

Having, maintaining and controlling power is critical for governments, businesses, and citizens to achieve their political goals. For example, without zoning power, cities would have a hard time regulating where business locate within their city. Businesses might also have trouble getting a pro-business agenda passed if they did not significantly contribute to the tax base in a city. While power in a city is normally concentrated between local government, businesses and citizens, these three power sources normally hold very different types of power. Furthermore, the degree to which these three hold power and their method of obtaining power vary distinctly. This can often lead to power struggles where the interests of one group do not coincide with another.

For example, local governments have power in their communities because they have the legal authority to legislate. This authority comes directly from the powers the state grants a city which generally include power of taxation, zoning power, eminent domain, and other powers which influence behavior and helps the city accomplish their goals. However, a 19th century Supreme Court case now known as “Dillon’s Rule” significantly limited the legal authority of cities. As a result of this case, cities only have as much legislative power as their state constitution allows. In addition to the limits of power that Dillon’s Rule places on a city, city power is also limited by the power of businesses and citizens in the community.

Business interest, in particular, complicates the power balance in a city because while cities and corporations are necessary for each other to survive, their interests can be very different. For instance, Consumers Energy is currently working on a plan to expand the use of renewable energy in Michigan. Mr. Bruce Rasher, manager of renewable energy, plans on expanding the number of wind generators in Michigan. While speaking at Energy Day on campus, Mr. Rasher described installing wind generators in communities as exceedingly difficult because city governments and citizens are reluctant to change land zoning to permit wind generators in their communities. However, he went on to say that these generators would likely bring new jobs to the communities as well as increased tax revenue, which cities leaders would like to attract. This situation is very similar to many other daily decisions that cities and businesses must make. Businesses have a strong incentive to use their power in the form of wealth (and the revenue it generates for the city) and other economic influences to minimize their operating costs. At the same time, city governments have an incentive to maximize their total revenue to insure the economic viability of their city. Although many times a power struggle exists between cities and corporations, leaders oftentimes compromise to maximize the benefits to both cities and corporations.

Furthermore, the evolution of different types of city governments have complicated the power struggle within cities and have sometimes resulted in a significant power shift toward one of the three major power sources. The two major structures of city government, the mayor-council system and the council-manager system create different power balances within a city government and among businesses and citizens. A third, less used system of governance, the commission government, also changes the balance of power within a community. In the mayor-council mode of governance the community elects a city council and mayor who are responsible for legislative and executive decisions. Within this system, a city government can have a “strong mayor system” or “weak mayor system”. In each case the mayor and city council have varying degrees of power to legislate but Ross and Levine contend that in each system the mayor has relatively little power.¹ These systems complicate the balance of power within a city because their power is dispersed among the mayor and council members and this decreases any one member's accountability. Furthermore, it may make negotiating with businesses for tax breaks or other incentives more difficult because there is not a single person who holds most of the power. By contrast, a professionally trained, appointed official maintains administrative control of the city and the city council dictates policy and legislates in the council-manager system. This system can decrease potential accountability issues because the council and managers role is more clearly defined than in the mayor-council system. Also, having a full time, professional manager enables a city to establish a cohesive policy toward business owners and citizens because a manager does not face re-election issues and can hold the position for many years. However, the manager’s position is becoming increasingly politicized and this may create significant ethical problems for a city. A third system of governing, governing by commission is much less common because each city commissioner is appointed

1 Ross and Levine pg 144

head of a department in the city. This system can significantly disperse power in the city and creating power struggles between commissioners. As a result, very few cities adopt this model.

Power can be measured and conceptualized at different levels and how it is measured may distort a person's perception of power. For example, power may be judged by who wins and who loses. Under this model, people would view a business as powerful because it accomplishes its political goals more often than it loses. But people can also think of power as an ability to set the agenda and prevent governments from addressing important issues. For example, steel mills in Gary, Indiana regularly prevent the city government from discussing air pollution. The mills maintain significant power by keeping citizens from addressing the issue. Last and most subtlety, power may be viewed as the ability to shape cultural attitudes about particular issues. If an organization can change the culture of a community to accomplish its goals then it has exercised another type of power. Ultimately, power is the ability for city governments, businesses or citizens to accomplish their goals. While the formal structure of a city may change power balances each of the three major sources of power must use their strengths to seize power to affect change in their communities.