

“Strong Mayor” vs. “Weak Mayor” Characteristics of Two Options for Municipalities

Prepared for the Pepper Pike Charter Review Commission

By Howard Bochner

B.A. Political Science, M.A. Urban Affairs (Municipal Governance)

September 2024

Excerpts from Ballotpedia Mayor - Council Government

Mayor-Council government is one of the major types of municipal government found in cities and towns throughout the United States. The other four are Council-Manager, Commission, Town Meeting, and Representative Town Meeting.

Mayor-Council governments generally feature an elected executive officer called a Mayor and an elected legislative body that is most often known as the City Council. Depending on a City's history or its relationship with the surrounding county, however, the legislative body might go by another name such as an urban-county Council, a common Council, a board of supervisors or a metro Council. Similarly, the number of City Council members varies widely. The Madison Common Council, for example, consists of 20 members, while the New York City Council consists of 51 members.^{[1][2]}

In a Mayor-Council government, the Mayor and City Council work together to balance and pass a budget, draft and enforce legislation, and oversee City departments and appoint departmental heads. The dynamics of how the Mayor and City Council work together depend on the type of Mayor-Council government that a City uses.

Strong vs. Weak Mayor-Council

Mayor-Council government can be broadly divided into two types: strong and weak. The difference centers on the scope of the Mayor's executive authority and legal power.

Strong Mayor-Council

Strong Mayor-Council governments represent the organization of most state governments. The Mayor is the City's chief executive, while the Council is the City's primary legislative body. The general characteristics of strong Mayor-Council governments are as follows:^[3]

- The Mayor may appoint and remove departmental heads.
- The Mayor drafts and proposes a budget to City Council.
- The Mayor possesses veto or line-item veto power.
- The Mayor officially represents the City on the state, national, and international levels.
- The Mayor exercises oversight of the City's day-to-day operations.
- The Mayor enforces City laws and ordinances.
- **The Mayor is not a member of City Council.**

Weak Mayor-Council

In a weak Mayor-Council government, the executive authority of the Mayor is less expansive, and more power is shared with the Council. The general characteristics of the Mayor-Council governments are as follows:^[3]

- City Council appoints and approves departmental heads.
- City Council (usually in consultation with the Mayor or an appointed administrative officer) drafts a budget.
- The Mayor possesses limited or no veto power.
- The Mayor officially represents the City on the state, national and international levels. The Mayor shares oversight of the City's day-to-day operations with City Council, an appointed administrative officer or both.
- The Mayor works together with City Council, an appointed administrative officer or both to enforce laws and ordinances.
- **The Mayor may be a member of City Council or the presiding officer of City Council.**

Footnotes

1.City of Madison, "Alders," accessed November 19, 2014

2.New York City City Council, "Members," accessed November 19, 2014

3.National League of Cities, "Mayoral Powers," accessed November 19, 2014

**Excerpts from “Municipal Forms of Government”
by Dr. Lawrence F. Keller, Ph.D. Public Administration and Associate Professor Emeritus CSU
December 2017 for the Cleveland Heights Charter Review Commission**

Mayor-Council (MC) Council

Historically, was based on parties and favored wards or districts. Usually had a large number of members as represented the ethnic diversity of the early industrial cities. Chicago currently has a 50 member council all from wards. Cleveland has 17 wards, with the number adjusted according to the population of the city. Many MC cities now have smaller councils with some elected at large. Boston has 13 members, 4 at large and 9 from districts. Columbus city council has 7 members, all at large. Some in Columbus are currently looking at changing the structure of council to include some districts/wards.

Roles

Council is legislative body, passing ordinances which are law. In addition, as the MC system has separation of powers, Council also serves as a check on the Mayor. This form of government is modeled on the federal government and in the Ohio statutes is called the federal model. Used in cities with active political parties with partisan elections.

In terms of authority, mayoral offices come in two (2) flavors, strong mayor and weak mayor. Strong mayor has appointment, budget and veto authority. A strong mayor appoints administrators, sometimes with the approval of council for all or some directors of departments or for some offices, such as Law Director. Strong mayors also send a proposed budget to council, called an executive budget. However, budgets can only be funded by ordinance of council. Finally, a strong mayor can veto ordinances with council able to override a veto by a supra-majority vote.

Weak mayoral offices lack all three of the above powers. **Weak Mayor may preside over council.** Many mayoral offices have some but not all of these powers. The actual power of any mayor depends upon what control she/he has over the party, his/her political popularity and general political ability. Also depends upon whether council can operate effectively as a political body.

Relation of Council to Mayor

As the MC system has separation of powers, the chief relationship between the council and mayor is political. They are a check on each other. This doesn't preclude working together by any means but if they don't operate as political checks then one or the other can dominate the government.

System Diagrams of Forms of Government

Figure 1
Strong Mayor System

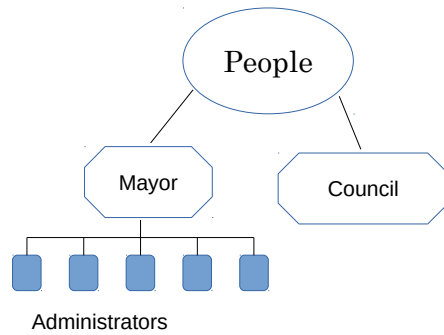


Figure 2
Weak Mayor System

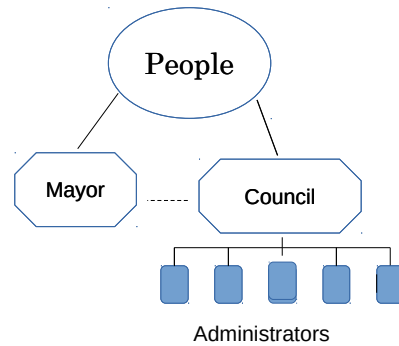


Figure 3
Hybrid Mayor System

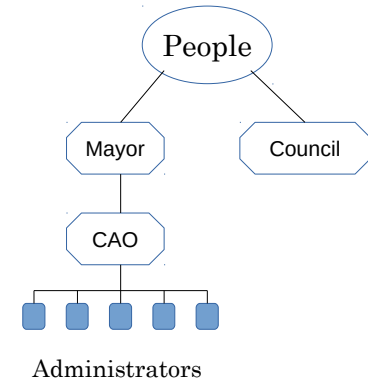


Figure 4
Council-Manager System

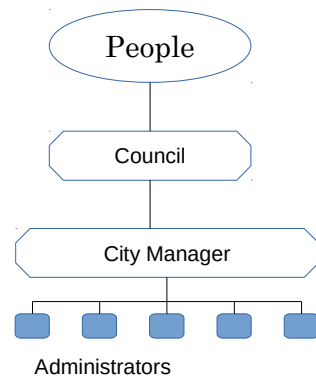
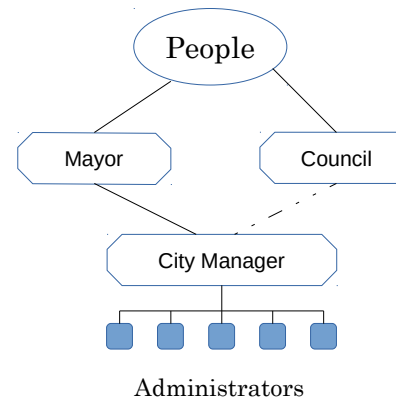


Figure 5
Hybrid Council-Manager System



FORMS OF CITY GOVERNMENT

There are two different structures of government that most cities utilize, either the Mayor-Council system or the Council-Manager system.

"STRONG" MAYOR-COUNCIL

Under this system the Mayor is the chief executive and the City Council is the legislative body. This system is modeled after the Federal Constitution structure of government.

MAYOR Chief Executive	CITY COUNCIL Legislature
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Not A Member Of The City Council• Proposes City Budget• Appoints Department Directors• Veto Authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Elects Own Presiding Officer• Sets own Agenda• Approves City Budget• Mayoral Veto override authority

COUNCIL-MANAGER

Under this system the City Council is the legislative body and an appointed City Manager is the Chief executive. This system is modeled after the corporate structure of governance.

CITY COUNCIL Legislature	CITY MANAGER Chief Executive
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Appoints City Manager• Approves City Budget• Mayor Is City Council Chairperson	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Proposes City Budget• Appoints Department Directors• Sets City Council Agenda