The Search for Meaning in Political-Administrative Relations in Local Government

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The Search for Meaning in Political-Administrative Relations in Local Government

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Abstract: Local government provides a useful setting for examining political-administrative relations. In an examination of roles and relationships beginning in the 1980s, my interpretation of the nature of interaction between elected officials and administrators shifted from a partial endorsement of the dichotomy model to a demonstration that both sets of officials have extensive interactions, are interdependent, and have reciprocal influence. There is evidence that public administration scholars in the United States from the beginning recognized and advocated this kind of interaction. It is useful to analyze political-administrative relations in terms of a model of complementarity in which two distinct and partially separated sets of officials come together to shape the governmental process.

Keywords: administration, city council, dichotomy, manager, politics

The relationship of politics and administration is an absorbing issue at any level of government, but it is a more accessible and visible phenomenon in local government. Accessibility comes from proximity at the local level. Elected officials and administrators can easily reach each other and may be connected through social ties. Citizens have extensive contact with administrative staff that deliver a wide range of services and regulate activities integral to the functioning of the community. Elected officials are commonly a source of assistance to citizens in their dealings with the administrative apparatus of the city and may even be a party to administrative decisions informally or formally. Administrators are part of the community, and rank-and-file administrative workers can be an important voting block in local elections. At the local level, political-administrative relations are not an abstraction, not largely hidden from public view, and not confined to limited points of contact between a few officials of each type.

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These characteristics are expressed most dramatically in the council-manager form of government. Although city managers have some private communication with elected officials, managers provide a great deal of information and take part in extensive interactions with the council in open meetings and through documents available to the public. The manager’s credibility is on display and his or her professional reputation is at stake. Furthermore, the city manager and other city staff act on their own (as opposed to acting as an aide to an elected official) as official representatives for the city and interact with a wide range of private groups, other jurisdictions, and officials at other levels of government. City managers vary in the way they handle the public and behind-the-scenes interactions with elected officials and in the nature and extent of external networking, but all engage in these activities to some extent. They are built into the formal structure. In the local governments of other countries or in other forms of government in the U.S., the top administrator’s position may not be as publicly prominent, but the contributions can still be extensive and an ongoing high level of interaction can be expected.

My research has focused on trying to understand the nature of the relationship between elected officials and administrators in local government—empirically and conceptually—and how it helps to shape the nature of public administration. Beyond being a complex and fascinating topic and one that resonates with practitioners, especially administrators, what does it all mean for the way that we think about local government and public administration? The discussion here will retrace significant steps in the research that I and others have done. This will set the stage for a consideration of a model of political-administrative relations and identification of challenges in future research.

To give readers a preview of how the themes are developed, I began with efforts to reconcile the commonly observed sharing of tasks and overlapping roles with the dichotomy model, which seemed to the conceptual starting point for any discussion of political-administrative relations in the eighties when I started this work. The research that followed probed the respective contributions of elected officials and administrators by comparing their involvement in a wide range of decisions. In time, I reached the conclusion that the dichotomy concept should be replaced with a more appropriate model which I labeled complementarity. A large-scale comparative study of politicians and top administrators, which incorporated measures of relative influence for the first time, challenged but ultimately reaffirmed the utility of complementarity.

Finally, a return to the conceptual foundation of political-administrative relations clarified the importance of dichotomy as an “ideal type” but reinforced its limitations as an empirical model. Over a twenty year period, my work has evolved from identifying ways to broaden the prevailing dichotomy model to replacing it. The model of complementarity retains but is not limited
to the idea of distinct spheres. Elected officials and administrators depend on some degree of separation to keep their bearings in filling roles that largely overlap.

**RESCUING BUT MOVING BEYOND DICHOTOMY**

As discussed in the opening essay in this issue, the dichotomy concept as it came to be defined in the late fifties presumed a strict separation of political and administrative spheres. In my initial research on the topic, I expected to find the dichotomy pattern as well as some exceptions to it in the five large council-manager governments in North Carolina in the early eighties. The same types of official and community leaders were interviewed using mainly open-ended questions in each of the cities. Officials tended to offer general descriptions of their roles that corresponded to the norm of clearly separating policy making and administration, but in their discussion of specific activities the officials identified many instances of overlapping activities. There was no indication that they found the overlap to be inappropriate. There were also areas that were largely reserved for either elected officials or administrators. The observers in the community, for example, interest group leaders and city hall reporters, saw even more overlap and viewed the city manager and staff as extensively involved in policy formation. Thus, there was evidence of both separation and sharing of responsibilities, and the pattern of interaction did not match well with either a strict separation of roles nor other models derived from the literature in which either set of officials was dominant over the other.

From the interviews, it was obvious that the terms “policy” and “administration” were used in different ways and that finer distinctions were needed in order to identify the respective contributions by officials. The determination of policy involves defining purpose and setting broad goals—the formulation of “mission”—as well as the specification of detailed middle-range “policy”, such as the content of the budget or the formulae for service delivery. “Administration” involves the implementation of policy, that is, the translation of policies into operating programs and the delivery of services. It also requires the creation and maintenance of personnel, budgeting, informational, and other operational systems, which sustain but are independent of policy and administration. These latter activities entail “management.”

The interpretation of the data I offered was an effort to reconcile the dichotomy concept with the obvious complexity of council-manager relations. There had been extensive criticism of the dichotomy model in the literature, but the evidence seemed to indicate that it should not be completely discarded even though it was an incomplete description and conceptualization of the relationship. The alternative I presented was the “dichotomy-duality” model. Neither group of officials was totally excluded from any of the dimensions, although the space assigned to elected officials was greater in mission and the
amount assigned to the manager and staff was much greater in management. It is presented graphically in Figure 1.

The placement of the line was far from exact. It was clear from the interviews that elected officials largely stayed out of the management dimension except for the critical tasks of selecting and periodically appraising the performance of the city manager. The dividing line in mission was more difficult to establish. The mayor and council play a large role in the setting goals and strategies, although the manager supports and guides these decisions with extensive advice and analysis. The council has to approve any major change in policy, and managers are sensitive to the importance of proposing what will acceptable although they cannot always do so. Furthermore, managers are anxious to get democratic direction when big decisions need to be made in contrast to the comfort they feel when recommending middle-range policies that are consistent with established goals. Thus, for these reasons, elected officials can be viewed as controlling the determination of mission. This conclusion as well as the manager’s predominant role in management are consistent in part with the dichotomy model, whereas the extensive sharing of responsibility for middle-range policy and implementation/service delivery was labeled duality. Future research would turn first to measurement issues and then to reexamining the conceptual underpinnings of the political-administrative relationship.

![Figure 1. The Dichotomy-Duality Model. (Source: Adapted and reprinted with permission from Public Administration Review, 1985, 45 [1]: 228.)](image-url)
Measuring Involvement

In subsequent research, measuring the relationship of elected officials and administrators has been pursued with closed-ended surveys of both sets of officials and a variety of instruments. The political-administrative relationship is inferred from a measurement of involvement in decisions associated with the four dimensions of the governmental process. Respondents are not asked directly whether their involvement is (or should be) more or less than the other official, but one can make that determination by comparing the ratings. “Involvement” does not measure influence but rather stresses the extent of engagement in activities. In the survey, respondents make four ratings of the current and preferred involvement of the mayor and council, and the current and preferred involvement of the city manager and staff. Thus, the approach measures the relative involvement of officials as it is and as it should be.

The number of decisions or activities on which involvement is rated has gradually been winnowed down over time from 29 used in a survey of elected officials and administrators in twelve cities in the mid-eighties to the thirteen items listed in Table 1 that have been used in recent surveys. Each specific activity is measured on a five-point scale. The approach does not presume a zero-sum situation. It permits any combination of involvement level for the two sets of officials. It will capture a situation in which one set of officials is more heavily involved than the other—but it does not presume it nor does it presume that either official is highly involved in a particular activity.

Table 1. Activities Used to Measure Involvement in Four Dimensions of the Governmental Process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MISSION</th>
<th>ADMINISTRATION</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Determining the purpose of city government and the scope of services provided</td>
<td>Evaluating accomplishments of specific programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing strategies for the future development of the city</td>
<td>Implementing programs and delivering services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting long-term fiscal priorities for the city</td>
<td>Resolving citizen complaints about services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POLICY</td>
<td>MANAGEMENT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing annual program goals and objectives</td>
<td>Changing management practices or reorganizing city government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budget process</td>
<td>Hiring decisions about department heads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifying current issues that require attention by city government</td>
<td>Hiring decisions about employees below the department head level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing solutions to current issues that require attention by city government</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Activities Used to Measure Involvement in Four Dimensions of the Governmental Process
Comparison of Council-Manager and Mayor-Council Cities

In the study of six council-manager and six matched mayor-council cities in the mid-eighties that formed the basis for *Official Leadership in the City*, all council members, top administrators, and department heads were surveyed. In the council-manager cities, analysis of relative involvement of the council and the city manager confirmed the general impression derived from the largely qualitative study in North Carolina. The involvement of elected officials is greatest in the mission dimension and recedes across the other dimensions. The city manager and staff were less involved than elected officials in mission—but still moderately involved at the level of advisers—and increasingly active in the other dimensions. To use the terminology of the measurement scale, in the mid-eighties the council took the initiative and managers advised in mission, managers initiated and the council reviewed decisions in the policy dimension, managers initiated even more and the council simply reacted in administration, and managers largely handled management and simply kept the council informed of their actions.

Council members had a perception of the manager’s involvement that was very close to that held by administrators. When it came to rating their own involvement, the elected officials viewed themselves as slightly more involved in mission and policy than the administrators did, but the differences were not great. There was also acceptance of the contributions of the city manager by both sets of officials in the sense that their preferred involvement level for the manager closely matched the actual level. Elected officials saw the manager as moderately to highly active across the four dimensions and accepted this level of involvement. They and the administrators both preferred that the elected officials be slightly more active in determining the mission of the city, but they did not want the city manager to be less involved than he or she was. Thus, the data from the six council-manager cities seemed to confirm the pattern labeled dichotomy-duality in the original North Carolina study.

Findings were very different in mayor-council cities. The strong mayor in five cities had somewhat higher ratings for involvement than did city managers. The involvement of the council was much lower than the council in council-manager cities and in all dimensions lower than the mayor. In the one weak mayor-council city, yet another pattern emerged. The council has a higher level of involvement than the mayor in all four dimensions, and the weak mayor’s involvement receded across the dimensions. There were also differences in the preferred level of involvement in the two major forms. As noted above, the council and manager are satisfied with existing involvement levels, whereas the officials in mayor-council cities are not. The council members in the strong mayor-council cities would prefer to be substantially more involved in all dimensions and would like the mayor and staff be somewhat less involved across the board. Department heads are generally pleased with the council’s limited role and would presumably resist greater council
involvement, as would the mayor. These differences in preference indicate the substantial potential for conflict in the mayor-council form.

Thus, in council-manager cities in the mid-eighties, the city manager stood out as an active participant in all dimensions of the governmental process. In cities with separation of powers, there was tension between the two kinds of elected officials, and administrators were subsumed under either the mayor or the council but made a substantial contribution particularly in administrative and management decisions.

City Manager Surveys in North Carolina and Ohio

The same survey approach was employed in surveys of all city managers in North Carolina in 1987 and in Ohio in 1988. The results largely matched those found in the council-manager cities in the twelve-city study, but the managers in these surveys rated their own involvement as higher and the council’s involvement as lower in each dimension than in the earlier study. The results were viewed at the time as additional substantiation of the validity of the dichotomy-duality model. As in previous studies, the managers preferred more involvement by the council in the mission and policy dimensions. In assessing actual behavior, however, the city managers in these two states viewed their involvement in mission and policy as greater than that of their council members, and they did not want to reduce the extent of their own involvement. In retrospect, these results were not compatible with the dichotomy-duality model because overall city managers had greater involvement in mission than did elected officials, and the findings in this study would contribute to a new conceptualization of the relationship.

Council Survey – 1989

Information was collected about the perceptions of elected officials in a national survey of council members conducted in 1989, although this survey used a different approach to measuring involvement. Respondents were asked to assess the importance of a number of actors in initiating policy proposals. There was widespread recognition that city administrators are a very important source of policy initiation in council-manager cities. Indeed, in moderately small cities (25,000–74,999 population), slightly more of the council members chose the city manager rather than the council as the most important initiator. In medium and large cities, city managers ranked below the council but were chosen as the most important initiator far more often than the mayor. In mayor-council cities, the mayor received substantially higher ratings and was commonly viewed as the most important policy initiator. The
administrative staff members were sometimes considered to be very important especially in the small cities. When the chief administrator or other administrative staff members are combined, they were considered to be the most important initiators in 15% of the small, 9% of the medium-sized, and 3% of the large mayor-council cities.

Thus, using a variety of surveys with elected officials and administrators, there was extensive evidence that administrators make important contributions to the policy process. Form of government makes a substantial difference, and size affects the contribution of administrators in mayor-council governments. In elected-executive forms, the mayor increasingly supplants administrators as city size increases as the most important policy initiators. In the appointed-executive form, the contribution of the city manager and staff is much greater. Initially, the relationship seemed to be characterized by the separation of involvement in certain functions—elected officials having predominant involvement in setting goals and strategies and administrators

Table 2. Sources of Policy Initiation

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<td>Administrative staff</td>
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<td>45</td>
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<td>29</td>
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<td>Interest groups</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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</table>

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Thus, using a variety of surveys with elected officials and administrators, there was extensive evidence that administrators make important contributions to the policy process. Form of government makes a substantial difference, and size affects the contribution of administrators in mayor-council governments. In elected-executive forms, the mayor increasingly supplants administrators as city size increases as the most important policy initiators. In the appointed-executive form, the contribution of the city manager and staff is much greater. Initially, the relationship seemed to be characterized by the separation of involvement in certain functions—elected officials having predominant involvement in setting goals and strategies and administrators
ABANDONING DICHOTOMY FOR COMPLEMENTARITY

A research project focusing on the large council-manager cities in the mid-nineties produced the clear impression that the boundary between the functions of the council and the manager is shifting and that elected officials are dissatisfied with their own limited contribution although not necessarily unhappy with the substantial role played by the city manager and staff.

The 1996 survey in 31 council-manager cities over 200,000 in population suggests that a change in council members’ behavior and preferences is occurring. As discussed above, the survey results from the council members in the six council-manager cities in 1985 indicated that council involvement was highest in mission and decreases through the other dimensions of decisions. Differences in both the council’s and the manager’s involvement are found in 1996. (See Figure 2 which presents the responses of council members only.)

The key changes are the following:

- Council members are slightly less involved in mission in 1996 than in 1985 and more involved in administration than previously.
- Council members no longer report their greatest involvement in mission in 1996 unlike 1985; in 1996, their highest score was in middle-range policy decisions.
- In 1985, council members’ viewed the city manager as moderately active in mission but less involved than they were, whereas in 1996 council members view the manager’s involvement in mission as higher than their own.
- Council members perceive the manager to be more active in policy than in 1985 but less highly involved in administration.[7]

In the mission dimension, there was a substantial net shift toward higher relative involvement by the manager and staff compared to the city council.[8] The manager is now perceived to be the source of initiation for mission decisions, and council members see themselves in a reviewing role. The council has moved away from self-perceived leadership in goal setting and long-range
decisions, and pays more attention to specific, immediate concerns. The council’s lower involvement leaves the manager as the visible enunciator of proposals that address long-range concerns and set goals.

The preferences of administrators and council members regarding the involvement of the council are substantially different, and council members view their preferred involvement as far greater than their actual involvement. This is a change from 1985 when the preferences of both groups were similar with only slightly higher preferred involvement by council members. Council members in both years preferred to be more involved in each dimension, but in 1996 the difference between actual and preferred involvement was much greater. The greatest gap regards the mission dimension where council members would like to shift from being moderately active reviewers—their actual involvement—to highly active initiators. In both surveys, administrators preferred that the council be more involved in mission—in 1996 much more involved—and policy and slightly less involved in administration and management. The disparity in preferences was much larger in 1996.

The council also prefers much higher involvement in other dimensions. There is preference for almost as much involvement in handling details as in resolving the big picture decisions. These differences in preference represent a potential source of tension over roles between elected officials and administrators not observed previously. Administrators would prefer that the elected officials be more active in determining the mission of the city and setting policy and
less involved as activities shift from the general and strategic to the specific and operational. Council members’ preferences for involvement recede somewhat but remain relatively high in policy and administrative actions as well as those dealing with reorganization and change in management policy.

The 1996 survey includes two activities that were not assigned to any of the four dimensions—identifying current issues that require attention by the city and developing solutions to them.[10] Such issues represent a current problem agenda that coexists with and at times may overshadow the ongoing work of city government. Both council members and administrators report that the city council is actually fairly highly involved in identifying current issues. Furthermore, council members want to be almost as highly involved in developing the solutions as in identifying the issues, whereas administrators would prefer that council members back off and respond to proposals developed by the city manager and staff.[11] Council members are willing to accept an active role by administrators in developing solutions but they want to have an active voice as well.

Administrators prefer involvement for the council that corresponds to the dichotomy-duality pattern, which emphasizes the long-term over the current and which stresses that involvement in administrative decisions should be lower than in mission and policy and should focus on assessing effectiveness of performance. For themselves, however, administrators want to be (and are) highly involved as the initiator of proposals with the council acting as the less involved reviewer except in setting broad goals. Council members, on the other hand, now aspire to be leaders in mission, initiators and full partners in policy, and active reviewers and proponents in administration and management policy change. They also want to be more informed about major administrative appointments. These aspirations contrast with the actual practice of taking a hands-on approach to emerging issues and specific policy and administrative decisions while deferring to the manager and staff when it comes to framing goals and broad policy. The changes in the council’s actual and preferred involvement do not carry over into shifts in preferences regarding the city manager in the 1996 survey. Elected officials continue to be basically satisfied with the manager’s high level of activity.

Two factors can be offered to explain these findings, both of which pertain to the characteristics of council members. First, persons filling elected office at the local level are now more likely to be electoral activists rather than trustees who hold their office primarily as a service to the community.[12] An “electoral activist” is someone whose tries to help his or her community as a spokesperson and representative. A 2001 council survey indicates that, although this tendency is even more common among council members elected from districts, it is increasingly found among all council members and in council-manager cities as well as mayor-council cities. Council members are also equally involved in cities with both major forms of government in acting as ombudsmen to solve the problems that concern constituents. Council members in cities regardless of form have come to place greater emphasis on the representational rather than the governance aspects of the position.
Second, it appears that council members are ambivalent about making policy decisions, particularly when they are broad in scope and long-term. Although they would ideally like to be highly involved in determining the mission of their cities, in practice they place more emphasis on middle-range policy and administrative matters. It appears that council members want to maintain greater control by being involved in determining the details of policy and implementation, and they are more likely to avoid making final commitments to policy goals in order to keep their options open. This approach allows them to fine-tune policy decisions as circumstances change and to adjust to pressures from the media and interest groups. The electoral cycle focuses the attention of elected officials on the near-term rather than the long-term, and term limits when used increase the sense of urgency about getting things done right away. The combined effect of these changes has pushed elected officials from taking the initiative in goal setting to a more wary, reviewing stance. Council members accept that the manager will take the initiative and may approve the manager’s recommendations, but it appears that they reserve the option of revising goals through middle-range decisions at the policy-specification or implementation stages.

Council members may also be absorbed in the current political agenda of problems that need to be solved and have difficulty making other major long-term decisions at the same time. The difference in perspective on handling pressing issues may underlie the shift in levels of actual and preferred involvement. Managers are inclined to study an issue to determine the underlying problem and consider a range of options for dealing with the problem; they would like to have evidence that an approach will work before undertaking it. Council members, on the other hand, want to “experiment,” as Nalbandian has suggested. Their logic seems to be based on a preference for taking some action and determining by trial and error what is the best approach. They also want to be as directly involved in solving problems as in identifying them.

The findings of the research have important implications for the way we think about respective roles of officials in government and about the nature of the politics-administration relationship. There is scant evidence of any elements of dichotomy in the council-manager relationship in the large cities by the mid-nineties, and, in retrospect, the evidence supporting the dichotomy portion of the “dichotomy-duality” was always limited. A revised approach that defines the political-administrative relationship as a complementary one was taking shape.

CROSS-NATIONAL COMPARISON OF INVOLVEMENT AND RELATIVE INFLUENCE

The value of a more flexible framework became even more apparent when used in comparative local government research. This research used different measures than in my previous research but produced findings that were
generally consistent. Surveys of top administrators in the United States (1997) and thirteen other countries (1995–1997) included a different way of measuring involvement as well as, for the first time, direct measures of influence. In the following discussion of findings, the top administrators are referred to as chief executive officers (CEOs) reflecting common practice in Europe.

Top administrators in local government potentially handle a wide range of activities. By choosing which of these they will emphasize, they create a profile of their priorities among roles. Analyzing the degree of emphasis given to thirteen activities identified three major role dimensions: policy innovator, adviser to elected officials, and classical administrator. There is a policy innovation dimension that is separate from advisory activities, and, on average, CEOs place great importance on the innovator activities. This level of emphasis is fairly uniform across all countries, and even in the countries with the lowest average scores the level reflects a score between moderate and great importance. Top administrators generally are active in shaping the vision for their cities, promoting new projects in the community, seeking external resources, keeping in touch with citizen viewpoints, and linking innovation to the efficient use of resources. The adviser to elected officials and classical administrator dimensions are emphasized less and at essentially the same level overall. Poul Erik Mouritzen and I reached this conclusion about the long-standing debate about whether top administrators are involved in policy:

Overall, despite the common perception that administrators are preoccupied with administrative functions and only occasionally and exceptionally involved in policy matters, the emphasis of CEOs is the opposite. The typical CEO seeks to shape policy and promote innovation, whereas he or she gives less attention to the classical administrator activities. In addition, CEOs attach as much importance to offering advice to elected officials as they do to internal administration. Thus, our findings regarding CEOs do not support the common distinction between “classical” and “political” bureaucrats (Putnam 1975) or the presumption that the former is typical. [15]

Form of government has a strong impact on the relative emphasis given to the three dimensions. In strong mayor cities in Europe (France, Italy, Portugal, and Spain), CEOs are fairly active as policy innovators, provide technical information and recommendations to elected officials, and give greater the greatest attention to administrative tasks compared to three other forms of government. The CEOs in quasi-parliamentary committee-leader cities (Denmark, Great Britain, and Sweden) are active in policy innovation and offer both technical and political advice to elected officials and politicians. They are the least involved in most traditional administrative activities. CEOs in collective leadership cities with a strong executive committee (Netherlands and Belgium) have relatively lower levels of emphasis on activities
across the board. In council-manager cities (Australia, Finland, Ireland, Norway, and United States), CEOs are very active in policy innovation and somewhat active in administration. Their emphasis on advice to elected officials is relatively strong but they give more attention to technical advice and shaping the process of decision making rather than to giving political advice.

Beyond measuring involvement in activities, the study also examined influence, which has not been done in previous surveys. CEOs offered ratings of their own influence and the influence of other actors in local government in the areas of budgeting and economic development. Overall, mayors tend to be the most influential political figure in city government. CEOs also have substantial impact on decisions—more influence on average than the majority group on the council. In fact, in four countries, they are the most influential actors in both spheres of policy, and in two additional countries the CEO is the most influential in one but not the other area of policy. Even at the lowest level, CEOs are moderately influential in budgeting and somewhat influential in economic development.

The distribution of influence is related to form of government and individual characteristics. In the strong mayor cities (except in the United States which is addressed below), the mayor overshadows the council and the CEO. In the council-manager cities, the CEO has more influence than the elected officials in both budgeting and economic development. Individual and community factors also affect the CEO’s influence. In budgetary decisions, a wide variety of factors have a modest effect on the CEO’s influence. These include the involvement of the CEO in policy innovation and political advice, level of advocacy by the CEO, and the extent of communication with actors in the community. The mayor’s influence level is weakly but positively related to the CEO’s influence. In economic development decisions, CEOs who are more highly engaged in policy innovation are much more influential. In addition, there is a strong positive relationship between the mayor’s influence and the CEO’s, and Mouritzen and I reach this conclusion about the interaction of form and individual characteristics:

… There is an apparent contradiction in the findings of the comparative status of mayors and CEOs depending on whether one examines the institutional or community level. Choice of the institutional powers assigned to the mayor has a direct bearing on the CEO’s weight in the political process: the more powerful the mayor, the less influential the CEO. On the community level among cities that use the same form of government, however, the greater the influence of the mayor, the greater the influence of the CEO. The assignment of authority in the design of institutions may be a choice between mayors and CEOs… . The way that officials actually work together, however, is typically a cooperative approach in which the efforts of one official positively affect the status of the other.
Within a given city, the mayor and CEO are usually not engaged in a zero-sum struggle for influence.

A classification of CEO partnership types was developed based on relative influence in the budgetary process. The influence of the top administrator was compared with that of the most influential politician (mayor, council, or committee chairs). Three major categories of influence types were defined:

- CEOs with low to medium (50 or less on a 100 point scale) and inferior influence compared to the most influential elected official (or group of officials) are classified as dependent.
- Those with substantial or high influence (75–100) who work with politicians with only slightly more or the same amount of influence, that is, 75–100, are interdependent.
- Those with substantial or high influence (75–100) and greater influence than elected officials (+25 or more) are independent.[17]

Operational measures were devised for two possible variants of “dependency” based on distinctions found in the literature. The political agent who demonstrates “politically responsive” competence[18] believes it is advantageous for the CEO to have opinions that are congruent with politicians and believes that he or she should be primarily responsible to them rather than to the public. The professional agent—similar to the “neutral agent” or “classical bureaucrat” type of administrator—does not consider it to be an advantage to share the political opinions of the majority of the council or feels that the CEO should be at least as responsible to the public as to elected officials.[19] Given their influence limitations, both types are appropriately seen as agents of politicians, but they may be professional agents or political agents depending on the nature of their attitudes toward politicians.

Among the nearly 4000 CEOs in thirteen countries,[20] 30% of the CEOs match the dependent type with modest individual and inferior relative influence; of the total sample, 10% are political agents and 20% are professional agents. A majority (56%) of CEOs are in the interdependent category. All these CEOs have substantial influence but slightly less or the same amount of influence as elected officials. Finally, 13 percent have the influence traits of the independent administrator. Only two percent of the CEOs do not fit into one of these combinations.

Form of government is strongly associated with the partnership type filled by the CEO. The dependent types are most often found within strong mayor cities. Almost half of the CEOs in strong mayor cities are dependent; 16% are political agents and 31% are professional agents. About half are interdependent leaders.[21] In the council-manager cities, interdependent CEOs are the most common types, and there is a substantial proportion of independent CEOs—one third. In the United States, only one percent of the top administrators in the council-manager cities fall into the dependent category. Although
the majority (58%) are in the interdependent category, 41% are the independent type. Virtually all the city managers in the United States view their influence as at least close or equal to that of the mayor or council in the budgetary process, and two in five consider their influence to be greater than that of elected officials.

The survey results with respect to city administrators in mayor-council cities in the United States are surprising in two respects. First, despite a common perception that the city administrator is tied to the mayor’s office, the city council is involved in the appointment of most city administrators. Only 12 percent of the cities have an administrator appointed by the mayor alone. In half the cities, the administrator is appointed by the mayor with the approval of the council, and in 38% the council as a whole (presumably with the participation of the mayor) makes the appointment. When the council approves the selection, administrators more often feel accountable to the entire council and believe that they can do more to instill professional values in the management of city government. When appointed by the mayor, city administrators tend to see themselves as the agent of the mayor and dependent on the mayor for authority. The more the CEO is formally linked to the mayor through appointment, the higher the mayor’s influence and the lower that of the administrator. Still, only 6% of the administrators in mayor-council cities are in the “dependent” category, 60% are interdependent, and 34% are independent. Thus, in American cities, structure makes a difference but top administrators have a close and, in their view, influential relationship with elected officials in both the council-manager form and mayor-council cities that have an appointed administrator.

One other sounding of official opinion is worth noting. It is largely confirmatory of other surveys but suggests that changes may be occurring in large cities. A repeat of the 1989 survey of council members conducted in 2001 indicates once again that council members view the city manager as equivalent to the council in importance as a policy initiator. Overall, about half the respondents viewed the council and the manager as very important policy initiators. Differences were found, however, in the cities over 200,000 in population. Only 32% of the council members considered the city manager to be a very important source of new ideas in policy. The change was even more dramatic when respondents identified the single most important source. Only 6% viewed the manager as the most important initiator (compared with 31% in these large cities in 1989.) The centrality of the city manager in the policy process is being reduced, and the council and the mayor are asserting themselves more. Whereas less than ten percent of the council members view the mayor as the most important policy initiator in council-manager cities under 200,000 in population, almost thirty percent in the largest cities consider the mayor to be most important. The significance of this shift to stronger political leadership will be considered further in the concluding section.
In conclusion, city managers and administrators generally view themselves as influential participants in the policy making process. Elected officials reciprocate this view for the most part. They recognize that administrators are highly involved in a range of decisions and consider administrators to be important contributors to policy initiation. Structural features enhance the position of the mayor vis-à-vis top administrators but administrators play a significant role regardless of form or methods of appointment. In large council-manager cities, the city manager may be taking on a larger role in goal setting as elected officials focus more on short-range concerns. In recent years, however, the mayor and council appear to asserting themselves in policy initiation and see the manager as less important than in the past.

COMPLEMENTARITY ENCOMPASSING DICHOTOMY

With the accumulated evidence, the need for a refined conceptual framework has become ever more evident. The empirical findings describe a political-administrative relationship in local government characterized by high level of interaction and varying but reciprocal influence. Distinctions can still be made in values and orientation if not always in specific behaviors, but the concept of dichotomy is questionable even if it is only used to describe a portion of the interactions between politicians and administrators. The extensive sharing suggests that the relationship of elected officials and administrators is best understood by using a more dynamic model than the dichotomy-duality model. Rather than stressing how functions are divided, a new approach views the relationship as a complementary one. In a model of complementarity, administrators accept the control of elected officials and elected officials respect what administrators do and how they do it. At the same time there is interdependency and reciprocal influence between elected officials and administrators who fill distinct but overlapping roles in policy and administration.

This way of interpreting the governmental process is not a new one, although it has not previously been recognized. One can argue that scholars throughout the history of American public administration have been developing a model of complementarity. Although the preferred balance of separation and interaction has varied over time, both have always been present. There was emphasis on insulation of administrators from political interference with quiet acceptance of policy advice by administrators from the Pendleton Act through the end of the Progressive era, and—moving forward in time—there was a “discovery” of a policy role in the post-war period and particularly in the sixties. The only period in which strict separation between policy and administration was actively espoused was during the orthodox period between the world wars, but even during this
period interaction did not disappear in practice or in the minority views expressed by some scholars.\textsuperscript{[26]} The point is not that politics and administration are the same. They are distinguishable as ideal types.\textsuperscript{[27]} The activities of politicians and administrators do not, however, necessarily correspond with the idealized distinction between politics and administration. Goodnow recognized this distinction in the early days of American public administration:

\ldots While the two primary functions of government are susceptible of differentiation, the organs of government to which the discharge of these functions is intrusted (sic) cannot be clearly defined.\textsuperscript{[28]}

Politics and administration are conceptually distinct, but the activities associated with each are not neatly divided between different sets of officials.

The complementarity model may be defined by in terms of interactions and values.\textsuperscript{[29]} Empirically, the interactions of elected officials and administrators have the following characteristics that have been observed in previous studies:

1. Elected officials and administrators maintain distinct perspectives based on their unique values and the differences in their formal position.
2. Officials have partially overlapping functions as elected officials provide political oversight of administration and administrators are involved in policy making.
3. There is interdependency and reciprocal influence between elected officials and administrators.

The balance between the two sets of officials is maintained by value commitments that blend control and delegation on the part of elected officials and blend independence and deference on the part of administrators. These “norms of appropriateness,” as they would be labeled in the “new institutionalism,” include the following:

4. Administrators support the law, respect political supremacy, and acknowledge the need for accountability.
5. Administrators are responsible for serving the public and supporting the democratic process.
6. Administrators are independent with a commitment to professional values and competence, and they are loyal to the mission of their agency.
7. Administrators are honest in their dealings with elected officials, seek to promote the broadest conception of the public interest, and act in an ethically grounded way.
8. Elected officials respect the contribution of professional administrators and the integrity of the administrative process.
The findings from the study of top politicians and administrators in local governments in fourteen western countries add substantial new evidence to support the model and the contention that it generally describes political-administrative relations.[30] Administrators are independent with a strong professional identity, and they articulate their distinct perspective in the governmental process. CEOs are committed to a high level of advocacy, and most believe that they should not limit their recommendations to proposals that are consistent with the intentions of politicians.

Evidence of the deference to elected officials is present as well. Politicians, in the administrators’ view, should establish a vision for the city, establish policy principles, and set precise goals. Furthermore, most CEOs feel that they should not initiate a major policy review without direction from politicians. There is interdependency between elected officials and administrators. CEOs consider the leading politicians to be highly important to their success. One can infer the interdependence of elected officials from the administrators’ practice of offering advice in dealing with sensitive political choices and their formative role in shaping the policy-making process.

There is also strong evidence of reciprocal influence between elected officials and administrators. Virtually all CEOs have at least moderate levels of influence in policy making. Officials have partially overlapping functions. Most CEOs in their description of the “ideal” politician accept a moderate level of involvement in certain management decisions, and politicians tend to be even more involved than administrators prefer. Furthermore, CEOs are extensively involved in policy development that is also the central function of elected officials.

Along with extensive interaction and interdependence, there is simultaneously distinctness in attributes and cooperation in relationships. Elected officials and administrators maintain distinct roles based on their unique perspectives and values and the differences in their formal positions.[31] Almost all CEOs think that politicians should set policy and not decide routine matters. Ideally, they see elected officials playing the roles of governors and representatives but prefer that elected officials not place great emphasis on being spokespersons for parties or individuals. For their part, most CEOs believe that they should be nonpartisan and make recommendations based on expertise. Distinction, however, does not mean strict separation in the relationship. CEOs report high levels of cooperation with elected officials. The two sets of officials—and the political and administrative functions—are intertangled but identifiable as separate parts. Under certain circumstances and to varying degrees depending on the country, top administrators are willing to provide advice and service of a political nature, that is, taking actions that potentially impact the balance of political forces on the council, but they are clearly aware of the problematic nature of entering the “political room” with elected officials.[32] Tied together in a cooperative and interdependent relationship, each complements the other to form the whole of the governmental process.
Complementarity is a replacement of the earlier dichotomy-duality model although it contains similar elements. Whereas the latter presumed a differentiation of contributions in setting the goals that define the mission of the city, complementarity also allows for the common situation in which administrators pay more attention to long-range issues and have equal or greater involvement in setting goals than do elected officials. Complementarity provides for the likelihood that elected officials make specific decisions that administrators would prefer be left to themselves. It also accommodates the increasing interest of elected officials in being ombudsmen for constituents, a behavior that increases their involvement in administrative affairs. Politicians may respect administrators and the administrative process in the abstract but reserve final decisions to themselves based on “political” considerations and at times seek to redirect or restrain administrative decisions. Still, it would not be consistent with complementarity for elected officials to politicize service delivery nor undermine the top administrator’s control over internal management decisions.\[33\]

Thus, whereas the dichotomy-duality model prescribed a particular division of functions, the complementarity model accommodates wider variation in behavior. It is possible for the norms of complementarity to be breached, that is, elected officials’ may not respect the professional advice or practices of administrators and administrators may fail to be accountable to elected officials. Still, empirical research indicates that these conditions are rare as a general pattern of behavior in local government.

**CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

There is much to be learned about the roles and attitudes of elected officials and administrators, and we need to better understand the nature of changes that are occurring at the present time.

It is clearly established that top administrators make contributions to policy and help shape the council process, but to what extent do they accept their extensive contributions?\[34\] What kind of leaders are they in specific policy areas? Do they promote certain agendas over others? Are they closer to certain groups in the community than others? The attitudes of city managers regarding elected officials and their roles should also be examined. Top administrators prefer the separate roles concept for council members but not themselves.

The preferred politician in the mind of administrators would be a trustee who speaks for citizens in a detached way rather than acting as a delegate for citizens. This politician would approve goals and principles but leave it to the top administrator to make specific proposals and to control the administrative apparatus. These attitudes match the prescriptions of the New Public Management and “reinventing” government with their emphasis on steering rather than rowing. Are administrators and those who support these new approaches
to governance aware of the anti-democratic implications of these attitudes? Can administrators work effectively with council members who are policy activists and ombudsmen?

Trends that are already evident in large cities suggest that city managers are facing the challenges of operating in a more actively democratic milieu. New questions become salient with these changing conditions. How do city managers and other professional administrators seek to advance their preferences in the face of resistance from politicians? What is the mutual adjustment that occurs between politicians and administrators in shaping policy decisions? Furthermore, why are these trends taking place?

More attention needs to be given to the contributions of elected officials in research. Governmental reformers and city managers have emphasized broad policy making and general oversight by a collegial governing board. Other contributions should be recognized and examined more fully. Council members acting individually as well as collectively help to keep the city in touch with the electorate, they serve as a pressure valve that helps to moderate the tension of distraught constituents, they draw attention to specific breakdowns in systems and problems with services, they promote consideration of a wider range of alternatives than professionals might raise, and they deal with the political realities that surround many city government actions. Cities have serious current problems that must be addressed even if they are a distraction from long-range concerns and cannot be “solved.” The political contributions of elected officials may be more extensive and varied than we have recognized.

The issue of interactions among elected officials in council-manager cities is also important. There is the impression that dissension is increasing among members; such disagreement is part the argument for stronger political leadership from the mayor. The link between single-member district elections and the internal process of city councils should also be examined. District representation seems to promote single-issue politics, which, in turn, exacerbates friction on the governing body. Does the council-manager form depend on a level of cohesiveness that is unlikely to be maintained in the future? Does the form depend on a level of political leadership from the mayor that is often not achieved?

Mayors in council-manager cities warrant additional attention, and the impact of their expanding role should be examined. In the large cities, mayors are stepping forward in some cases as policy innovators. A few cities have made structural changes to enhance the authority of the mayor, and the issue of structural change is salient in many large cities. The connection, however, between the level of initiative and influence, on the one hand, and structural features, on the other, has not been investigated. The impact of the higher level of political leadership by the mayor on the role of the city manager also needs to be examined more fully. Despite the common view that the mayor’s and manager’s interests may conflict, the results from the fourteen-country...
study indicate a positive correlation between the influence of the mayor and manager. In some large council-manager cities, however, the reverse may be true. The mayor’s own behavior and ambitions may make a difference in the amount of friction between mayor and manager.

On another track, the role of the city administrator in mayor-council cities should receive more attention. The method of appointment affects the degree to which the city administrator acts as an agent for the mayor and/or council. The use of the CAO position appears to be expanding. The background and professional orientation of city administrators are not well understood. Although city administrators in large cities have different backgrounds than city managers, they have professional qualifications nonetheless. In small-to medium-sized cities in which council involvement is selection is common, city administrators have characteristics similar to city managers, but more information is needed about preparation and career patterns. Should the position of city administrator be set up with council approval in order to bridge the gap between the mayor and council and between the mayor and the administrative staff, or should mayors be able to select their own political agents?

What difference does the method of selection have on policy initiatives and administrative performance?

Two new frontiers for research of political-administrative relations involve examining how each set of officials interact with citizens and groups in the community. The connections between top administrators and citizens are important, and some advocate an expansion of the level and scope of community leadership by the city manager. Do closer ties between top administrators and citizens lead the administrator to articulate citizen preferences independently of elected officials? Only three in ten city managers in the United States feel that they should be primarily responsible to political leadership rather than to citizens of the community as a whole. Will a stronger emphasis on community leadership create tension between managers and their councils? Mayors are seeking to be more prominent political leaders in their communities, and council members are giving more emphasis to their representational role and strengthening their ties with constituents. Will the community be a new arena in which political-administration relations play out?

This line of inquiry will open the possibility of linking local political-administrative relations to the regime theory literature in political science. By harnessing public and private resources and connecting official and private sector leaders, regimes focus on a strategic agenda for the city and can achieve a level of accomplishment that government can not achieve on its own. Regimes strengthen the capacity for governance and tend to promote system-level politics, for example, concern for the city as a whole, over subsystem politics. These characteristics are similar to those fostered by the council-manager form of government, even though regimes have rarely been examined in council-manager cities. When the mayor, council, city administrator, and
department heads are in conflict, and when top level officials are weakly linked to civic organizations, there is likely to be fragmentation and emphasis on subsystem politics. If the close working relationship between elected officials and administrators is extended to civic groups and citizens, perhaps more coherent governance can be achieved. The rise of new governance approaches involving myriad partnerships makes the formation of regimes or other mechanisms for informal coordination of public and private actors increasingly important for all cities.\[41\]

These research possibilities indicate that the local level will continue to be the setting in which new issues in political-administrative relations will be explored. It may be time to broaden the scope of inquiries on political-administrative relations to include public linkages as well.

REFERENCES

1. The argument, fully developed in J. H. Svara, Complementarity of Politics and Administration as a Legitimate Alternative to the Dichotomy Model. Administration & Society 1999, 30, 676–705, is that the claim that strict separation was the founding model of public administration in the United States was an ex post facto explanation from the late fifties, not supported by a close examination of the original writings of Wilson, Goodnow, and White.
4. In the weak mayor city, there is a desire by council members to be quite a bit more involved in mission formulation, despite their high actual rating. Department heads, on the other hand, wish that the council would decrease its activities in administration and management. They do not, however, want the mayor to assume a larger role in these areas above his actual moderate level of involvement. In the strong mayor-council cities, the department heads are generally satisfied with involvement levels as they are. These findings seem to indicate that the department heads are more closely aligned with the strong mayor and to not want the council to play a larger role.
6. Svara, J. H. A Survey of America’s City Councils: Continuity and Change; National League of Cities: Washington, DC, 1991. This measure can not identify the leadership offered by mayor as part of the collective effort of the council.

8. Compared to 1985, the council’s decline is from 3.7 to 3.4, and the manager’s increase is from 3.4 to 3.9. Thus, the manager shift is from one-third step below to one-half step above the council in involvement.

9. In practice, council members are most engaged in specific, operational, current matters with highest actual involvement in resolving citizen complaints (3.7 is their rating of actual involvement) and identifying problems that require attention (3.7). They are more involved in solving current problems and budget review (3.5) than in setting long-term (3.4) or annual direction (3.4). In the administrative arena, they are more active in resolving specific complaints (3.7 as noted above) than in evaluation (2.8).

10. To increase comparability of the analysis between the 1985 and 1996 studies, these new items were not included in the calculation of the indices of involvement. As indicated in Table 1 presented earlier, however, they can be included in the activities that measure the policy dimension.

11. Administrators prefer a fairly high level of involvement by council members in identifying current issues (3.8) but moderate involvement in developing solutions (3.3). Council members prefer very high involvement in both identifying issues (4.4) and developing solutions (4.2).


19. Approximately one out of three dependent CEOs has the characteristics of the political agent. In contrast to this compliant and directly accountable group, the remainder have some basis in their values for distinguishing themselves from politicians: either they favor holding divergent policy views from the majority (29%), feel broadly accountable to the public rather than directly accountable to politicians (15%), or both (24%).

20. Although fourteen countries were included in the study, the respondents from Ireland were excluded from this analysis. There was an exceptionally high percentage of independent CEOs in Ireland—64%—and the
method of weighting respondents gave the relatively small number of Irish respondents a disproportionate impact on the overall breakdown of types. For a discussion of the factors that account for the predominance of independent types, see Mouritzen and Svara, 2002; 231–232.

21. In the committee-leader and the collective cities where one finds both a formally strong body of elected officials as well as a mayor or equivalent with formal executive authority, the most common are the interdependent type with 68% and 51% respectively. Dependent types, particularly the professional agents, are much more common in committee-leader and collective cities than the independent type CEOs. Mouritzen and Svara, 2002; Ch. 9.


23. When the city administrator is appointed entirely by the mayor, appointed by the mayor with the approval of the council, and appointed by the council, the mayor’s influence rating on a 100-point scale in the budgetary process is 95, 75, and 70, respectively. The city administrator’s influence self-rating in the three structural arrangements is 82, 87, and 93, respectively.

24. In mayor-council cities with a CAO, the city administrator is a very important policy initiator in 30% of the cities (and an important contributor in another 49%) and the most important in 23% of the cities. This level of impact, however, is largely confined to smaller cities.

25. Another 52% view the manager as an important source of policy ideas. Thus, a total of 84% consider the manager to be very important or important.


29. Adapted from Svara and Brunet, 2003; 203.


32. Mouritzen and Svara, 2002; Ch. 6.

Golembiewski, R. T.; Gabris, G. Today’s City Managers: A Legacy of Success-Becoming-Failure. Public Administration Review 1994, 54, 525. In a survey of practices conducted by ICMA in 1996, city managers demonstrated ambivalence about roles. Virtually all managers report that they identify community needs and initiate policy proposals (96%) although one-third question the desirability of doing so. Nine in ten promote policy discussion among council members, but 55% do not consider this action to be desirable. Finally, most managers are uncomfortable promoting team building on the council—only 29% think it is a desirable practice—but 81% undertake such efforts.


The Model City Charter, Eighth Edition; National Civic League: Denver, 2003; Appendix, for the first time recommended selection of the CAO by the mayor with approval by the city council.


Mouritzen and Svara, 2002; Table 4.1.

