

Overview of City Government

Mayoral Powers

Mayors are bestowed varying degrees of responsibility and authority across the nation, especially depending on a city's form of government.

These responsibilities may include:

- Serving on the city council;
- Voting in council meetings;
- Assigning council members to chair or serve on committees;
- Appointing citizens to serve on advisory boards or commissions;
- Preparing the annual budget; Receiving the annual budget developed by chief administrative official or city manager; and
- Making an annual report to the council.

Weak or Strong Mayors

Cities in the United States are sometimes characterized as having either "strong" or "weak" mayors. The term is not a judgement of effectiveness, rather it distinguishes the level of political power and administrative authority assigned to the mayor in the municipal charter. In practice, there is no sharp category that distinguishes between "weak" and "strong" mayors, but rather a continuum of authority and power along which cities are spread. However, the designation of "weak" and "strong" are useful in showing the variations in mayoral authority that exist.

Characteristics of a "strong" mayor:

- The mayor is the chief executive officer, centralizing executive power.
- The mayor directs the administrative structure, appointing and removing of department heads.
- While the council has legislative power, the mayor has veto power.
- The council does not oversee daily operations.

Characteristics of a "weak" mayor:

- The council is powerful, with both legislative and executive authority.
- The mayor is not truly the chief executive, with limited power or no veto power.
- The council can prevent the mayor from effectively supervising city administration.
- There may be many administrative boards and commissions that operate independently from the city government.

City Councils

City councils are the legislators of a municipality who are democratically elected to decide which services will be provided and how to pay for them, among many other tasks.

Elections

A survey done by the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) in 2006 reveals that a candidate's political party is noted on the ballot in 20 percent of responding cities. Council members in two-thirds of responding cities are elected at-large, rather than by district. And once elected, most (65 percent) reported that council members receive four-year terms.

Council Size

Councils can range in size from 5 to 51 across the nation, although the national average is six. While the number of councilmen is proportional to the population of the municipality, there is no national standard of proportion. In addition, the size of a council may reflect the complexity of services provided, the council's workload, the diversity and size of the population, the political dynamics and preferences of the city. This variability is illustrated by the large range in the number of councilmen per number of constituents, from 6,278 in Albany to over 250,000 in Los Angeles.

Council Functions

As local legislators, council members are responsible for and responsive to the citizens who elected them. Depending on the city's charter and state laws, they may perform the following functions:

- Review and approve the annual budget;
- Establish long- and short-term objectives and priorities;
- Oversee performance of the local public employees;
- Oversee effectiveness of programs;
- Establish tax rates;
- Enter into legal contracts;
- Borrow funds;
- Pass ordinances and resolutions;
- Modify the city's charter;
- Regulate land use through zoning laws;
- Regulate business activity through licensing and regulations;
- Regulate public health and safety;
- Exercise the power of eminent domain;
- Communicate policies and programs to residents;
- Respond to constituent needs and complaints; and
- Represent the community to other levels of government.

Committees

The system of using issue-specific committees is common for city councils. Committees provide groups of council members the opportunity to thoroughly consider particular items of business then recommend action on those items to the full council. This system reduces the amount of work each councilmember must perform and reduces the length or frequency of full council meetings. Additionally, it enables citizens to participate in matters of interest to them at the regular meetings of each committee. Task forces or

ad-hoc committees may also be used to investigate and resolve specific issues that once addressed, are disbanded.

In the past several decades, city councils have become more institutionalized in American cities, with more councils using committees to conduct their work and more councils hiring paid staff. According to survey data from the National League of Cities, 81 percent of city councils in 2001 relied on committees, which was an increase from 61 percent in 1979. Committee use was less common in cities with a council-manager form of government (64 percent) than in those with a mayor-council government (85 percent). In addition, the use of committees tends to increase with the size of cities and city councils. For example, New York City has 43 committees for its 51 councilmen.

Sources

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