

**What have we learned about the Performance of Council-Manager
Government? A Review and Synthesis of the Research**

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Abstract: The 100th anniversary of the International City/County Management Association provides an excellent point to review and assess research on the performance of the council-manager form of government. The development of council-manager government is arguably the most important innovation in American local government over the last century, yet its impact on the performance of municipal governments is not well understood. In this article, I review and assess the empirical evidence for ten propositions that council-manager governments perform better than mayor-council governments. This evidence indicates that while progress has been made on demonstrating differences in representation and functionality, the proposition that council-manager governments are better managed than mayor-council governments has yet to be seriously engaged in this literature. Filling this critical gap requires progress in two areas: the development of theory to explain why council-manager governments are better managed organizations and the production of evidence assessing the major propositions of this theory.

Practitioner Points

- The proposition that the council-manager form of government produces better operational performance than mayor-council government has not received serious attention in the vast empirical literature municipal government in the U.S.
- The empirical literature shows that council-manager governments seek to distribute the benefits of public policies more broadly, experience lower voter turnout, and their senior executive officials direct more of their time to their roles as managers than is the case in mayor-council governments.

- The evidence also suggests that council-manager governments favor more comprehensive policy solutions, experience less conflict among senior officials, and are more willing to adopt innovative policies and practices than are mayor-council governments.
- Currently, the empirical literature does not support contentions that there are systematic differences between the two forms of government in their responsiveness to powerful constituencies, in the levels and form of civic and political [other than voting] participation by residents, the quality of public services delivered, or in the general operational effectiveness of the organizations.

The council-manager form is arguably the most important innovation in American local government over the last century. It fundamentally changed municipal government in the U.S. and its steady diffusion has led to a sustained effort to study the institutional structures used to govern local governments. The advantages for professional public administration provided by council-manager government are regularly asserted in the professional and academic literatures on local government administration and the proportion of America's municipal governments using the council-manager form has increased steadily (Choi, Feiock, and Bae 2013; Nalbandian, O'Neill, Wilkes, and Kaufman 2013; Wheeland, Palus, and Wood 2014).

The idea that council-manager governments perform better than those using the mayor-council form has become conventional wisdom in our field, but what does the decades of empirical research on the performance of this innovation reveal? The short answer is that we simply do not know what we know. Literally hundreds of papers and reports have been published examining aspects of municipal government performance in the U.S., but a comprehensive review of this literature has not been produced to date. This article begins to address our knowledge gap in two important ways. First, it synthesizes the findings from 76 studies analyzing differences in one or more aspects of the performance between council-manager and mayor-council governments to distill ten propositions illustrating the questions that have been examined in this literature.¹ Second, it provides a brief assessment of the evidence for these propositions produced by this research.

The discussion that follows is organized into three major sections. The next section discusses the scope of this review, the basis for selecting the studies included, and explains the categories used to group the outcomes discussed in this review. This section also identifies the elements that constitute the council-manager form and how this concept differs from the broader subject of municipal institutions. The subsequent section presents these ten propositions and summarizes the extant empirical literature on the differences in the performance of these two forms of municipal government. The final section summarizes the findings of the review and identifies gaps that remain in our understanding of the performance benefits of the council-manager form. This evidence indicates that while progress has been made on demonstrating differences in representation and functionality, the proposition that council-manager governments are better managed than mayor-council governments has yet to be seriously engaged in this literature. Filling this critical gap requires progress in two areas: the development of theory to explain why council-manager governments are better managed organizations and the production of evidence assessing the major propositions of this theory.

Scope: Form of Government's Effects on Municipal Performance

The scope of this review is limited to empirical studies that examine the effects of differences in these two forms on the performance of municipal governments. To be included, the research must be empirical, analyze multiple cases, and utilize methods of analysis capable of supporting conclusions about observed differences in performance between the two forms. This decision rule resulted in the exclusion of entire research streams focused on only the performance of council-manager governments or mayor-council governments, such as city manager turnover,

mayor-manager relations, and the policy roles of city managers. In all, findings from 76 articles were included in this review.

Measuring Form of Government

Form is often used interchangeably with municipal structure or political institutions, but it is not synonymous with these two terms.² Svava and Nelson (2008) propose the following three elements constitute form and provide the most important distinction between council-manager and mayor-council governments:

- Allocation of authority over policy and administration: “The unique feature of the council-manager form is the interaction of the council members and administrators in both policy and administration” (p. 7). In contrast, the mayor-council form creates a separation of powers structure similar to the federal government by assigning policy authority to the council and administrative authority to the mayor.
- Assignment of executive responsibilities: “In the council-manager form, executive functions are the responsibility of the city or county manager even if some functions on occasion are shared with other officials” (p. 8), whereas in the mayor-council form, these responsibilities are carried out under the authority of the mayor. “A central coordinating position can be created—a CAO—but,” the responsibilities for the CAO are determined by the mayor in the mayor-council form (p. 8).

- Accountability of chief administrative officer: “Responsibility to the entire council is an essential characteristic of the council-manager form and helps to ensure both transparency and a focus on the public interest rather than the political interests of a single elected official” (p. 8). Svara and Nelson observed that when the mayor is charged with the responsibility of terminating the manager, this reporting relationship essentially creates a CAO who will likely serve the mayor’s interests rather than those of the council.

The studies included in this review largely rely on the traditional dichotomous measure of council-manager and mayor-council government to capture differences in the form of government. However, a few studies (e.g. Carr and Karuppusamy 2010; French and Folz 2004; Nelson and Svara 2012; Nelson and Nollenberger 2011) use more complex measures that combine form and other aspects of institutional structure. These studies still permit conclusions to be drawn about the effects of form, because with the notable exception of the adapted cities approach developed by Frederickson, Johnson, and Wood (2003) these measures build directly on the two generally recognized forms of government.³ The few studies using measures based on the adapted cities framework are more difficult to interpret in terms of insights about form, but the findings most relevant to the key elements of the council-manager form, such as shared decision making and professional management, are highlighted. Finally, a few studies included in this review employ measures that treat form of government as just another element of municipal structure. These analyses examine several specific elements of institutional structure (Lineberry and Fowler 1967; Welch and Bledsoe 1988; Sharp 1991) or bundle institutions in ways to highlight specific dimensions like mayoral power (Krebs and Pelissero 2010) and the

mayor-manager balance of power (Lubell, Feiock, and Rameriz de la Cruz 2009). These studies are the most difficult to draw insights about the effects of form, but some conclusions are possible.

The Performance of Council-Manager Government: Policy Choices and Functionality of the Organization

I distill ten general propositions about how council-manager governments produce different—often better—performance than mayor-council governments from my review of the literature analyzing the performance of these governments. The propositions and evidence for each are described at length in the next three sections. Table 1 lists these propositions grouped into the following two categories:

- Differences in incentives for executive officials to respond to politically important interests: The propositions in this category are largely directed at the representation function of municipal government. Expectations for performance differences are based on differences in the responsiveness of the chief executive officials in each form to influential constituencies within the community and the incentives to encourage civic and political engagement by residents.
- Differences in the functionality of the organization: The propositions in this category focus on how well the organization functions (e.g., role emphases and conflict among key officials) and the incentives provided by form for certain types of “desirable” decisions (e.g., adoption of innovations and the use of analysis) that key officials make.

Insert Table 1 about here

Form and Incentives for Policy Choices made by Executive Officials

In a now classic study, Lineberry and Fowler (1967) concluded that “reformed” municipalities spend and tax less than their unreformed counterparts. They asserted this finding indicated that interest groups had less influence on fiscal policies in council-manager cities and concluded, “reformed cities are less responsive to cleavages in their population than unreformed cities” (710). The first five propositions are rooted in this assumption that a city’s form of government shapes the incentives of the chief executive official to supply policies demanded by powerful local interests and to choose policies that target benefits to supporters.

This literature has improved considerably on the initial claims of differences in performance as stemming from “less political decision making” or “more professional management.” A promising advance is the emergence of literature on the “political market,” which conceptualize policy change as an exchange between government policy suppliers and interest group policy demanders (Feiock, Lubell, and Lee 2014). This literature is providing a serious theoretical underpinning. Analysts have used the political market framework to understand policy decisions in economic development (Sharp 1991; Feiock and Kim 2000; Feiock, Jeong, and Kim 2003; Kwon, Berry, and Feiock 2009; Hawkins 2010; Hawkins and Feiock 2011; Sharp and Mullinix 2012), land use (Lubell, Feiock, and Rameriz de la Cruz 2009; Rameriz de la Cruz 2009),

environmental sustainability (Krause 2011, 2012, 2013; Sharp, Daley, and Lynch 2011; Daly, Sharp, and Bae 2013; Hawkins and Wang 2013), and service delivery (Carr and Shrestha 2014).

Proposition 1: Executive officials in council-manager governments are less likely to be responsive to the policy agenda of politically powerful interests than are their counterparts in mayor-council governments.

This proposition has been assessed in several ways over the years. The initial studies focused on identifying differences in spending between the two forms. Studies attempting more direct measures of the influence of interest groups followed. Finally, over the last decade several studies have focused on the potential contingent effects of form of government on municipal spending decisions and policy adoptions.

Studies of municipal expenditures. More than a dozen studies have sought to confirm and extend Lineberry and Fowler's (1967) findings, and like them, the initial efforts largely focused on relating differences in spending to form. A few studies have confirmed Lineberry and Fowler's finding that cities with council-manager governments have lower spending levels (Anderson 1979; Booms 1966; Clark 1968; Lyons 1978; Morgan and Brudney 1985; Chapman and Gorina 2012). A few others reported the opposite, finding that cities with council-manager governments have higher spending than cities with mayor-council governments (Campbell and Turnbull 2003; Jung 2006; MacDonald 2006; Craw 2008) and wages (Deno and Mehay 1987; Ehrenberg 1973).

However, the most common finding from the studies examining this question is that spending differences are due to factors other than form. Liebert (1974), Deno and Mehay (1987), Hayes and Chang (1990; fire, police and refuse), Morgan and Pelissero (1980), Campbell and Turnbull (2003; police, fire, and highways), Jung (2006), Carr and Karuppusamy (2010), and Eskridge (2012) each reported no differences in expenditures per capita between council-manager and mayor-council cities, no differences in wage levels for employees (Ehrenberg and Goldstein 1975), and total compensation (including fringe benefits) for police and fire employees (Deno and Mehay 1987). Deno and Mehay (1987) explained the null findings they reported as resulting from the absence of systematic differences between these two forms of government for cost minimization, arguing that simply appointing a professional manager does not mute the forces of electoral politics or provide incentives for efficiency that did not previously exist. “If matters were so simple, the urban fiscal crisis could have been solved long ago” (639).

Analyses based in the theory of the political market may ultimately provide the needed clarity to this question because these studies assert expectations for performance differences not simply based on the presence of appointed administrators, but due to different incentives for executive action created by the two forms. City managers are presumed to be more attentive to the expectations of their professional peers and the norms of professional management advanced by organizations such as the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) and not the demands of electoral politics.

Another important contribution of this framework has been to press the argument that the effects of form on municipal performance is likely contingent on other factors and that the weakness of the existing literature can be corrected with better theories and stronger research designs (Carr and Shrestha 2014). Craw (2008: 668), for example, argues that the “appropriate model of expenditures is likely to be causally complex, that is, a model in which political institutions or fiscal constraints mediate the impacts of other variables.” This direction is promising, as indicated by the studies of municipal expenditures reporting that form of government affects local fiscal policy through the way it moderates the influence of other factors, such as intergovernmental grants (Bae and Feiock 2004), state tax limits (McCabe and Feiock 2005), interjurisdictional competition (Craw 2008), and local fiscal capacity (Karuppusamy and Carr 2012) on municipal spending levels.

Responsiveness to specific interests. These studies notwithstanding, the evidence for Proposition 1 from analyses of municipal expenditures is generally weak. It may be that the effort to produce evidence for Proposition 1 has been hindered by the narrow focus on spending as proxy for policy responsiveness and analysts are increasingly turning to more direct measures of interest group influence on policy outcomes. One set of studies seeks to show that the link between the presence of interest groups and the adoption of their preferred policies is affected by form of government. For example, “[t]he developmental nature of local political priorities has made local governments eager to accommodate business and manufacturing interests...” (Krause 2012: 2400). This perspective of the strong influence exerted by the local growth machine on the policies adopted by city governments is widely held, and having a council-manager government may moderate this “eagerness.” However, the political market literature has not produced

compelling evidence for this proposition. All but six of the roughly two dozen studies seeking to establish these differences exist have reported null findings.⁴

Stronger evidence for this proposition is provided by studies examining land use decisions. Land use policy provides an interesting case because this issue often pits powerful interests against one another, and the political market framework presumes that form moderates the influence of these competing forces. For example, Lubell, Feiock, and Ramirez de la Cruz (2009) proposed that wealthy residents demand land use policies that restrict growth in order to isolate themselves from low-income individuals, increasing their property values and lowering the costs of supplying public goods, but developers use their properties for personal or economic gain and resist regulations that limit their choices in how to use their properties. They concluded that property owners had more influence in mayor-council cities, because “[a]s mayoral power increases, higher socioeconomic status shifts the balance of land use changes to be more proenvironmental...” (p. 662).⁵ Property owners also had more influence on the number of housing permits granted than developers in cities with executive mayors. Ramirez de la Cruz’s (2009) analysis of the adoption of “smart growth” regulations in Florida cities produced similar findings.⁶ He found that active homeowners associations increased the use of density bonuses and growth boundaries in mayor-council cities over the levels seen in the council-manager cities. Developer activism reduced the use of growth boundaries in mayor-council cities, but their influence on the other two regulations was not affected by form.

The logic underlying Proposition 1 is that interests with resources that can help reelect the mayor will be favored in mayor-council governments, and several studies analyzing the link between fiscal decline and economic development policy seem to support the premise that mayor-council governments are more responsive to wealthier residents (Sharp 1991; Feiock and Kim 2000; Feiock, Jeong, and Kim 2003). Feiock and Kim (2000) showed that the relationship between population decline and economic policy adoptions was strongest in mayor-council governments and poverty levels were more important to the policies adopted in council-manager governments. A later study by Feiock, Jeong, and Kim (2003) again showed that council-manager cities were more likely to adopt development policies as poverty levels increased and that median income was an important factor in the mayor-council cities. Sharp (1991) analyzed the adoption of development policies in 428 U.S. cities to assess the potential of municipal political institutions to “either exacerbate or diminish the tendency for economic policy to be driven by economic distress” (p. 140). She reported that the relationship between fiscal stress and the amount of financial incentives and economic development strategies adopted was strongest in the least “reformed” cities.⁷ A contrary finding is provided by Sharp and Mullinex’s (2012) analysis of the adoption of municipal policies limiting the use of economic development subsidies. They proposed form of government would mediate the responsiveness of these policies to the demands of business, but found that economic needs did not shape the use of these controls in either type of city.

Finally, the emerging literature on the adoption of sustainability policies by municipal governments is a source of additional evidence about the ability of form of government to moderate the influence of important politically important interests on policy change.

Interestingly, these studies suggest that the influence of city's manufacturing sector on the likelihood that the government adopts sustainability policies does not vary with form, but decisions about the depth of implementation and the use of communitywide initiatives do. Two studies assessing the influence of manufacturing interests on the adoption of sustainability initiatives advocated by the International Council on Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI) reported that form did not affect the strength of this relationship (Sharp, Daley, and Lynch 2011; Krause 2012). Krause (2012) concluded, "[t]he hypothesis that different local institutions—in this case having a mayor-council or council-manager/commission government type—amplify or reduce this influence that various interests have on political decisions making also fails to receive support" (p. 2414). However, Sharp, Daley, and Lynch (2011) concluded that form of government did moderate the influence of manufacturers on the implementation of these policies. "The more prevalent industrial interest groups are in a city, the less progress that the city makes in achieving ICLEI milestones. And once again, the importance of political institutions is demonstrated by the fact that this negative influence is apparent in mayoral cities but not city manager cities" (p. 451). Finally, Daley, Sharp, and Bae (2013) examined the factors affecting the likelihood cities adopt sustainability policies with communitywide impacts. They showed that the effect of key organized interests (business, environmental, general interest) on the adoption of these sustainability initiatives did not vary with form, with one exception: Mayor-council cities where the manufacturing sector is relatively large compared to the number of "creative class" establishments were more likely than council-manager cities to adopt these initiatives with communitywide impact.

Proposition 2: Executive officials in council-manager governments are more likely to adopt comprehensive policies than are their counterparts in mayor-council governments.

This second proposition asserts that the high-powered incentives of the mayor-council form encourages elected executives to appear responsive to local demands for action, but not necessarily to invest the financial and political resources to comprehensively address the underlying problem. The appointed executives in council-manager governments are presumed not to reap the same benefits from pursuing largely symbolic policies and thus are expected to approach issues more comprehensively. Evidence for Proposition 2 is largely provided by studies examining the effect of form on the policies adopted by cities to improve economic development and environmental sustainability. These two policy areas provide a good context to study this proposition because each confronts problems that are highly salient to the public, yet also involve the creation of programs that are complex and difficult to assess.

The extant literature offers two sources of evidence in support of Proposition 2. One source is several studies that show seemingly symbolic policies adopted by mayor-council governments that are less often pursued by their counterparts in council-manager governments. A second source is the studies that examine “comprehensive” policies to identify differences in adoption patterns that are attributable to form.

Adopting symbolic policies. Council-manager governments are less likely to adopt symbolic policies than mayor-council governments, at least when it comes to the issue of climate change. A growing literature is focused on understanding the factors that explain when cities will make

formal public commitments to reduce the emissions from within their borders and the extent of their implementation of these commitments, permitting analysts to distinguish between those cities using the program for largely symbolic purposes and those taking steps to reduce their emissions. Krause (2011) found that mayor-council cities were more likely to have signed the nonbinding “Mayors’ Climate Protection Agreement” advocated by the U.S. Council of Mayors. This agreement to meet the emissions reduction targets set out in the Kyoto Protocol has no mechanisms for monitoring or enforcing compliance to these targets, giving it value to local officials as symbolic policy. Krause (2013) built on these findings by showing that council-manager governments were more likely to have taken actions to implement their climate protection programs. She showed that mayor-council governments were less likely to take these steps, and the odds of adoption declined as the analysis moved from policies with symbolic value (e.g., developing inventories and climate action plans for city government operations) to the creation of plans covering the entire community and providing resources to implement these plans.

A third study analyzed city participation in another nonbinding program for emission reductions by examining membership in the International Council on Local Environmental Issues’ (ICLEI) Local Climate Protection program and the extent to which the cities adopting the ICLEI’s program implemented key milestones identified by the program. Sharp, Daley, and Lynch (2011) sought to provide “a means for differentiating cities that actually develop and implement policies and programs to achieve GHG emission reductions from cities whose involvement is largely symbolic policy” (p. 435). Their findings suggest that mayor-council governments used this program as symbolic policy. They showed that the presence of fiscal stress increased the

likelihood that mayor-council cities joined the climate change program, but decreased the likelihood that these cities made significant progress on implementing the program. In contrast, fiscal stress did not affect either outcome in council-manager cities.

Adopting comprehensive sets of policies. The evidence produced thus far on the question of differences between the two types of governments in the comprehensiveness of their programs is much weaker. The “comprehensiveness” of these programs is conventionally assessed by the number of policies adopted relative to a list or index of policies presumed to represent a comprehensive program in each policy area (e.g., Feiock and Kim 2000; Saha 2009; Sharp, Daley, and Lynch 2011, Krause 2012, 2013; Daly, Sharp, and Bae 2013; Svara, Watt, and Jang 2013; Hawkins and Wang 2013). Despite the popularity of these approaches, only three of these studies concluded that form of government affects the comprehensiveness of the program. Svara, Watt, and Jang’s (2013) analysis of sustainability initiatives in 2,176 cities found that council-manager cities adopted more comprehensive policies than mayor-council cities. Likewise, Homsy and Warner (2015) showed that the environmental policies adopted by the council-manager cities in their study were more comprehensive than what mayor-council cities adopted. Finally, Hawkins and Wang (2013) also concluded that form of government affected the comprehensiveness of the sustainability initiatives adopted by cities, but only in the presence of active support from business interests. The council-manager cities in their study that actively involved business in developing a sustainable vision for the city adopted 45 percent more policies than mayor-council cities.

Proposition 3: Council-manager governments are less likely to adopt policies that direct highly visible benefits at politically important interests than are mayor-council governments.

Feiock and his colleagues (2014) argue that the high-powered incentives created by the mayor-council form of government give mayors a strong interest in adopting policies that provide clear opportunities for credit claiming and improved prospects for reelection. They assert that policies that facilitate credit claiming by local officials provide clear benefits to the general public or target benefits to politically important groups (Feiock, Steinacker, and Park 2009).

The political market literature provides evidence for the proposition through studies of policy adoptions in economic development and sustainability. Economic development policies provide significant opportunities to officials for both avenues to claiming credit. These policies often produce highly visible projects that seem to benefit the entire community, but the largest benefits may flow to politically important interests (Feiock, Steinacker, and Park 2009). Sustainability policies are also often highly visibly initiatives that appear to provide benefits to the general public, yet may also benefit key supporters through various cobenefits from generated by these policies (Hawkins and Wang 2013).

Policy instrument choice. Proposition 3 asserts differences in the net benefits of policy from targeting benefits to particular groups, dispersing the costs widely, or both. For example, loan policies, financial incentives, and business attraction are policy instruments with costs that are diffuse or largely borne by groups that are not politically mobilized. Feiock, Jeong, and Kim

(2003) examined city adoption of seven types of development policy instruments that they described as differing in terms of “cost, visibility, targetedness of benefits, and other potentially salient dimensions” (p. 620).⁸ They found that lower household incomes increased the likelihood that mayor-council governments used loan policies, financial incentives, and business attraction, but that the size of median household income did not affect the adoption of these policies in council-manager cities. Income levels also did not affect the use of regulatory reform, land management, historic preservation, or aesthetic improvements in either group of cities. Median income did not affect the adoption of the other four types of policies differently in the two groups of cities. Feiock, Jeong, and Kim (2003) concluded that the divergence between the influence of population and economic decline in council-manager and in mayor-council communities was greatest for the costly and controversial strategies based on tax-exempt bonds, cash contributions, and deferred tax payments. They found that the use of financial incentives was strongly linked to declines in population and economic base in mayor-council cities, but their use was unaffected by these economic declines in council-manager systems. “Despite their questionable effectiveness, they may be politically advantageous because they provide targeted and visible benefits.” (p. 623).

This proposition that elected chief executives have stronger incentives to respond to the demands of politically important interests than their appointed counterparts has also been examined through the lens of joint ventures on economic development projects. Feiock, Steinacker, and Park (2009) asserted that joint ventures are appealing to mayors because these projects provide good opportunities for credit claiming, even though any credit gained is shared with elected officials in other jurisdictions. Their analysis of joint venture formation in 254 U.S. cities

showed that mayor-council governments are more likely to seek economic development through joint ventures than council-manager governments. Hawkins (2010) confirmed their finding and showed that the odds of forming a joint venture in mayor-council cities were almost four times higher than in the council-manager cities. In a third study, Hawkins and Feiock (2011) linked presumptions of directing benefits to political supporters and motivations to claim credit for popular policies by proposing that executive mayors seek economic development that rewards geographically-based constituents. Economic development projects can be designed to promote “localized” or “communitywide” development, and they proposed that these mayors prefer interlocal agreements that support localized development. Their analysis showed that “when compared with cities with a council-manager governing arrangement, the likelihood that a joint venture is established increases substantially when cooperation is intended to address localized issues and when the city has a mayor-council system” (p. 340). This study was limited to joint ventures in just 75 cities, but suggests that governments with a council-manager are more likely to use these joint ventures to pursue a communitywide development agenda.

Differences in program design. Finally, a third source of evidence for Proposition 3 comes from analyses of the targeting of the benefits from sustainability policies adopted by municipal governments. Bae and Feiock (2013) framed the choice this way: Sustainability programs “can be targeted to promote energy efficiency in governmental operations, which aligns with the career incentives of professional managers, or they can be targeted to residences and businesses in the community, a strategy in alignment with the incentives of elected mayors” (p. 777). Their analysis of the sustainability policies adopted by 956 U.S. local governments showed that the council-manager form has a significant positive effect on the expected number of sustainability

policies that are directed to governmental operations and a significant negative effect on community-based sustainability efforts. They concluded that managers are more likely than mayors to promote policies to reduce operational costs in the public sector and are less likely to accommodate community and interest group demands.

Proposition 4: Residents in council-manager cities are less likely to vote in municipal elections than are residents in mayor-council cities.

Propositions 4 and 5 focus on an important consequence of the incentives produced by the two forms of government—the idea that the presence or absence of high-powered incentives affects the kind of public participation sought by executive officials. The fact that the mayor-council form of government is built upon a classic representation system of an elected executive provides a strong basis to expect these governments to encourage their residents to be politically engaged. This rationale would also seem to place a premium on voting over other forms of engagement in mayor-council cities. In contrast, the low-powered incentives of council-manager government are predicted to reduce incentives for executive officials to engage in distributive politics to encourage turnout from supportive voters (Feiock et al. 2014).

A strong consensus has emerged around the conclusion that voter turnout is lower in cities with council-manager governments. This finding goes back to Lineberry and Fowler's (1967) study and has been consistently supported by subsequent research (Alford and Lee 1968; Karnig and Walter 1983; Bridges 1997; Oliver 2001; Wood 2002; Hajnal and Lewis 2003).⁹ This literature often shows that other local institutions also affect voter turnout even more than form of

government (e.g., council districts, partisan ballots, local initiatives, electing timing, etc.), but the finding that form matters is consistent.

Proposition 5: Executive officials in council-manager cities are more likely to involve residents in deciding issues of public importance than are their counterparts in mayor-council cities.

If form of government incentivizes executive officials to use participation in different ways, Proposition 5 follows in a very straightforward way from Proposition 4. Proposition 5 presumes that executive officials in council-manager governments are more likely to utilize participation mechanisms beyond voting to engage residents in deciding issues of public importance than are officials in mayor-council governments (Nalbandian et al 2013). This practice may be motivated by the low powered incentives discussed in the previous section (Frant 1996), because these executive officials embrace best practices encouraging public participation (Nelson and Wood 2010), or because these forms of participation are more consistent with an accountability system based on professional management and consensus decisions (Svara and Nelson 2008). Examples of these processes range from the use of traditional activities like public meetings or hearings to online activities or mobile phone applications (Nabatchi and Blomgren Ansler 2014).

Scholars have been slow to focus on forms of public participation other than voting, and only three analyses reviewed for this study examined this proposition. One study provides evidence that council-manager governments more actively seek to engage the public. Nelson and Wood (2010) surveyed city managers in 91 cities about the municipality's use of sixteen specific

participation strategies. After controlling for differences in the average education levels of their residents and the size of their population, the analysis showed that the administrative cities in the sample--the only group almost entirely comprised of cities using the council-manager form of government--used more of these participation strategies than did cities in political or two adapted categories.

However, the two studies seeking to link form of government other forms of civic and political participation have not produced strong evidence of a relationship. Oliver (2001) examined the effect of form of government on the likelihood that residents contacted public officials, attended local government meetings, attended meetings of civic organizations, and informally engaged in community activities using self-reported measures of these activities from a 1990 survey of political and civic participation by the American public. He found the residents in council-manager cities were no more likely to engage in these mechanisms than residents in mayor-council cities. He concluded “[electoral] politics is more compelling, it seems, when mayors are running for office, a fact that contributes to higher turnout. Nevertheless, across all other civic acts, there are few differences between the civic activities of people in reformed municipalities and those in unreformed ones” (pp. 183-4). Finally, Kelleher and Lowery (2009) extended Oliver’s work by examining two additional measures of participation, the act of registering to vote and membership in local civic organizations. They found that people living in council-manager cities were more likely to report registering to vote, but responses about membership in civic organizations were unrelated to the city’s form of government.

Summary

Progress has been made in studying these five propositions, but the empirical evidence base linking form of government to differences in executive choices and political and civic engagement by residents is still relatively small. This lack of progress is due, at least in part, to the emphasis in the literature on analyzing municipal expenditures. The emergence of the political market framework has led to analyses focused on more direct measures of policy adoption and targeting benefits. This approach has considerable promise, but the overall literature is still in a very early stage of development.

The evidence thus far indicates that advocates of the benefits of council-manager governments have some evidence to support their claims. This literature does not provide strong evidence yet for the widely held presumptions that council-manager governments are less responsive to politically important interests or that elected executives reward political supporters, but evidence does exist for other propositions. The evidence is stronger for the proposition that the executives of council-manager governments are less likely to adopt symbolic policies or to seek visible development projects providing localized benefits over those befitting the community more broadly. This is a potentially important finding and confirmation from analyses of other policy areas would permit stronger conclusions to be drawn.

The empirical case for differences between the two forms in the intensity and form of public engagement in municipal government rests largely on voter turnout and the evidence indicates that turnout is lower in council-manager governments. To date, there is virtually no statistical

evidence of differences in measures of public participation other than voting. The one exception is Kelleher and Lowery's findings that residents in council-manager governments are more likely to register to vote. The findings for Propositions 4 and 5 are particularly interesting given Ihrke's (2002) finding that surveys of local government officials on their perceptions of the representational effectiveness of their city governments showed no difference attributable to form. He analyzed the representational effectiveness of 108 municipalities in New York and Wisconsin and found no differences in the mean representational effectiveness reported by city council members between the council-manager and mayor-council cities.¹⁰

Lineberry and Fowler's work led to analyses focused on the proposition that executives in mayor-council governments promote a "machine politics" approach to holding power and these strategies encourage higher turnout than what is typical in cities with council-manager governments. The possibility that the gap is (also) due to executives in council-manager cities using participation in a fundamentally different way and therefore relying on different mechanisms has attracted little attention by comparison. Perhaps the behaviors predicted by propositions 4 and 5 net out, at least from the perceptions of officials. What is lacking is an analysis of residents' perceptions of representation effectiveness and form.

Form and the Functionality of Municipal Government

Analysts have also devoted considerable energy to examining differences in the functionality of municipal governments that can be attributed to form of government. The next three propositions assert that improvements in role symmetry, governance harmony and innovation are provided by

council-manager governments. These outcomes are not direct measures of performance, but instead are precursors of positive organizational performance. The final two propositions focus on expected differences in the effectiveness of service delivery and general functionality of the government, but also are indirect measures. The lack of attention in the literature to the analyzing the organizational performance of the two governments directly in terms of efficiency, effectiveness, and economy is an important limitation of this literature. This issue is considered at length in the discussion section.

Proposition 6: Executive officials in council-manager governments devote more of their time to managing the organization than do their counterparts in mayor-council governments.

The expectation that the appointed executives of council-manager governments devote more of their time to management is broadly supported in this literature, but the influence of form on these choices is less clear (Newell and Ammons 1987). For instance, some analysts point to the advantages of the presence of high-level appointed professional administrators, regardless of form, in explaining role emphases (French and Folz 2004; Nelson and Svara 2012). There is the additional issue that the link between time allocation and organizational performance is widely assumed, but not confirmed empirically.

The evidence on the question of time allocation generally supports Proposition 6. Newell and Ammons (1987) examined the time allocation among city managers and mayors with regard to management, policy, and political activities.¹¹ They (p. 247) reported that “city managers spend

significantly more of their time on both the management role (50.8%) and the policy role (32.2%) than do mayors (44.2% and 25.6%, respectively), who spend twice as much time on the political role (32.2% compared to 17% for the city managers).” In a later study, Eskridge (2012) asked respondents to rate their involvement (as either mayor or CAO), their counterpart (either the mayor or CAO), and their city council in several specific activities falling within these three groups. He found that CAOs in council-manager cities reported spending more of their time on management activities than did their counterparts in mayor-council cities.¹² There was no difference in the time devoted to policy activities reported by the CAOs, but the respondents from council-manager governments reported spending less time on political activities than did the mayor-council CAOs.

Additional evidence is provided by analyses of differences in how the chief administrative officers in the two forms of government spend their time using Svara’s (1985) four categories of mission, policy, administration, and management (French and Folz 2004; Eskridge 2012), and this research also generally supports Proposition 6. Eskridge (2012) asked the CAOs to report their involvement in specific activities intended to represent Svara’s (1985) categories of mission, policy, administration, and management activities and the CAOs from mayor-council cities reported lower involvement in all but the mission activities of their organizations.¹³ French and Folz (2004: 57) also concluded that “form of government is important for understanding how mayors and city managers allocate their time and choose role emphases, but it [our research] also underscores the importance of knowing whether or not a mayor-council city is served by a professional administrator.”

Proposition 7: Council-manager governments produce less conflict among their officials than mayor-council governments.

Two studies in the review assessed the proposition that form affects the level of conflict among elected officials and the existing evidence supports this proposition. Svava's (2002b) analysis of council roles showed that council members reported their interactions with other council members were more positive and less conflictual in council-manager cities than in mayor-council cities. Nelson and Nollenberger (2011) built on Svava's work with a study examining how municipal form affects the amount of conflict among council members and showed that respondents from cities using the mayor-council form reported higher conflict scores than the respondents from cities with the council-manager form.¹⁴ Their analysis also indicated that respondents from cities using the mayor-council form without a CAO and those using a mayor-council form with a CAO appointed by the mayor reported more conflict than the respondents from cities with the council-manager form.

Nelson and Nollenberger's (2011) also reported that mayor-council cities where the mayor and council jointly appoint the CAO reported lower conflict than the mayor-council cities where this was not a shared responsibility. They concluded, "[a]ll of the cities with a professional administrator hired with council involvement showed lower levels of reported conflict in the decision-making process than the cities without such a position or the municipalities that have a CAO who is appointed by the mayor" (p. 710). They attributed this finding to the ability of

professional managers to bridge the separation of powers divide by reducing conflict and increasing cooperation between the mayor and members of council.

Proposition 8: Executive Officials in council-manager governments are more likely to adopt innovative policies and practices than are their counterparts in mayor-council governments.

Only three studies in this review profess to examine differences in adopting innovative policies, and each provides relatively strong support for this proposition. Another source of evidence about how form effects the adoption of innovative policies and programs comes from the voluminous literature on public services contracting by local governments. In-house production of virtually all services was common until the last few decades, and the decision to contract or otherwise share service production is the most frequently studied innovation in municipal government.¹⁵

Incentives for general innovation. The studies explicitly linking form of government to differences in the adoption of innovative policies assert that the council-manager form incentivizes innovative behavior. The proposition that council-manager governments are more innovative than mayor-council governments is based on expectations of increased stability due to less conflict, a willingness to take risks because of a less political environment, and the longer term perspective and credibility of commitment permitted when the chief executive official is a professional administrator. Krebs and Pelissero (2010) examined the adoption of several management innovations commonly associated with “reinventing government” to assess the

general proposition that managers in cities with institutions that decrease conflict are more active in controversial policies than their counterparts in higher conflict environments. They did not use form of government as an independent variable, but instead used a scale variable indicating “mayoral power,” with endpoints roughly corresponding to the council-manager/mayor-council distinction.¹⁶ They found that weaker mayoral power was associated with more adoptions of the “REGO” innovations, even while controlling for the manager’s interest in the topics, and concluded that where mayors are stronger, managers are less active in seeking innovations.¹⁷

Nelson and Svara (2012) also examined the link between form of government and innovation by examining the adoption of several specific management innovations, including e-government, REGO, and strategic practices in 490 U.S. municipalities. They proposed that cities are less likely to adopt innovative practices when their form “more greatly distinguishes the mayor from the council and reduces the professional stature of the chief administrative officer” (pp. 226-27). They found higher innovation rates were associated with council-manager governments, both with and without an elected mayor.

Aversion to risk is a well-known barrier to innovation, and Feiock, Steinacker, and Park (2009) assert that elected executives are averse to risking being perceived as ineffective on issues that are highly salient to residents. They argue that this aversion to failure incentivizes mayor-council governments to be late adopters of innovative policies. Kwon, Berry, and Feiock (2009) examined this proposition by analyzing the timing of the strategic economic development tools adopted by 233 U.S. cities. They asserted that “[l]ater adoption produces less gain but it poses

little political risk. In fact, once the innovation has become more visible and is legitimated by its diffusion, there are stronger political incentives to adopt it” (p. 973). Their analysis confirmed that council-manager governments were more likely to adopt these strategic economic development tools and confirmed that the cities in the late adopter group were much more likely to be mayor-council cities.

Incentives to contract service delivery. The literature examining services contracting in local governments generally supports Proposition 8, but the picture is muddled by the frequency of null findings from these studies. Roughly half of the studies seeking to link form of government to decisions to contract services report that form is not statistically related to these decisions (Morgan, Hirlinger, and England 1988; Lamothe, Lamothe, and Feiock 2008; Carr, LeRoux, and Shrestha 2009; Kwon and Feiock 2010; Shrestha and Feiock 2011). None of these studies indicated that mayor-council governments were more likely to contract services than council-manager governments, but simply lack evidence to support claims of differences in behavior attributable to form of government.

The strongest evidence is provided by three analyses reporting that council-manager governments are more likely than mayor-council governments to adopt the innovation of services contracting. Hefetz and Warner’s (2004) analysis of service delivery arrangements in 628 U.S. cities showed that council-manager governments were more likely to contract services than mayor-council cities and less likely to return services to in-house production once they have been contracted out. Levin and Tadelis’s (2010) analysis of service delivery arrangements in 1,043

U.S. cities in 1997 and 2002 showed that council-manager cities were slightly (15 percent) more likely to contract with other governments and nongovernmental (private and nonprofit) organizations (10 percent) than the mayor-council governments. They concluded that “cities run by an appointed manager, rather than an elected mayor, are more likely to contract for service provision, although the effect is relatively modest” (p. 510). Finally, Hefetz, Warner, and Vigoda-Gadot’s (2012) analysis of service delivery arrangements in cities and counties in the U.S. showed that those with a council-manager form were more likely to contract with other governments and nongovernmental producers.¹⁸

Four additional studies focus on the proposition that form of government incentivizes officials to prefer certain sectors for producing services because the transaction risk common to arrangements with the different sectors. The sectors have different transaction risks and these studies seek to assess the extent to which these risks affect the choice of sector. The evidence thus far is mixed at best. For example, Brown and Potoski (2003) reported that council-manager cities were less likely to contract with private sector firms, but that form of government was unrelated to the likelihood cities opted to contract with nonprofits and other governments over in-house production. They also reported that council-manager cities were significantly more likely to engage in joint contracting, internal production, and complete contracting with other governments than enter into complete contracting with private firms. Feiock and Jang (2009) found that council-manager cities were more likely to contract elder services to nonprofits than mayor-council cities and more likely to use joint arrangements when they did. Finally, Hefetz and Warner (2012) found that the presence of a council-manager government decreased the

likelihood of the service being produced using a nonprofit organization, but had no effect on the other sector choices.

Proposition 9: Council-manager governments produce higher quality services than mayor-council governments.

Finally, propositions 9 and 10 focus on differences in the organizational effectiveness of these governments. Proposition 9 focuses on the proposition that council-manager governments produce higher quality services than mayor-council governments. Council-manager governments are presumed to provide high quality services because city managers have an advantage over elected mayors when it comes “to collaborative civil authority and injecting expert administration in the delivery of urban services....The professional values, training, and expertise of city and town managers and administrators may promote or encourage advances in the level of urban services provided in their communities” (Folz and Abdelrazek 2009: 568). The evidence for this proposition comes from several different approaches to studying the quality of public service provision. The findings from these studies suggest form matters to service production decisions, but it is not clear how much.

Perceptions of service quality. Three studies examine this proposition by studying the perceptions of service quality held by CAOs, councilmembers, and residents. Eskridge (2012) found that CAOs in mayor-council cities viewed the quality of the services provided by their city more favorably than CAOs in council-manager cities. Ihrke’s (2002) study of council-members in New York and Wisconsin found that the council members from the council-manager cities in

New York reported statistically higher service delivery effectiveness scores than did the council members from the state's mayor-council cities. The scores reported by the council members from the Wisconsin cities did not differ by form of government.

Finally, Wood and Fan (2008) examined differences in the probability of residents reporting that the public services provided by their municipal government were "exceptional" between cities using institutions based on one of the two forms of government or an adapted structure blending elements of the two forms.¹⁹ For the most part, this study did not demonstrate a statistically significant relationship between municipal structure and their measure of residential service satisfaction. However, their analysis did show that residents from administrative cities (the group most closely proxying the council-manager form) were more likely to rate the quality of city services in the top category than were residents in cities with the adapted structures, controlling for several important socioeconomic variables. There are significant limitations to the design of this study, but it is the only analysis from this literature to examine Proposition 9 from the point of view of residents.

Service levels. Folz and Abdelrazek's (2009) analysis of service levels for police, fire, building code enforcement, and solid waste management in 508 communities showed that council-manager governments and "adapted" mayor-council cities with a professional city administrator had higher levels of service than did mayor-council cities with a mayor who serves as the chief executive officer.²⁰ There is clear evidence in this study for a distinction based on form, but the authors also suggest that the presence of professional administrators alone is likely enough to

influence service levels. They concluded that the “association between the type of chief executive and service level is considerably stronger than the connection between type of government and service level” (p. 564).

Contract management best practices. Five studies provide additional evidence for Proposition 9 by examining how form of government moderates the effect of complexities of managing the use of contractors. Council-manager governments are presumed to be more effective than mayor-council governments in assessing the transaction risks, conditions in the vendor market, and citizen preferences that must be balanced when contracting for public services with other organizations (Hefetz, Warner, and Vigoda-Gadot 2014). Hefetz and Warner (2004) proposed that council-manager governments engage in higher levels of monitoring than mayor-council governments and that this difference leads to “more effective” monitoring by council-manager governments and a higher probability of reverse contracting in these cities. They also proposed that council-manager governments are more effective in managing internal opposition to contracting and that form moderates the reductive effect of internal opposition on the use of service contracting and the positive effect that this opposition has on contracting services back in. They did not find support for the proposition that the link between opposition and contracting decisions is moderated by form of government, but showed that the relationship between monitoring activities and contracting out and back in is affected by form in the way they predicted. A later study of the service production arrangements in 118 U.S. cities by the same authors (Hefetz and Warner 2012) showed that the effects of several measures indicating increased difficulty of managing contracts for external service production on the likelihood the city would contract these services were each moderated by form of government. Hefetz et al.

(2014) showed that council-manager governments are less likely to rely on for-profit organizations to supply services when the market for vendors is not competitive.

Another approach used to examine this proposition is to focus on decisions to contract services when the risk of contractor opportunism is high. Levin and Tadelis (2010) proposed that council-manager cities would be less likely to contract for services with substantial transaction risk, but that the contracting decision in mayor-council cities would be less influenced by the level of difficulty of effectively contracting the service because “political concerns might cause administrators to focus on issues other than the economic tradeoffs” (p. 517). They reported null effects for this proposition and concluded that “[t]he relationship between contracting difficulty and privatization is essentially the same in cities with managers and mayors” (p. 532). This same question was examined by Hefetz et al. (2014) and also showed that the presence of substantial transaction risks did not lead to different decisions in council-manager and mayor-council governments. The one exception is that council-manager governments were more likely than mayor-council governments to contract with the for-profit sector when services are difficult to measure. Given that this is typically considered the riskiest sector to contract for services with, one interpretation is that council-manager governments do not strike a better risk/reward balance than mayor-council governments. However, the authors suggest the finding may reflect that council-manager governments are better able to mitigate the risks through superior contract management practices.

Proposition 10: Council-manager governments are more effective in performing the basic functions of government than are mayor-council governments.

Finally, an improvement in operational effectiveness is central to the perceived performance benefits of the council-manager form, but only a few of the studies in this review sought to analyze differences in effectiveness attributable to form. The following five studies provide eclectic, if not definitive, evidence in support of Proposition 6.

Officials' perceptions of their own effectiveness. Svara (2002a) analyzed surveys asking administrative and elected officials to rate the effectiveness of their governments to determine if the levels reported differed by form of government. He reported that council members in council-manager cities rated their effectiveness higher than council members in mayor-council cities with regard to several key functions: establishing a vision for the city, establishing long-term goals, establishing objectives and priorities, reviewing and approving the budget, overseeing program effectiveness, and overseeing administrative performance. He also found that the two groups of council members reported similar ratings for tasks related to the representation function such as resolving citizen complaints and responding to citizen demands.

Effectiveness capitalized in home sales. Two studies investigated the proposition that differences in the effectiveness of the two forms can be seen through premiums in the sales price of homes in council-manager cities. Kreft (2003) studied the sales prices of 37,441 homes sold in Ohio in 1991, and after controlling for differences in structural-house and city-specific characteristics, he concluded that houses in council-manager cities sold for higher prices. He also reported a similar effect on sales prices for houses in regions where the central city had a

council-manager form, arguing that a “CM-run metropolitan area” (p. 16) benefits sales prices in cities throughout the region. MacDonald (2006) also proposed that council-manager governments improve the provision of public services and tax rates in communities and increase the desirability of home ownership in their communities. However, her analysis of the home sales from 1980-2005 in 165 Florida cities showed no statistical difference in home prices between cities of different forms.²¹

Application of analysis to decisions. Finally, decisions informed by analysis are expected to improve organizational performance, but if the elected executives in mayor-council governments assess projects largely in terms of political benefits, analysis of the fiscal or economic impacts is unnecessary. Ha and Feiock (2012) surveyed local government officials in 274 U.S. cities about their use of cost-benefit or fiscal impact analysis prior to granting requests for development incentives.²² They found that officials from mayor-council governments were less likely to report using these techniques than those from council-manager governments, even after controlling for differences in the strength of the bargaining positions of business interests and governments. “As predicted, mayor-council governments apply fiscal analyses less often, and local governments with an appointed administrators position apply fiscal analyses more often” (p. 490).

Summary

The five propositions presented in this section cover several key aspects of organization functionality and two indirect indicators of effectiveness. This review shows that the evidence produced thus far for these propositions is weaker than many might expect. Many studies report

no differences that can be attributed to form, and others attribute observed differences to the benefits of appointed professional managers, rather than form of government. At this point, the strongest evidence for differences due to form is the level of conflict among key officials and incentives for adopting innovative policies.

An important limitation in this literature is the lack of studies that directly examine propositions about potential differences in the two types of governments in terms of effectiveness, economy, and efficiency. Superior management capacity and more professional management are central to the perceived benefits of the council-manager form, yet this literature has focused instead on examining differences in functionality and a few indirect measures of organizational effectiveness. Likewise, service provision is a basic function of municipal governments, yet only a few studies have examined the proposition that council-manager and mayor-council governments perform differently on this key function. Here too, the research focus is not on assessing differences in efficiency, economy, and effectiveness, but at understanding the decision to contract for services and how officials balance the demands of contactors, residents, and employees in these cases. This review reveals that scholars have more often chosen to study how form of government affects the sector choices municipalities make for services production, rather than how well they perform this function.

Discussion

The improvement in performance provided by council-manager governments is widely assumed in the field of local government scholarship, but what does research show? This review answers

this question by identifying the propositions about performance differences between council-managers and mayor-council governments that have been analyzed empirically and assessing the evidence provided through these studies. The studies examined in this review provide considerable evidence in support of claims of improved performance of the council-manager form of government. The evidence is not as strong as many advocates likely assume, but progress has been made. This literature is still maturing and more work is required to fully assess these claims.

This review concludes with three general assessments of the state of this literature and several suggestions about the steps necessary to develop the evidence required to more fully assess the potential performance differences between the two governments: First, are scholars examining the topics necessary for us to develop a good understanding of the actual benefits of the council-manager form? Second, what is the strength of the evidence produced by this literature? Third, how might some of the major gaps in this literature be filled through future research?

Are Scholars Examining the Appropriate Topics to Build our Knowledge Base?

The answer to this question is a qualified yes. This review shows that scholars have been engaged in the quest to assess the presumed performance advantages of council-manager government for nearly fifty years. The breadth of the topics covered by the ten research propositions underscores the broad scope of this literature. This literature emerged decades ago focused on issues of representation and accountability, expanded into assessments of differences

in the functionality of these organizations, and is increasingly focused on examining differences in the policy choices encouraged by the two forms of government.

For the most part, this literature is examining the most important questions. The one glaring exception is the lack of attention to assessing differences in the operational performance (i.e., effectiveness, economy, and efficiency) of these governmental forms. The lack of attention to this question is surprising given that discussions in favor of council-manager governments often emphasize its professional management benefits over mayor-council governments. Not only has this literature failed to provide much evidence for these claims, but it has largely failed to directly address this research question.

The lack of progress on these questions is disappointing given the extensive literature on the positive impact of public management on the performance of local government that has emerged in recent years. A recent review of this literature concluded that “the evidence points toward strong positive performance effects resulting from staff quality, personnel stability, and planning” (Walker and Andrews 2014: 101). Scholars studying the effect of form of government on performance have not built on this extensive literature, but instead have focused on differences in role emphases, conflict among officials, and other indirect assessments of the operational performance of these governments.

Progress on the effects that form of government plays in operational performance has lagged in part because the attention of the scholars most concerned with local institutions has been elsewhere. The performance of the council-manager form of government has not received the same level of sustained, systematic attention that has been directed at identifying the elements of municipal institutional structure, the extent of the institutional variation in U.S. municipalities, and how the different institutional arrangements used by these governments should be categorized and described (e.g., Frederickson et al. 2003; Nelson and Svara 2010; Carr and Karupusamy 2008; DeSantis and Renner 2002; Wheeland, Palus, and Wood 2014). This focus reflects the historical emphasis in this literature on understanding representation processes and the nature of executive leadership in these governments. This exercise is ultimately necessary, but not sufficient, for understanding performance differences among local governments. Hopefully, more effort will be directed at analyzing performance differences in the future.

What is the Strength of the Evidence supporting these Presumed Differences thus Far?

The evidence produced by this literature is uneven at this point because the amount and quality of attention from empirical scholars to these propositions varies enormously. This is often the case in empirical work, but it does indicate additional effort is required to provide an adequate base of support for most of these propositions. In the next few paragraphs, I provide a brief assessment of the evidence produced thus far for the individual propositions and a general assessment of the major sources of weakness in this literature.

The evidence is strongest for propositions 3, 4, and 6: Council-manager governments seek to distribute the benefits of public policies more broadly, experience lower voter turnout, and their senior executive officials direct more of their time to their roles as managers than is the case in mayor-council governments. These three propositions share the benefit of consistent findings across several studies and the use of common variable measures and theory. The findings produced for propositions 4 and 6 are the best example of consistent findings over time and in both cases, the measurement of the dependent variable is consistent over several studies. A reliance on the same theoretical framework over several studies has likely contributed to the consistent findings favoring council-manager governments for Proposition 3. The evidence for Proposition 3 is also strengthened by the use of different policy areas to test this proposition.

The evidence is weaker for propositions 2, 7, and 8, but still fairly compelling: Council-manager governments seem to favor more comprehensive policy solutions, experience less conflict among senior officials, and are more willing to adopt innovative policies and practices than are mayor-council governments. The evidence for this set of propositions is less consistent both within and across propositions. For example, when Proposition 2 is studied in terms of the adoption of symbolic policies in support of mitigating climate change, this research provides consistent evidence over several studies that council-manager governments are less likely to adopt these policies. The consistent findings strengthen the case for this proposition, but the use of the same policy area in these studies raises questions about their generalizability. However, when analysts assess this proposition in terms of the sheer number of policies adopted by these governments, the empirical evidence is less compelling. The findings for Proposition 7 consistently show that conflict is lower in council-manager governments, but so far this evidence is based on only two

studies. Similarly, the evidence produced for Proposition 8 suggests that council-manager governments are more open to innovative program and practices, but again based on just a few studies. In addition, this literature does not focus on identifying differences in innovative behavior in these governments, but simply examines differences in the adoption of policies the researchers perceive as “innovative.”

The evidence for propositions 1, 5, 9, and 10 is considerably weaker than the other six propositions: At this point, the evidence does not support contentions that there are systematic differences between the two forms of government in their responsiveness to powerful constituencies, in the levels and form of civic and political [other than voting] participation by residents, the quality of public services delivered, or in the general operational effectiveness of the organizations. It’s not that the proposals are incorrect, but that the evidence provided by this literature is inconclusive for two general reasons. First, the quality of evidence suffers from insufficient coverage of important topics. The attention of empirical scholars has been strongly focused on representation issues, but the proposition of improved management from council-manager government has yet to be engaged in a meaningful way. This review shows that analyses of operational performance have largely been limited to exploring differences in functionality of these organizations, such as conflict among key officials, role emphases, and innovation. These elements may prove to be important to the theory building needed for this topic, but we need to go further than demonstrating differences in functionality.

Second, the quality of the evidence is very uneven across the ten propositions. This is a both a problem of inadequate theorizing and general weaknesses in research designs. Form of government is often been included in these studies to serve as a control variable, permitting the authors to avoid articulating a solid theoretical basis for expecting differences due to form. Examples of this problem can still be found (e.g., Hefetz et al. 2014), where authors do not go beyond vague assertions of increased management capacity or more professional management provided by council-manager governments.²³ This practice has stunted the development of our knowledge about this critical question.

To a lesser degree, the strength of the evidence is also affected by weaknesses in the research designs used to study performance differences. In terms of methods of analysis, we have come a long way from the initial studies relying on analyzing frequency distributions and bivariate correlations (Lineberry and Fowler 1967; Sharp 1991) to widespread use of multivariate analyses in this literature. The move toward multilevel models is a positive step (e.g. Kelleher and Lowery 2009), as is increased use of network analysis (Feiock, Steinacker and Park 2009; Hawkins 2010). Finally, there is a strong reliance on cross sectional analyses in this literature, creating challenges for demonstrating causality rather than association in these studies.

How can these Gaps be filled through Future Research?

The major gap that must be filled in order for the evidence base to be fully developed is to expand the literature to cover the perceived benefits of council-manager governments for

operational performance. In my view, the lack of attention to this aspect of municipal performance is the most important finding of this review.

This review shows that empirical scholarship has not adequately engaged the proposition that council-manager governments are better managed than mayor-council governments. Given that council-manager government emerged as a solution to problems from political corruption and the need to generally improve administrative competence (Lineberry and Fowler 1967; Lyons 1978; Sharp 1991), it is not surprising that the effect of institutional structures on the responsiveness of elected officials and administrators has received serious attention from scholars over the past several decades.

Filling this critical gap requires progress in two areas: the development of a theory to explain why council-manager governments are better managed organizations than are mayor-council governments and the production of evidence assessing the major propositions of this theory. Insufficient theorizing about why the two forms of municipal government create different behavior is a critical factor limiting the strength of the evidence produced by this literature. For decades, analysts have presumed this performance gap exists, but have yet to empirically demonstrate any differences actually exist.

Greater emphasis on developing theory to explain differences in operational performance. The presumption that form of government produces differences in operational performance is a staple

of the empirical literature on local government management in the U.S. Scholars have not devoted sufficient attention to developing theory to explain the basis for these expectations, but an extensive literature exists that links local government management and operational performance that can be drawn upon. Walker and Andrews (2013) report that “three broad theoretical perspectives on the management of local governments—economic theories of service production; contingency theories of organizational design; and resource-based arguments about distinctive production capabilities—encapsulate much of this literature” (p. 105). The resource-based arguments of contingency theory in particular might provide some building blocks for this theory. It is worth noting that form of government is not mentioned in the Walker and Andrews review of this literature, nor are any other of the municipal governance institutions commonly studied in this literature. The authors do note that the contingency theory literature is UK-based and perhaps this omission results from differences in the systems of municipal government between the countries.

Despite the conventional wisdom to the contrary, it is possible that there are no fundamental differences in the management strategies used in governments of different forms. The lack of theory development on this question in the U.S. may not be an oversight, but may instead reflect a sense that there is not a clear basis to expect substantial differences than can be attributed to form. Given the extensive professionalization of local governments in recent decades, the use of effective management strategies may not depend upon form, but on other factors, such as differences in resources and scale of the organization. If this is the case, the differences in operational performance that are popularly attributed to form may instead be due to the different incentives for executive decision making created its form of government.

If so, the story may not be about how differences in administrative competence between the two forms lead to the use of different management strategies to achieve operational efficiency, economy, and effectiveness, but about how operational performance is affected by incentives for policy choice encouraged by form of government. Interestingly, this premise is consistent with perspectives on municipal institutions that deemphasize the importance of form in explaining municipal performance (Karuppusamy and Carr 2012). For example, studies using the Adapted Cities framework have raised questions about the centrality of form of government for explaining performance differences (Svara 2005).

Analyzing operational performance through policy choice. A different path to theory development on this question is through an empirical strategy that builds on the political market framework by analyzing policy choices that have clear implications for the operational performance of these governments. The political market framework provides a basis for understanding the effects of high- and low-powered incentives on the policy choices of municipal governments and often the policies selected will have significant operational consequences for the government. This approach would permit scholars to extend insights from the research focused on issues of representation and policy choice to questions of operational performance. Potentially, the benefits of this approach are not only in explicating the incentives of executive officials in policy adoption, but in articulating the contingent effects of form of government on operational performance.

There are many policy areas where local government officials have substantial discretion in selecting among options and their decisions have significant consequences for the long-term operational performance of the local governments. A contemporary example is the constrained fiscal policy space many municipal governments face due to past decisions about staffing levels and compensation, revenue structure, capital expenditures, service production, and infrastructure investment (Carr and Shrestha 2014; Methe and Perry 1980; Tavares and Ferreira da Cruz 2014; Terman and Feiock 2014). The political market theory expects high-powered incentives to privilege certain policy options in mayor-council governments and these decisions are likely to have predictable impacts on the operational performance of these governments over time. Council-manager governments may produce superior operational performance over time, all other things equal, because these governments lack these distorting incentives. If so, this reinforces the contingent effects approach suggested by the political market.

Conclusion

Decades of efforts have produced some evidence about the presumed performance benefits of council-manager governments. The ten propositions presented in this paper reflect my efforts to organize the empirical literature into the core research questions addressed in this literature. The range of topics covered by the propositions suggests the importance of this topic. The studies examined in this review indicate evidence exists to support claims of improved performance of the council-manager form of government. The evidence is not as strong as many advocates likely expect, but progress has been made. In many ways, this review suggests that local government

scholars are still at an early point in the effort to demonstrate the performance differences between council-manager and mayor-council governments.

Notes

1. The full list of citations are included in the references and indicated with an asterisk.
2. These latter terms are broader concepts that include aspects of governance beyond the fundamental elements of form. For example, the commonly used term “reform government” refers to the council-manager form and the presence of two specific electoral institutions (nonpartisan ballots and at-large elections). In another example, the adapted cities framework developed by Frederickson, Johnson, and Wood (2003) identifies categories of cities based on nearly twenty different institutional elements (Carr and Karuppusamy 2008).
3. For those studies using measures of municipal structure emphasizing form of government, the interpretation is fairly straightforward. However, for approaches that use categories that comingle cities with different forms of government, such as Frederickson, Johnson, and Wood’s (2003) “adapted cities,” the task is more difficult. Findings about their “nonadapted” categories—political and administrative cities—are easily relatable, but findings for their three “adapted” categories—adapted administrative, conciliated, and adapted political—are not.
4. This proposition is difficult to assess empirically because the local interest groups that are politically important are a product of many local factors that are not easily measured. Given this, these studies generally identify one or more interests expected to benefit from the adoption of specific policies, measure their presence in the community and/or engagement in the issue, and assess any differences in adoptions across the two groups of cities (e.g., Lubell, Feiock, and Ramirez de la Cruz 2009; Sharp, Daley, and Lynch 2011). This approach does not provide conclusive evidence, but these studies indicate that mayor-council governments seem to be more responsive to developers, upper-income residents, and business interests. A few studies instead

use scale measures indicating perceptions of support for the policy from different groups or levels of activism in the policy area (Bae and Feiock 2012; Daly, Sharp, and Bae 2013; Hawkins and Wang 2013). A different approach was used by French and Folz (2004) to investigate the question of responsiveness to the “particularistic interests” described by Lineberry and Fowler. They asked mayors and city managers to rate “the level of influence that any local interest groups have on their decisions” in regard to six core local government services (p. 61). The executives in both forms of governments reported “between a minor and moderate influence on the decisions they make about local government services” (p. 61), but the responses from the managers in council-manager government were not statistically different from the influence reported by executives in the mayor-council cities.

5. This study did not examine form, but instead used an index that depicts “mayor-manager balance” based on form and a few other institutions. Despite the additional factors, the index strongly corresponds with form. “The factor score is highest for mayor-council cities and lowest for council-manager cities” (p. 656).

6. Cities use density bonuses to “promote affordable housing, child care facilities, open spaces, or the preservation of environmental and historical goods, while at the same time, promoting the construction of compact developments” (p. 225). Smart growth zoning focuses on regulating the intensity instead of the type of land use. It has limited redistributive effects because it largely directed at making the development process flexible. He argued that these regulations provided benefits to prodevelopment interests because density bonuses and urban containment regulations increase the production of public goods such as open space that can be capitalized into housing prices and passed on to homebuyers.

7. She did not examine form of government, but instead used an index of political institutions that combines form of government with the proportion of the city's council members elected by ward. Higher values of the index indicate less "reform."

8. The category of "Facilities Improvements" was excluded from this study.

9. Several of these studies focus on the effects the broader "reform" institutional package of council-manager form, nonpartisan ballots, and at large elections of council members. Karnig and Walter (1983) attributed their findings to several factors they saw as depressing incentives for turnout in council-manager cities: fewer council members, no party cue due to nonpartisan elections, and the professional management in these cities made it possible to avoid major conflict and policy debates. In her study, Bridges (1997) found that the council-manager cities, without exception, had lower voter turnout than the mayor-council cities, despite the fact a lower proportion of the population in the council-manager cities was foreign born, minority, and less educated. Like Karnig and Walter, she also concluded that the use of non-partisan ballots and at large elections of council members reduce public participation in elections and thus insulate government officials from the demands of lower income and ethnic groups. Wood's (2002) study examined this question using measures of structure based on the adapted cities typology developed by Frederickson, Johnson, and Wood (2003). His findings show that the cities with mayor-council governments had the highest voter turnout and the council-manager cities had the lowest turnout. Wood's findings are based on the adapted cities framework, which does not use form of government as the key variable in assigning governments to categories of structure. In the adapted cities framework, political cities are those cities that most closely resemble the classic mayor-council form.

10. Ihrke studied differences among cities within the same state and did not attempt to assess differences in cities across the two states.

11. Eskridge (p. 219) used the following definitions in his survey to assist respondents in answering this question: Management activities include “staffing, budgeting, coordination of departments, evaluating, directing, etc.” Policy Activities include “meetings with council members, agenda setting, and policy development, policy proposal, and policy advise [sic].” Political activities include “ceremonies, public relations, meetings with other governmental officials at other levels of government, speeches, etc.”

12. For the purposes of his study, Eskridge (p. 91) defines CAOs as “the individual within a government that is responsible for the administrative functions of the municipality (this may be the elected mayor or an appointed professional administrator).”

13. Eskridge’s (pp. 216-217) measure of mission activities included the following three activities: determining the purpose and services of municipal government; developing strategies of future development of the municipality; and setting long-term fiscal priorities for the municipality. His measure of policy activities included these four activities: developing annual goals and objectives for municipal programs; the budget process; identifying current issues that require attention by the municipal government; and developing solutions to current issues. His administration measure included these three activities: evaluation the accomplishment of specific programs; resolving citizen complaints about services; and implementing programs and delivering services. Finally, his measure of management activities included the following three items: changing management practices or reorganizing city government; hiring decisions about department heads; and hiring decisions about employees below department head level.

14. Nelson and Nollenberger (2011) measured the amount of conflict as an index of perceptions about the presence of conflict, including if the respondents believed that other officials were overstepping their roles, that conflict was a problem on city council, and that council members were too focused on short-term issues and administrative matters.

15. That is, other than studies of the innovation of council-manager government.

16. Mayoral power is measured as a six point scale that includes information on “whether the mayor was responsible for preparing the budget, whether the mayor had power to appoint department heads, whether the mayor was directly elected by the voters, whether the mayor had veto power, and whether the mayor’s position was full-time” (p. 396).

17. The study also examined the effects of other elements of institutional structure. They found that managers are less likely to propose REGO policies in places that use partisan ballots in the selection of local elected officials, holding constant several other factors likely to affect policy initiation.

18. Council-manager governments were more likely to contract with other governments in all four years studied and with nongovernmental producers in 1992 and 2002. They were less likely to use nongovernmental producers in 1997 and there was no difference between the forms in 2007.

19. Their study of citizen perceptions of service quality in 74 U.S. does not examine this question in terms of the two forms of governments, but in terms of the “adapted cities” measure developed by Frederickson, Johnson, and Wood (2003).

20. Spending levels are a common, but very limited approach, to measuring the level of services provided by local governments. Folz and Abdelrazek instead develop proximate measures other than spending for each of the five service areas. For example, police protection is measured by the ratio of full-time sworn officers per 1,000 people (p. 557).

21. Prior to correcting the estimation for serial autocorrelation, MacDonald's analysis showed the council-manager had a negative effect on sales prices. She suggests that Kreft's analysis suffers from several problems, including the use of a single cross-section and omitted variable bias.

22. Sharp and Mullinex (2012) also analyzed factors explaining the use of benefit-cost analysis prior to granting development ventures, but did not examine the effect of form of government on this decision. Instead, they focused on the proposition that form mediated the impact of other factors (economic need or disadvantage, government capacity (other than form), and political context).

23. These examples are not intended to criticize specific authors, but to highlight the prevalence of this approach.

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Table 1: Summary of Propositions Derived from the Review of the Empirical Literature

<i>Strategic Choices made by Executive Officials among Policy Options</i>
Proposition 1: Executive officials in council-manager governments are less likely to be responsive to the policy agenda of politically powerful interests than are their counterparts in mayor-council governments.
Proposition 2: Executive officials in council-manager governments are more likely to adopt comprehensive policies than are their counterparts in mayor-council governments.
Proposition 3: Executive officials in council-manager governments are less likely to adopt policies directing highly visible benefits at politically important interests than are their counterparts in mayor-council governments.
Proposition 4: Residents in council-manager cities are less likely to vote in municipal elections than are residents in mayor-council cities.
Proposition 5: Executive officials in council-manager cities are more likely to involve residents in deciding issues of public importance than are their counterparts in mayor-council cities.
<i>Functionality of the Organization</i>
Proposition 6: Executive officials in council-manager governments devote more of their time to managing the organization than do their counterparts in mayor-council governments.
Proposition 7: Council-manager governments produce less conflict among their officials than mayor-council governments.
Proposition 8: Executive officials in council-manager governments are more likely to adopt innovative policies and practices than are their counterparts in mayor-council governments.
Proposition 9: Council-manager governments produce higher quality services than mayor-council governments.
Proposition 10: Council-manager governments are more effective in performing the basic functions of government than are mayor-council governments.