists, or individualists. Such typologies typically emphasize an incumbent's personal qualities, how the mayor must use a variety of informal means for accomplishing his or her agenda. In New Haven, for example, Dahl comments that Mayor Lee had to rely heavily on informal influence. The mayor was not at the top of a neat hierarchy. He could rarely command, so he had to rely on his skills as a bargainer and negotiator—cajoling, exhorting, promising, insisting, demanding, even threatening (Dahl, 1961, p. 204). Yet the mayor's capacity to use these political tactics depends on more than personality or even governing style. Besieged with questions, demands, and complaints, the elected executive serves as a focal point in most communities. The mayor's visibility, attentiveness to the press and media, and participation in intergovernmental affairs help that official capture and retain the public's attention. Structural character-

istics, though, often impose severe constraints on mayors' ability to exercise effective policy leadership.

Regardless of a mayor's political skills, a community's governmental structure will affect the mayor's ability to influence public policy. Based on her analysis of Boston and San Francisco, Ferman (1985) finds that the strong mayor structure of government provides talented individuals exceptional opportunities for political leadership. According to Ferman (1985, p. 10), "formal tools and informal resources must be manipulated in such a way that the mayor establishes the conditions for increasing executive power." The strong mayor plan of Boston, coupled with the city's nonreform ethos, granted Mayor Kevin White sufficient formal power to build his own political machine. For White, centralizing control through formal powers bolstered his bargaining position and overall use of informal authority in dealing with business, labor, and ethnic groups.

In council-manager cities, direct election of mayors lends more power to the position (Kammerer, 1964; for a contrary view, see Adrian, 1958). Directly elected mayors tend to be more active in local party politics and are more likely to garner political support for their policy views. Newland (1989, p. 267) furthermore claims that mayors commonly provide leadership by exercising authority over the local agenda as well as by managing council meetings. Although rarely granted to nonexecutive mayors, the legislative veto is another vehicle for acquiring power (Newland, 1989, p. 267). As Wikstrom (1979, p. 272) notes, "it is reasonable to infer that a mayor who enjoys the prerogative to veto legislation passed by council has more than an equal role in the policy-making process."

The presence of a political machine, either party-based or of the mayor's own creation, may affect mayoral power. Fuchs (1992, p. 230) argues that, by maintaining budgetary authority and control of a disciplined party organization, the mayor can check interest group demands for spending and thus promote greater fiscal stability. Ferman agrees (1985, p. 215) and advocates a return to a competitive two-party system, district-based elections, and less restrictive term limits as measures for increasing the mayor's formal and informal power. In their study of how pluralism affects mayoral activity, Eberts and Kelly (1985, p. 59) also provide evidence that electoral competition and citizen participation enhances mayoral network building, agenda setting, and task initiatives.

Considerable research (Banfield, 1965; Eberts & Kelly, 1985; Ferman, 1985; Fuchs, 1992) confirms that the strong mayor model is most conducive to mayoral policy leadership. Even so, Svava (1987, 1990) has shown that mayors can exercise power within a council-manager form of government. He argues that such mayors may still provide strong leadership without significant formal powers. They must develop a different approach to leadership, one that de-emphasizes the acquisition and use of power traditionally defined. He offers a contending model of leadership—the facilitative mayor—that helps explain how council-manager mayors operate. Questions remain, then, about how government structure affects the formal and informal powers of American mayors.

Svava's research notwithstanding, we would expect mayors to have the least amount of power in council-manager government. In such communities, mayors are traditionally seen as ceremonial figures, responsible more for "rib-

bon cutting than policy innovation" (Lineberry & Sharkansky, 1974, p. 158). As Svava (1987) comments, such mayors must rely heavily on informal powers and a nonobtrusive style, characterized by negotiation, persuasion, and facilitation. The lack of access to budgetary and personnel decisions, inability to set the agenda, and limited political tools to control council members should hamper the mayor's efforts to direct public policy.

In addition to examining the above hypothesized relationships, we will consider the extent to which certain external conditions may affect mayoral power. These include region, population, metropolitan status, ward elections, and partisan ballots. Larger, urban communities, especially those in the Northeast, are more highly politicized and likely to have numerous groups representing business, labor, and ethnic interests. The larger and more densely populated a community, the more essential the mayor's assistance, even in council-manager communities. Either structurally, through ward elections and partisan ballots, or through sheer size and hence heterogeneous population, communities that are more political in nature should have more influential mayors.

Data and Measures

The data for this research come from a nationwide survey of municipal chief executives in all cities of 2,500 and above population and those below 2,500 recognized by the International City Management Association (ICMA). The ICMA undertook the study in 1987, and the initial analysis appears in the 1989 *Municipal Year Book* (Anderson, 1989). The response rate for all cities was 46.3 percent. For the group of communities of 25,000 and over that we use in the following analysis, the return rate was 55.6 percent. Of the total surveyed, council-manager cities replied at a rate of 61.5 percent, mayor-council cities at only 38.1 percent. Of the group of communities of interest here, the lowest rate of return was for cities between 500,000 and 999,999 (27.8 percent). By region, the response rate was lowest for cities in the Northeast (36.4 percent) and the South (45.2 percent). The available information best depicts middle-sized council-manager cities from areas outside the Northeast and the South; thus, this group of 609 cities is not representative of all U.S. cities of 25,000 and over, but the percentage return is good for a mailed survey and provides more complete information than is usually available except from census data.

The instrument included questions on organizational structure and decision making. Many of them related to the position and activities of the mayor and city manager. The use of a mailed questionnaire limits the information obtainable about personal interactions and relationships that constitute the essence of informal influence. Nonetheless, the ICMA instrument does provide information that we might use to differentiate between formal authority and the potential for informal influence. Formal authority or formal power (we will use the two interchangeably) normally consists of those features of an executive office established by constitution, charter, or law. Informal power or influence connotes those behaviors or traits primarily of incumbent office holders that enable such officials to broker agreements and build political coalitions.

Before proceeding to the analysis, we might comment briefly on efforts to differentiate executive power along formal and informal lines. This endeavor has a rather long history in the study of the nation's governors. Schlesinger (1965) offers the first assessment of the relative positions of the governors of several states. He identifies four major organizational devices that "define the strength of the governor": tenure potential, power of appointment, control over the budget, and veto power (Schlesinger, 1965, p. 217). Although he uses the terms *power*, *strength*, and *influence* interchangeably, Schlesinger clearly had in mind those formal arrangements, tools, and constraints established by constitution or law. Those researchers who followed Schlesinger began to refer to this index and its later modifications as the "formal powers" of the office (Dometrius, 1979). Soon thereafter, comparisons of formal and informal gubernatorial power began to appear. Based on an 11-state survey of state senators, Bernick (1979), for example, finds considerable support for the components of the Schlesinger index (also see Beyle, 1968). Respondents named budget formulation, administrative control, and veto power as especially useful in the exercise of gubernatorial leadership. In short, following the well-established tradition in the literature for state chief executives, we will attempt to separate formal from informal mayoral power.

Analyzing Mayoral Power

Table 1 displays those items that represent the formal powers associated with the office of mayor in cities of 25,000 population and over. In the construction of an index of formal authority for later analysis, we awarded half the items a score of 1 point each. We gave extra weight (2 points) to those features that are especially critical to policy leadership—direct election, budget preparation, veto power, and departmental appointments (for appointing 50 percent or more; 81 percent of the mayors appointed none). The range for formal power is thus 1 to 12 (mean = 5.3; standard deviation = 2.4). Informal power, the four items listed in the lower part of Table 1, received 1 point each, producing a measure with a range of 0 to 4 (mean = 2.8; standard deviation = 1.0). The total mayoral power measure (formal plus informal) yields a measure with a mean of 8.2 and a standard deviation of 2.6 (range is 2 to 15). These power constructs only crudely represent the actual potential for any given mayor to exercise effective policy leadership, yet such measures derived from questionnaires can provide large-scale comparisons across cities unavailable in any other way.

As expected, the executive authority inherent in mayor-council offices far surpasses that for council-manager mayors. The average percentage score on the eight items for mayoral cities is 61, compared to only 26 for manager jurisdictions. The most common power available in mayoral cities is direct election, at 90 percent, closely followed by the capacity to call special meetings (83%). Voters cast ballots directly for mayor in only 63 percent of manager cities, but 91 percent of the mayors in those cities could call special meetings of the council. The biggest differences between mayor and manager cities appear for three formal powers: the veto, 76 percent to 9 percent; departmental appointments, 49 percent to 1 percent; and board appointments, 66 percent to 17

percent.¹ Also, 44 percent of survey respondents indicated that the chief executive in mayoral communities prepared the budget (to only 1 percent in manager cities). Among mayoral jurisdictions, one might have expected a higher figure for this potentially powerful weapon. This outcome may result from the presence of appointed chief administrative officers (CAO) so common in large mayoral cities.² These CAOs typically exercise many of the day-to-day functions city managers carry on, such as budget preparation. Overall, however, the information in Table 1 is unequivocal—chief executives in mayoral cities possess significantly more formal authority than mayors of council-manager cities.

Table 1
Formal and Informal Powers of the Mayor in
Council-Manager and Mayor-Council Cities, 1987

Powers	Cities of 25,000 Population and Above	
	Mayor Cities ^a	Manager Cities ^b
<i>Formal Power</i>		
Directly elected	90%	63%
Call special meeting	83	91
Veto	76	9
Annual message	66	24
Appointment—boards ^c	66	17
Appointment—departments ^d	49	1
Prepare budget	44	1
Prepare agenda	16	1
Mean	61	26
<i>Informal Power</i>		
Ceremonial representative	92%	95%
Confer frequently with manager ^e	—	82
State capitol representative	75	54
Frequent media representative ^e	43	63
Mean	70	74

Note: Data taken from Anderson (1989).

^a N ranges from 157 to 165.

^b N ranges from 426 to 444.

^c Percentage who appointed 50 percent or more of municipal boards.

^d Percentage who appointed 50 percent or more of the city's department heads.

^e Represents Categories 4 or 5 on a 1 to 5 scale with 5 high.

A comparison of informal mayoral power (bottom of Table 1) reveals a different picture. Here the two offices are quite similar. In fact, mayors in manager cities have only slightly more informal strength than their counterparts (74% to 70%). Three of these four features relate to the mayor's connection to external audiences—as ceremonial representative, capitol emissary, and me-

dia spokesperson. Chief executives in mayoral jurisdictions are especially likely to represent their community at the state capitol, an activity that has definite political overtones. On the other hand, council-manager mayors more frequently deal with the media, an activity that is much less likely to be perceived as political or partisan conduct. In general, though, mayors of all types engage in a variety of activities designed to promote their communities, if not themselves.

At this point we turn to a consideration of certain community characteristics that might affect mayoral power. As indicated previously, the urban politics literature suggests that large central cities with fewer reformed structures are more likely to have strong chief executives. This expectation, of course, derives from the general view that effective policy making among large heterogeneous and politicized communities requires uncommon strength in the office of chief executive. Banfield (1965), for example, finds that, among his nine large cities, strong mayors had a greater ability to achieve their policy objectives. Whether such cities actually elect mayors with greater political skills is less clear, yet large cities are the setting for most case studies of strong mayors (for an exception, see Greer, 1974). This provides sufficient rationale for testing the effects of population and metropolitan status. We will assume these same community features may help explain informal power differences as well. Specifically, as independent variables we include region, city size, metropolitan status, ward elections, and partisan ballots (see Table 2 for the coding).

What about council-manager mayors? In general, one again might expect certain environmental features to help explain the strength of the mayor's office. The relationship may not be as strong, however. Because council-manager executives presumably have less capacity for and perhaps less incentive to provide policy leadership, large politicized cities may give less authority to the mayor. On the other hand, we may find few differences in the capacity of the independent variables to account for variation in informal power between the two types of cities.

Table 2 shows the multivariate models explaining executive strength for both types of municipalities.³ Mayor-council cities appear first with formal power at the upper part of the table. The dominant effect here is from metropolitan status (f ratio = 13.3); central cities do grant more power to their mayors than do suburbs or independent cities. Only one other variable reaches statistical significance—population ($f = 4.2$). As expected, large jurisdictions often have stronger mayors. The level of explained variance is modest at .29, however, indicating that the equation cannot account for the preponderance of variation in the formal powers in mayor-council cities. An analysis of informal influence by itself yields little useful information. No variables are significant for either type of city, and the level of explained variance is less than .10 for both such equations (not shown).

The right-hand side of Table 2 also contains an equation predicting formal mayoral strength for council-manager cities. For this group, region is the best predictor. Council-manager mayors in the Western and North Central regions have slightly more authority than their counterparts in other areas of the country.⁴ The city manager plan is especially popular in the West, even among large municipalities (e.g., San Diego, San Jose, Phoenix). Apparently some large Western cities have chosen to provide their mayors with somewhat more au-

thority, perhaps to enhance the leadership potential in that office. Somewhat surprisingly, ward elections and partisan ballots surface here as important predictors for formal authority. Certain manager communities with more powerful elected executives may also think that other features associated with the politicized model of city government might enhance the capacity for more effective local policy making. Finally, population exerts some slight effect (large cities have stronger mayors). Still, this equation cannot account for much of the variation in the index of formal power ($R^2 = .15$).

Table 2
Explaining Mayoral Power Using ANOVA (25,000 and over Population)

Source	<i>Mayor-Council Cities (N=165)</i> F ratio	<i>Council-Manager Cities (N=397)</i> F ratio
<i>Formal Power</i>		
Region ^a	1.4	12.1**
Population ^b	4.2**	2.4*
Metro status ^c	13.3**	3.7*
Ward elections	1.1	7.3**
Partisan ballot	0.3	6.1**
	$R^2 = .29$	$R^2 = .15$
	F value = 4.4**	F value = 5.8**
<i>Total Power</i>		
Region ^a	2.6	7.6**
Population ^b	4.3**	3.0*
Metro status ^c	12.7**	2.0
Ward elections	1.2	3.3
Partisan ballots	1.0	5.7*
	$R^2 = .31$	$R^2 = .12$
	F value = 4.7**	F value = 4.3**

Note. Analysis is performed using SAS GLS. Data taken from Anderson (1989).

^a Region is coded NE=1, NC=2, S=3, W=4.

^b Population is coded into 6 categories: 25,000-49,999; 50,000-99,999; 100,000-249,000; 250,000-499,999; 500,000-999,999; 1,000,000 or above.

^c Metro status is central city=1, suburb=2, independent city=3.

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

Table 2 also provides equations for total mayoral power, again divided by form of government (bottom of table). The results for total power are quite similar to those obtained for the index of formal power. This is not surprising because the 12-item total power measure is composed predominantly of the eight formal power variables. Metro status and population remain the best predictors of variation in total strength for mayoral communities. For manager cities, region and partisan ballot are still robust predictors of total mayoral power.

The levels of explained variance and the F values for the two total power equations are comparable as well.

No obvious explanations come to mind for why certain explanatory measures operate differently in the two types of cities. Why should ward elections and partisan ballots, rarities in council-manager government,⁵ help account for variation in mayoral power in certain cities? Ward elections and party ballots in some manager cities may signal the presence of a residual partisan culture left from a bygone overtly political era. It may also reflect the reality of a racial or socioeconomic diversity not often found in reformed communities. Where such diversity exists, even proponents of the council-manager plan may recognize the need to provide local government an enhanced capacity to mediate conflicts among disparate interests. Presumably, strengthening the office of mayor, while also providing for party voting and district elections, may be seen by some as contributing to that end. The presence of partisan ballots also might be the result of concessions to organized labor or to a strong local Democratic party.

Conclusion

Every U.S. city has a mayor. There the similarities end. Incumbent officeholders differ markedly in their personality, style, energy, and effectiveness. More than this, the offices themselves reflect considerable variation. Some mayors are elected directly by the people; some are not. Some possess the veto power while others do not; appointment authority fluctuates significantly—all of which may advance or impede the capacity of the mayor to offer productive policy leadership.

Most of what we know about mayors of American cities comes from a rich and detailed case literature. Many of these studies provide valuable insights not only to the world of big-city mayors but to the complex realm of urban policy making in general. The emphasis frequently is on the personality and leadership style of well-known and even controversial big-city executives. As valuable as these studies are, the accent on incumbents and their successes and failures may create at least two potential difficulties for those interested in broader generalizations about the mayoral office. First, these case studies tend to detract from an understanding and appreciation of the legal and structural constraints under which all mayors must operate. Second, case studies, especially of a few large cities, may lead experts and lay observers alike to evaluate the success of urban chief executives using the strong mayor model as the ideal. As Svava (1987) has argued, however, this model does not fit the experiences of mayors in council-manager cities well. Such officials often must operate in a different mode—by coordinating, facilitating, and empowering others. As Crouch and Dinerman (1969, p. 155) insist, “formal structure limits leadership,” or at least forces executives to modify and adapt their leadership style.

Indeed, we should not judge mayors in city-manager cities using the norms derived from our knowledge of strong mayors in big cities. This research confirms the substantial difference in formal authority between mayors in the two different forms of government. For every feature of formal power included in

the ICMA survey, mayor-council executives enjoyed greater formal tools and resources than their manager counterparts, yet our limited assessment of the potential for informal influence revealed no significant differences in this set of characteristics. Mayors in council-manager cities, for example, were even more likely than their counterparts in mayor-council cities to have frequent contact with the media.

Finally, we ascertained that community characteristics have only a modest effect on mayoral powers, as operationalized in this study. Such environmental features as region, city size, metropolitan status, type of election, and nature of the local ballot had almost no influence on the office's informal powers. A few key differences by type of city did appear when we examined the office's formal powers. As expected, chief executives in mayoral jurisdictions who enjoyed the most legal authority were more likely to be central city office holders. This was not as true for mayors in manager communities, where regional location, district elections, and partisan ballots were associated with formal mayoral strength. Among certain council-manager cities, local conditions that lead to a strengthening of the mayors' powers also create incentives to adopt more political forms of municipal government.

This research is not an argument for minimizing, much less ignoring, the patterns of informal relationships that so critically shape urban policy making, yet too often we may become preoccupied with personality and style while underestimating formal powers and prerogatives. As research on American governors confirms, formal grants of authority may contribute significantly to the effective exercise of policy leadership. A complete understanding of the office of mayor requires knowledge of both the formal advantages of the office as well as those traits of leadership style associated with individual incumbents.

Notes

¹We had to establish some cutoff for the measures reflecting mayoral appointment power. The questionnaire included a total of 13 boards. For all cities, the range for mayoral appointment of boards was from none (58.5%) to all (15.6%). It seemed reasonable that mayors who appointed no boards should receive no points for formal power (64.2 percent of cities said the council appoints *all* boards). Mayors who appointed all boards should receive at least 1 point. The question then becomes what to do with those in the middle. We made an arbitrary decision that mayors who appoint less than half the total boards would receive no points for formal power (70%); those who appointed half or more would receive 1 point (30%).

As stated in the text, we contend that appointment of department heads is especially critical to the exercise of mayoral leadership. The range for this measure is 0 to 2. The huge difference in mayoral appointment power by form of government created some difficulty in deciding on cutting points for this measure. For example, 37 percent of mayor-council cities reported that the elected executive appointed no department heads; for manager cities, that figure was 97 percent. Actually, 24 percent of mayoral cities indicated that the

“manager” (i.e., CAO) appoints all department heads. For mayor cities, 49 percent responded that the elected executive appointed half or more agency heads; for manager cities, the figure was 0.7 percent. Thus we decided to award 1 point to those mayors who appointed up to half of all department heads (5.7 percent for all cities) and two points to those who appointed half or more (13.7%). For all cities, the percentage appointing no department heads was 80.6 percent.

²The questionnaire does not permit a direct determination of the percentage of mayoral cities with CAOs. No doubt, the presence of a CAO may complicate how a respondent decides which official exercises which power. However it seems inappropriate, even if possible, to try to separately analyze mayoral cities with and without a CAO. Most CAOs are found in relatively large communities, so separation on that characteristic would be confounded by city size.

³We perform the analysis using SAS General Linear Model (GLM), which handles unequal cell frequencies better than analysis of variance. A more complete set of GLM equations showing sums of squares, mean squares, and degrees of freedom is available on request from the first author, David Morgan.

⁴This differentiation by regional category is revealed through a cross-tabulation (not shown).

⁵In this sample, 10 percent of manager cities have party ballots, compared to 36 percent for mayoral communities. Only 3 percent of manager cities have both partisan ballots and ward elections. The comparable figure for mayoral municipalities is 14 percent.

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