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City Government Structures: An Attempt at Clarification

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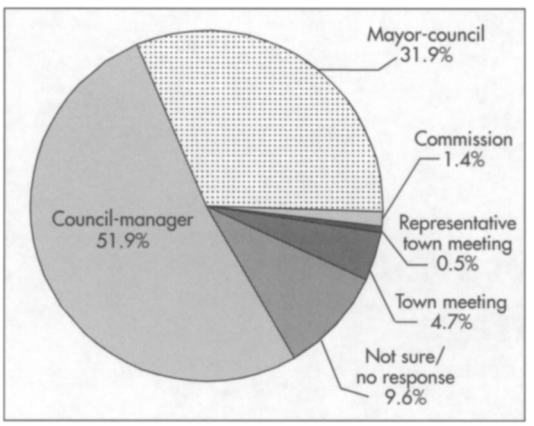
INCREASING EVIDENCE in existing literature—although much of it is impressionistic and anecdotal—suggests that the two major municipal government structures (i.e., council-manager and mayor-council) may be inadequate to describe the various hybrid forms of government that have been evolving. Given the importance ascribed to political structures by academics, practitioners, and activists, it is important to understand the characteristics and consequences of different structural arrangements. Using the latest national Municipal Form of Government Survey (1996) conducted by the International City/County Management Association (ICMA), as reported in the *1998 Municipal Year Book* (Renner and DeSantis 1998), we identify subcategories within the broad political structure that comprises the two major municipal government structures in an effort to more effectively categorize the administrative and policy-making processes in American cities. Before scholars can assess the consequences of contemporary city structures, as past researchers have done for traditional forms (Lineberry and Fowler 1967; Lyons 1978; Dye and Garcia 1978; Morgan and Pelissero 1980; Welch and Bledsoe 1988), it is necessary to have more systematic data on current characteristics.

An Overview of Forms of Municipal Government

Five general forms of municipal government are most common in the United States today: the mayor-council, council-manager, commission, town meeting, and representative town meeting forms. Although each of these forms retains distinct structural characteristics, recent research reports a general convergence of the different forms over the past several decades that is especially apparent between the mayor-council and council-manager systems (Renner 1988; Boynton and DeSantis 1990; Frederickson and Johnson 2001). The most recent (1996) ICMA national Municipal Form of Government Survey indicates that the vast majority of American cities have one of these two structures. As Figure 1 shows, a total of 51.9 percent of responding communities report that they have the council-manager form, and 31.9 percent report having the mayor-council form. Less than 5 percent of municipalities report having the commission, town meeting, or representative town meeting forms. Thus, the ratio of council-manager to mayor-council cities in the 1996 ICMA survey is 60.1 percent to 39.9 percent. Distribution of the two major forms has changed substantially over the last four national sur-

Figure 1: Form of Government Distribution, 1996 ICMA Survey



veys (conducted in 1981, 1986, 1991, and 1996). Table 1 shows that the council-manager form has grown in use from 46.8 percent in 1981 to 60.1 percent in 1996. Although the data indicate a longitudinal trend, the absolute proportion of council-manager cities is probably exaggerated in any particular year, given the greater tendency of these communities to respond to ICMA surveys.

The council-manager form of government came about during the Progressive Era as a solution to the widespread corruption and inefficiency in local government. The council-manager form is actually a hybrid of two previous government structures: the "strong" mayor and commission. The newly formed National Municipal League first supported the strong mayor form in 1898 in an effort to decrease the power of political machine bosses. About the same time, the business community began to support the commission form of government, which unified all power in the hands of a board of commissioners, essentially copying the structure of a private corporation. However, a major fault of the commission form was that it fragmented administrative functions among several members and lacked a true executive (Nolting 1969; Stillman 1974).

To improve on the commission form, Richard S. Childs, a pioneer of municipal government reform during the Progressive Era, attempted to combine the commission form with a strong administrative component, concentrating all administrative powers in a single official. This new government model, which became known as the council-manager plan, was favorably received by the National Municipal League and was included in its revised model city charter in 1915. Proponents of the council-manager form of government argue that this structure centralizes supervisory and administrative responsibility in one individual, allowing the individual's expertise and knowledge of administrative activities to be developed while vesting all power in an elected governing body to promote representative democracy.

Lineberry and Fowler (1967) were the first scholars to systematically investigate the direct and indirect effects of reformed city government structures. In their study, they found that reformed structures (i.e., council-manager governments and at-large and nonpartisan elections) tend to tax and spend at lower levels than do so-called unreformed structures (i.e., mayor-council governments and district and partisan elections). They also concluded that political structure is a significant intervening variable affecting the relationship between the socioeconomic characteristics of municipalities and their public policy outputs. Specifically, unreformed jurisdictions tend to be more responsive to the demographic characteristics of their constituencies than are reformed jurisdictions Two separate cross-sectional studies found that municipal reforms are correlated with the highest levels of aggregate spending and that the relationship between structure and public policy outputs disappears altogether when the number of services provided by municipalities is controlled.

Subsequent longitudinal research, however, failed to resolve whether reformed structures are more efficient than unreformed structures, or vice versa. Lyons (1978) investigated the patterns of bias in forms of government from 1962 to 1972 and found that, as citizen demands and financial resources increase, unreformed jurisdictions tend to increase expen-

Table 1: ICMA Form of Government Survey Results, 1981–96

	1981		1986		1991		1996	
Form of Government	***N***	**percent**	***N***	**percent**	***N***	**percent**	***N***	**percent**
Council-manager	1,893	46.8	2,170	54.8	2,175	51.6	2,402	60.1
Mayor-council	2,148	53.2	1,787	45.2	2,042	48.4	1,540	39.9
Totals	4,041	100.0	3,957	100.0	4,217	100.0	3,942	100.0

ditures more rapidly than do reformed jurisdictions. Morgan and Pelissero (1980) studied 11 jurisdictions that changed to reformed structures between 1948 and 1973 and matched them with a group of 11 jurisdictions that retained their unreformed structures throughout this period. In contrast to Lyons, they find no significant differences in spending patterns between the control and experimental groups. Although their research is clearly limited by having a much smaller number of cases than did Lyons', it illustrates a lack of consensus and underscores the empirical reality that structural change is no guarantee of public policy change.

Analytically, it is most useful to conceive of the impacts of political structures as interactive rather than direct or additive. Instead of assuming that different rules and institutions will directly produce particular results or policy outcomes, it should be recognized that different structures serve to translate public opinion and needs into public policies in different ways. In other words, some political structures may facilitate the articulation and advancement of certain political interests more so than others. The conventional hypothesis (which has not been uniformly supported in the academic literature) is that reformed governments will be less responsive to social cleavages in municipalities than will unreformed governments.

The existing research examining either the additive or interactive effects of municipal policy-making structures is limited in that it almost exclusively focuses on the two major forms of government. However, cities have adopted myriad structural arrangements that cannot easily be considered part of one model or the other. Mayor-council jurisdictions, for example, are increasingly likely to hire chief administrative officers (CAOs) who perform many of the tasks of a city manager, and many reformed structures have moved to strengthen the power of the mayor (Renner and DeSantis 1998; Hansell 1998). If research is to be useful from both a theoretical and practical standpoint, it must reflect and respond to this evolution in forms of government.

Creating a New Typology: Methods and Analysis

As mentioned previously, the data for our study come from ICMA's 1996 Municipal Form of Government survey. The survey was sent to city clerks in 7,331 cities, and a total of 4,552 (62.1 percent) responded. The jurisdictions, which were given two opportunities to respond, include all municipalities with a population of 2,500 or more (the U.S. census bureau's definition of an "urban place"). As well, a small group of 643 communities with populations of less than 2,500 were surveyed, with a total of 331 (51.5 percent) responding. This group of very small communities is included in ICMA surveys because they have applied for and received "recognition" from ICMA for establishing a position of "professional management" in their government. They all have an appointed CAO of some sort, regardless of whether or not they have actually adopted the traditional council-manager plan.

Figure 1 presents the results of ICMA's 1996 Municipal Form of Government Survey for each of the five structural categories included

in the questionnaire. The distribution of the reported forms of city government differs from those reported in the *1998 Municipal Year Book* (Renner and DeSantis 1998). Interviews with ICMA staff in February 2001 indicate that the organization made changes in the data after the *Year Book* was sent to press. Subsequently, ICMA completed an important validity check: cross-tabulating the responses to the general form of government question (the first question on the survey instrument) with the form of government data on ICMA's masterfile of all cities. There were several hundred discrepancies after the few jurisdictions that had reported a change in form of government were eliminated from the data. ICMA staff conducted follow-up phone calls to the responding city clerks to determine which general form of government the community actually had at the time the survey was administered. The primary difficulty occurred in distinguishing between the mayor-council and council-manager categories. Apparently, a large number of city clerks in council-manager cities had checked the first category, mayor-council, without reading the other categories carefully. The data reported in Figure 1 reflect the changes made by ICMA to the first question after the data had been verified, subsequent to the publication of the *1998 Municipal Year Book*. The percentage of mayor-council cities (31.9 percent) is slightly lower than initially reported (35.2 percent), and the percentage of council-manager cities (51.9 percent) is slightly higher (48.5 percent). ICMA did not attempt to recode questionnaires in which the respondents had left the general form of government question blank or reported that they were "unsure" about which form their community had.

The primary focus of this study is to use ICMA's most recent national survey data to clarify the governance structures that have evolved from the two major forms of city government. Therefore, the commission, town meeting, and representative town meeting forms are eliminated from this analysis. The commission form continues to decline in usage over time (Renner and DeSantis 1998), and the town meeting and representative town meeting forms are regionally confined to New England. In addition, the smallest group of cities is eliminated because not all communities with less than 2,500 people were given an opportunity to respond to the survey. Moreover, because all of these cities had applied for ICMA recognition by virtue of appointing a professional manager, their inclusion in this study would have introduced bias.

We examined the responses to questions on the survey other than the first question and ICMA's masterfile data to determine the general form of government category for each of the jurisdictions that responded. The 1996 survey was the first in which nonresponses to the general structure question and the "not sure" categories were reported in the *Municipal Year Book*. We attempted to replicate the data-cleanup procedures used by ICMA in previous surveys to recode the nonresponses. For our purposes, nonresponses to the general form of city government question (question 1 on the survey instrument) were eliminated from our data when the ICMA masterfile indicated that a commission, town meeting, or representative town meeting form of government was currently in use. Cities were recoded to council-manager when the jurisdiction reported having a CAO, the mayor was not independently elected, and the ICMA masterfile records indicated that the municipality had a council-manager government and did not indicate a change. Cities were also recoded to council-manager if all of these criteria were met except that the mayor was independently elected, as long as the mayor was not reported to have the sole power both to prepare the budget and to appoint department heads or was not reported to have sole authority in one of these areas and shared authority in the other. Cities were recoded to the general mayor-council structure when they did not report having a CAO, the mayor was independently elected, and the ICMA masterfile indicated that they had a mayor-council system. In addition, cities were recoded to mayor-council when they reported having a

CAO, as long as the mayor was independently elected, had sole responsibility in both appointment and the budgetary process (or sole responsibility in one and shared authority in the other), and the ICMA masterfile indicated that the city had a mayor-council form of government. These procedures reduced the number of missing cases from 437 to 20. Among these jurisdictions, the ICMA masterfile reported that 11 were mayor-council forms and 9 were council-manager forms. All cities in the latter group had reported having an appointed administrator since 1996, even though they did not indicate having a CAO on the 1996 survey. In addition, according to the masterfile, all 9 had received ICMA' s highest form of recognition, which is usually reserved for those who adopt a council-manager plan closely approximating the model. None of the responses to the other survey questions indicated that the jurisdictions might not have a council-manager system (such as having a mayor with a veto); therefore, they were all recoded to the general council-manager form. Among the group of 11 that ICMA's masterfile indicated had mayor council systems, none reported having a CAO and none had even the lowest ICMA recognition code for providing for a position of professional management. In addition, none had reported having a professional appointed in other ICMA surveys for the *Municipal Year Book* since 1996. Therefore, these jurisdictions were recoded as mayor-council systems. With the complete recode of the general form of government categories, 60.9 percent (2,402 cities) are included in the council-manager form and 39.1 percent (1,540 cities) are included in the mayor-council form.

Identification of Subcategories of City Government Forms

According to the Executive Director of ICMA, four variations of city governments with appointed professional administrators have recently emerged (Hansell 1999). Cities are considered to have the so-called classic city manager form if all of the following conditions are met: a council-manager structure exists, there is an appointed CAO, the mayor is not independently elected at-large, and the mayor does not have a veto and is not reported to have any formal role (solely or shared) in either preparing the budget or appointing department heads. Responses indicate that 894 cities, or 37.2 percent of the 2,402 council-manager communities, have the classic city manager form (Table 2).

Cities are considered to be "council-manager with an at-large mayor" if the following conditions are met: a council-manager structure exists, there is an appointed CAO, the mayor is elected independently at-large, and the mayor does not have a veto over council actions and no formal role (solely or shared) in either preparing the budget or appointing department heads. In these cities, the mayor is elected separately but has virtually no structural power. There are 1,125 cities, or 46.8 percent of those in this general structure category, that have the council-manager with at-large mayor form.

The third category is a version of Hansell's "council manager with empowered mayor" form of government. In such cities, a council-manager structure exists, and there is an appointed CAO and an independently elected mayor who has veto power. In these council-manager cities, the mayor not only is elected independently but also has some institutional executive power. The mayor has a formal role in the budgetary preparation process (solely or shared) or in the appointment of department heads (solely or shared), including the authority to nominate a city manager and to review the manager's budget proposals before they are submitted to council. (The survey does not specify the procedures for how a city manager is chosen, however.) Based on these criteria, 345 cities, or 14.4 percent of council-manager communities, have a city manager with empowered mayor form of government.

The total number of cities in these three subcategories of the council-manager form is 2,364. Only 38 cases (1.6 percent of cities with

Table 2: Subcategories of the Council-Manager Form

	Classic council-manager	Council-manager with at-large mayor	Council-manager with empowered mayor	Unclassified council-manager	
Number	894	1125	345	38	
Percent	37.2	46.8	14.4	1.6	
Mayor is independently elected	No	Yes	Yes	No	
Executive power	Either 0 or 1	Either 0 or 1	NE 0 (or)	If >1,	If = 0,
Mayor has veto power	No	No	Yes	then No	then Yes

Notes: Executive power is defined as the combined responsibility of preparing the budget and appointing department heads.

0 = the mayor was reported to have no formal role in either area

1 = the mayor shares power with the CAO in either budget preparation or the appointment of department heads

2 = the mayor either has shared responsibility for preparing the budget and appointing department heads or has sole responsibility in either preparing the budget or appointing department heads (sole responsibility is given two points)

3 = the mayor has sole responsibility in one area plus shared responsibility in the other

4 = the mayor has sole responsibility in both budget preparation and appointment of department heads.

N = 2,402.

the council-manager form) could not be categorized according to the aforementioned criteria. All of the cities in this residual group had mayors who were not independently elected but were reported to have some structural authority. Specifically, 15 reported having a mayoral veto, and 4 of these also reported that the mayor had a shared role with the CAO in the appointment of department heads. The remaining 23 cities have mayors who do not have veto power but who do have some role in the appointment of department heads and/or budget preparation, but in no city was there a mayor who had sole authority. Although there are few cities in this council-manager category that do not fit comfortably into the three subcategories, the findings suggest that some cities have a council-manager system with an empowered mayor who is not elected at-large.

Hansell's fourth form is a strong mayor form of government with a city manager or appointed CAO (Table 3). In this system, there is a separation of power, and the mayor serves as the chief executive officer and appoints the city manager subject to the approval of the council. As with the city manager with empowered mayor form of government, the survey does not specify how the city manager is appointed. However, the remaining data provide excellent empirical indicators of executive power. Cities are considered to have the strong mayor–council with CAO form when there is a mayor-council structure in which the CAO is appointed and the mayor is independently elected. Moreover, the mayor has veto power and a formal role (solely or shared) in either the budget preparation process or in the appointment of department heads. A total of 262 cities, or 17 percent of mayor council jurisdictions, are designated as having a strong mayor–council with CAO form based on these criteria.

In his typology, Hansell described four substructures that are distinguished by the professional administrator's role, discretion, and authority (three of which are subcategories of the council-manager form, and one—the strong mayor–council with CAO form—that is a subcategory of the mayor-council form). However, appointed CAOs can and do exist in cities that have a mayor-council structure in which the mayor is structurally "weak." We therefore expand on Hansell's typology by in-

Table 3: Subcategories of the Mayor-Council Form

	"Strong" mayor with CAO	"Strong" mayor without CAO	"Weak" mayor with CAO	"Weak" mayor without CAO
Number	262	392	245	298
Percent	17.0	25.3	15.9	19.4
CAO position exists	Yes	No	Yes	No
Mayor is independently elected	Yes	Yes	—	—
Executive power	>0	>0	<3	<3
Mayor has veto power	Yes	Yes	No	No

Note: See the note for Table 2 regarding the definition and operationalization of "executive power." $N = 1,540$.

troducing a further subcategory of the mayor-council form. Cities are included in this weak mayor–council with CAO subcategory when the following criteria are met: a mayor-council form of government exists, there is a CAO, the mayor does not have veto power over council actions, and the mayor does not have sole responsibility in both budget preparation and appointment of department heads but could have a shared role in either or both of these duties. Based on these criteria, a total of 245 cities, or 15.9 percent of mayor council communities, have a weak mayor–council with CAO system.

At least two more possible subcategories of the mayor-council form exist, including the strong mayor–council without CAO and the weak mayor–council without CAO. The strong mayor–council without CAO form is defined in the same way in which the strong mayor–council with CAO form has previously been defined, except there is no appointed administrator. Included in this subcategory are jurisdictions in which a mayor-council structure exists, there is no appointed CAO, and there is an independently elected mayor who has veto power and a formal role in the budgetary process and/or the appointment of department heads. Based on these criteria, a total of 392 jurisdictions, or 25.5 percent of mayor council cities, have a strong mayor–council with CAO form.

The weak mayor–council without CAO subcategory includes communities in which the general form is mayor-council, the mayor does not have veto power, the mayor is not reported to have a formal role in either the budgetary preparation process or appointment of department heads, and no CAO is employed. Based on these criteria, a total of 298 cities, or 19.4 percent of mayor council communities, have a weak mayor–council without CAO form.

The total number of cities included in the four subcategories of the mayor-council structure is 1,197. The total number of mayor-council cities, however, is 1,540, a difference of 343 (22.3 percent) that cannot be categorized according to our typology—substantially more than the residuals for the council-manager form. Many of these residual cities are distinguished by a disjunction between the veto power and budgetary and appointment authority of the mayor (see Table 4), which explains why they do not fit into any of the subcategories. Among the 148 mayors serving in communities in which there is a CAO, 94 had veto power but no formal authority in terms of either the budgetary process or the appointment of department heads; in 54 communities, the mayor had no power of veto but did have some formal authority in the budgetary process and/or appointment of department heads. These cities could not be included in either the strong mayor–council with CAO or weak mayor–council with CAO subcategories. A similar pattern is evident for the 190 residual cities in which there is no CAO. In 91

Table 4: Categories of Residuals: A Cross-Tabulation of Mayoral Power and the Presence of an Appointed Executive (CAO)

	Is there an appointed CAO in the city?		
	Yes	No	Total
Mayor has veto power but no appointment or budget power	94	91	185
Mayor does not have veto power but does have either appointment or budget power	54	99	153
Total	148	190	338

of these cities, the mayor has veto power but no budgetary or appointment authority; in 99, the reverse is true. For the remaining five outliers, either data are missing or there is an inconsistent pattern. For example, in one city, the mayor was reported to have both a veto and some budgetary or appointment authority but was not included in the strong mayor–council form because the city clerk reported that the mayor was not independently elected.

City Forms of Government and Reformed Electoral Systems

The data from ICMA's 1996 Municipal Form of Government survey, as reported in the *1998 Municipal Year Book* (Renner and DeSantis 1998), indicate that the correlation between the broad city structures and reformed election systems is predictable. That is, mayor-council cities are more likely to have district elections and partisan elections than are council-manager cities. Therefore, among the three subcategories of council-manager cities, those that have the so-called classic city manager form should have the most reformed electoral structures. Presumably, there should be less electoral reform in cities in which there is a city manager with a separately elected mayor. Furthermore, cities in which there is a strong mayor should have the least reformed structures.

The data in Table 5, which are disaggregated according to our typology, indicate that these presumptions are incorrect, however. The foregoing expectations are apparent for at-large, district, or mixed election types but are not discernible for nonpartisan and partisan systems. In fact, the cities that have the classic city manager form have the highest percentage of at-large elections (78 percent), followed by those in which there is a separately elected mayor (65.4 percent) and an empowered mayor (46.6 percent). However, the cities in which there is a separately elected mayor have the highest percentage of nonpartisan election systems (89.4 percent), and the "classic" cities actually have the lowest percentage of the three subcategories (77 percent).

Among the four subcategories of mayor-council governments, predictably, cities in which there is a strong mayor–council but no CAO have the highest percentages of district (38.5 percent) or mixed (36.2 percent) elections and the lowest percentage of at-large elections (25.3 percent). However, their reported percentage of nonpartisan elections (62.2 percent) is actually slightly higher than that of cities in which there is a weak mayor–council but no CAO (61.4 percent). Communities in which there is a weak mayor–council and CAO report the highest percentages of reformed electoral structures. Actually, the distributions of their electoral systems are more comparable to the three council-manager subcategories than to the other mayor-council forms. The strong mayor–council with CAO and the council manager and empowered mayor forms of governments are similarly distributed in cities that have at-large, district, and mixed election systems, but the presence of partisanship is 12 percent higher in cities in which there is a strong mayor–council with CAO.

Conclusion

The findings here confirm that contemporary city governments are more complicated than the traditional categories suggest. We

Table 5: Forms of City Government and Election Systems

Form of Government	Type of Election									
	At-large		District		Mixed		Nonpartisan		Partisan	
	N	percent	*N*	percent	*N*	percent	*N*	percent	*N*	percent
"Classic" council-manager	686	78.0	91	10.3	103	11.7	688	77.0	206	23.0
Council-manager with at-large mayor	731	65.4	106	9.5	281	25.1	1,006	89.4	119	10.6
Council-manager with empowered mayor	160	46.6	99	28.9	84	24.5	273	79.1	72	20.9
"Strong" mayor with CAO	115	44.2	79	30.4	66	25.4	175	66.8	87	33.2
"Strong" mayor without CAO	98	25.3	149	38.5	140	36.2	244	62.2	148	37.8
"Weak" mayor with CAO	160	66.7	50	20.8	30	12.5	174	71.0	71	29.0
"Weak" mayor without CAO	188	64.2	69	23.5	36	12.3	183	61.4	115	38.6

have attempted to clarify the administrative and policy-making processes in American cities by developing a typology of forms of municipal government based on the responses to ICMA's 1996 survey. Our efforts have produced seven different subcategories: classic council-manager, council-manager with at-large mayor, council-manager with an empowered mayor, strong mayor–council with CAO, strong mayor–council without CAO, weak mayor–council with CAO, and weak mayor–council without CAO. In addition, we identified communities that did not neatly fit any of these subcategories, even though a mayor-council structure exists. Specifically, these residuals are a result of the disjunction in many cities between a mayor's veto power and his or her budget and appointment role. The four combinations include mayor-council cities (with and without a CAO), in which the mayor has a veto but no formal role in either the budget process or appointment of department heads; and mayor-council cities (with and without a CAO), in which the mayor has no veto but does have some formal authority in budget preparation and/or the appointment of department heads.

If these hybrid forms of government continue to emerge, the practical and theoretical relevance of the broad types (i.e., the council-manager and mayor-council forms) may become obsolete. Fredrickson, Wood, and Logan (2001) find that recent trends render these categories less meaningful and suggest that the latest attempt to revise the model city charter will have to respond to these changes. Indeed, Svara (2001, 19) wonders if choice among alternative general forms can "be rendered irrelevant by a blending of governmental structures, or are there fundamental distinctions between them that keep choice among alternative forms at the forefront of the debate over model charters?" Our findings indicate that more complete knowledge about the organizational arrangements for the allocation of public resources is needed. Future research should therefore focus on the specific structural elements of city government (e.g., having an appointed CAO, giving the mayor a veto) that affect the efficiency, equity, and effectiveness of city government systems. From a practical perspective, advocates for municipal reform may realign their focus from changing forms of government to adjusting specific structural elements within overall forms.

This research has been limited by the unfortunate and ironic reality that the ICMA Municipal Form of Government Surveys contain more questions on the powers and authority of elected mayors than on those of appointed administrators. ICMA intends to rectify this problem by including a question

regarding the appointment of the city manager or CAO. Moreover, our research probably suffers from an undersampling of mayor-council cities because, historically, they are less likely to respond to ICMA surveys than are council-manager cities. Notwithstanding these limitations, our findings have relevance for scholars, practitioners, and citizens seeking to understand and perhaps improve city policy-making structures.

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