

Three Key Characteristics of Form of Government

From Carr, "100 Years of Council-Manager Government: What have we Learned so Far?"

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Form of government is the most important element of the political institutions that govern municipalities and Svava and Nelson (2008) identified three factors that differentiate the council-manager and mayor-council forms of government.

The first factor is a basic difference in how authority is allocated in these two forms; "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.

The second feature differentiating the two forms is how executive responsibilities are assigned to elected or appointed executives. "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).

The third distinguishing feature is whether the administrator is responsible to the entire council or to the mayor. "Responsibility to the entire council is an essential characteristics 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). Svava 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.