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Deciphering Authority: The Balance of Powers in Local Government

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by

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Abstract

The Balance of Powers Principle, while well-applied in the spheres of federal and state government, is not much discussed when it comes to local government structures. This paper seeks to compare the strengths of some of the more popular forms of municipal governance (i.e., the council-manager and mayor-council systems) to determine, to what extent, the Balance of Powers principle applies in an American local government context. The author then subsequently argues that this principle can be utilized to propose a preferred, counterbalanced model of city government, that uses and relies upon the strengths of all three major authority figures in municipal politics—the city council, the mayor, and the city manager. A theme of mutual reliance and benefit is explored, as is the relational experience of working in local government.

Introduction

The Balance of Powers Principle is commonly understood in American government as a tripartite distinction between the executive, legislative, and judiciary branches. When it comes to municipal government structure, however, discussion surrounding this framework seems to disappear from the political landscape. This is a striking observation when one considers the immense popularity of the concept in political theory that deals with federal and state power dynamics.

For the purposes of this project, "separation of powers" in local government can be understood as the formal and distinct conferment of authority upon different branches or key officials in the structure of the municipality's governance (such as those powers laid out in the town or regional charter). Rather than seeking to articulate from scratch how this might begin to

manifest in a city government, this paper will use the most popular structural forms of city government as grounds to deconstruct how the framework differs in local authority.

Generally, a city government is comprised of two-to-three leading bodies: the mayor, the city manager, and the city council. Depending on the preferences of the local citizenry, the individual governments may privilege either a mayor or the city manager as the foremost executive, and then resultantly referred to as either "mayor-council" or "council-manager" forms of government (MRSC 2022). Oftentimes, local governments will possess all three parties, but choose to label their official structure as mayor-council or council-manager depending on whether the mayor or the city manager is given more authority in the community.

There is competing opinion in the current literature as to whether the hierarchy of choice matters when it comes to improving the performance of city governance, which will be discussed later in the paper. However, it is currently up for debate as to whether the form makes much of a difference in the overall efficacy of a municipality. Some scholars of local government recommend ditching the narrative of more formalistic framework. Boynton and Wright (1971), for instance, go so far as to advocate that the form is currently irrelevant when it comes to the potential inquiries of modern scholars, and that students should instead seek to study informal powers, that do not rely on the form. Similarly, in his synthesis of articles on administrative efficacy by form, B. Carr (2015) writes that "the empirical literature does not support contentions that there are systematic differences between the two forms of government" (p. 673).

Despite this, there are good reasons to consider how and why these systems ought to display clear distinctions of authority that serve to counterbalance each other. The foremost of these is that doing so allows us to better dissect when and where informal powers *ought to become formal*. Secondly, the separation of powers framework is useful as a diagnostic tool for

determining when it might be more appropriate for powers to be separate or shared. Arguments

focusing solely on the tangible, city-specific benefits of informal powers can sometimes miss the

mark of understanding what our cities *ought* to be, and how some improvements are better

substantiated with codification than without it. Finally, there are times when structure *does* make

a substantial difference, by preventing overlaps of power that contribute unnecessarily to the

authority of one major branch of government over another, and these shall also be shortly

explored. To ignore inquiry, then, into the ways local government structure both conforms and

conflicts with the balance of powers principle would be neglectful.

Seeking to answer some of this need, this paper will be split into two parts. Part one will

be an investigation into the current understanding of the separation of powers in local

government, starting with a brief legal history of the principle, and then going into more depth on

how the individual stakeholders fit within it. Part two shall be a subsequent case for a new

understanding of the Balance of powers principle, crafted especially for local government, and

an exploration into the relationship strengths between the three major bodies (the mayor, the city

manager, and the city council) that constitute municipal authority in the United States.

A Brief Legal History

In general, the authority to determine whether a local government must utilize a

separation of powers framework depends on the authority of the State legislature, who may

decide either to enforce rules that align with the separation of powers, or to leave it up to

individual municipalities to decide how to delegate different responsibilities. For instance,

according to the BYU Law Review (1971), California decided in 1868 that local governments

were not required to have a clear separation of powers on the grounds that State authority was in

and of itself a "sufficient check" on local abuses of power (p. 962). Some states, like Utah, took a halfway approach, requiring that the mayor be granted additional privileges which would somewhat separate them from the council, thus diversifying the city's executive power into two branches. Still others, like Washington state, simply charge their mayors with the vague responsibility of being the "chief administrative officer," and their city managers with "general supervision of all administrative affairs" (Washington State Legislature, Duties and Responsibilities of the Mayor). Altogether, there is a great deal of discretion given to local governments when it comes to the formation of their power structures. The authority of city government officials can therefore vary widely depending on who takes office, meaning it becomes difficult to generalize how those structures operate. Attempting to clearly articulate how the powers of city governance fit into the idea of the separation of the powers, then, is a significant challenge.

For brevity and to avoid unnecessary additions to what is already a comprehensive body of literature, this paper will not delve too deeply into the history of the Balance of Powers principle or attempt to explain its relevance in the American political sphere. Rather, time will instead be spent on the framework's current and possible relationship with local government administration, and the merits of the theory called upon as needed to explain that dynamic.

Powers of the Mayor

The role of the mayor in municipal government generally functions in one of two formal structures: mayors in cities with city managers, and mayors in cities without city managers. According to the Washington Municipal Research and Services Center, in council-manager governments "a ceremonial mayor presides at council meetings and is recognized as the head of

the city for ceremonial purposes but has no regular administrative duties…[and] the mayor is generally selected by the city council," whereas in the mayor-council form of government, the mayor is "elected at large and serves as the city's chief administrative officer, with a separately elected council" (City and Town Forms of Government, 2024).

In the council-manager system, the existing conceptions of the function and formal reach of mayoral power are wide-ranging. While there seems to at least be agreement on the fact that mayoral power is important, there is currently a lack of clarity on exactly *how far* that power extends (or ought to extend). Wikstrom's (1979) work on the functions of mayors in council-manager governments concluded that it was "reasonable to assume that many mayors throughout the United States functioning in the council-manager framework exercise strong policy leadership" (p. 274). However, later inquiries challenged this claim, arguing that the overall portrait is more complicated. For instance, Morgan and Watson (1992) found in a subsequent look at mayoral authority that mayors in council-manager systems do not actually possess strong formal powers most of the time, though informally, mayors can still possess a wide range of influence in their communities. This becomes atypical when framed in the light of the separation of the powers in federal government, where the tangibility of authority rests upon its transcription in our federal or state constitutions.

Assuming a city's mayor possesses at least a baseline level of influence, as is often the case in the mayor-council cities, they can then be sorted into one of several categories. James Svara (2003) categorized city mayors into different leadership styles depending on their most prominent strengths and perceived influence in the community. These mayors varied widely in their commitment to the position and style of public engagement, and ranged from "ceremonial" to "directive" in the actualization of their authority. In later work, Svara (1987) wrote that this

director style leadership is not usually present, "unless he [the mayor] has the formal control over the bureaucracy or supportive staff (usually absent from council-manager government) or unusually great entrepreneurial capacity" (p. 212). He concludes that mayors on the whole exercise a variety of leadership styles, and that "mayor" is a term that encompasses much more diversity than is traditionally understood.

Specifically in the council–manager system of government, there is debate over what the necessary components are to form a certifiable "executive," usually described as a mayor that possesses a high level of independent influence in the community. For instance, there is friction over whether the direct election of the mayor is of critical importance. Direct election is currently the case in 69% of council-manager cities—the remaining percentage being directly nominated by their peers on the city council (Grant, 2022). Kammerer and Degrove (1964) write that the elected mayor, in contrast to the council-nominated type, is granted "primacy in policy presentation and shaping policy decisions," and that direct election "structures council relationships around the mayor" (p. 101). Protasel (1988) found in the analysis of alterations to council-manager plans of government that the direct election of the mayor was a consistent and preferable institutional change. While it is difficult to establish claims about the efficacy of city governments with directly elected mayors from their research, this does at least point to the fact that the perception of independent mayors is largely positive.

This research has its origins in a politically passionate history. Ideologically, motivation for it from the "strong mayor" movement that swept through the country in the 1970s, especially in larger municipalities. This was evidenced in multiple passionate arguments for the benefit of a stronger and more concentrated executive, perhaps best represented by an excerpt from Leonard Ruchelman's book, *Big City Mayors*: "Where the mayor is excessively limited in authority and

influence, the city is also limited in what it can do for itself, for it is the chief executive who is in the best position to provide all-over direction and coordination without which the metropolis must remain fragmented" (1970, 331).

Formed largely as a countercultural reaction to the "insistence on rationality" that plagued perceptions of the manager-council system, this movement was one of the first and only pushed that helped further distinguish which government responsibilities ought to be administrative in nature, and which ought to be executive (Stillman, 1974, p. 41). Managers, being perceived as aloof leaders imported from the ivory tower, were not viewed as capable of truly fulfilling this role, even when set up to do so. Indeed, election was often perceived in the movement as integral to the establishment of real executive leadership in local government. Wikstrom (1979), for instance, suggested that the desire for reelection forms a central component of the way that the mayor operates in the community, a factor that is naturally expanded when broad public support forms the bedrock of the mayor's power.

Still, others remain less convinced that such mayors need to fit a particular mold to be considered high-value community leaders. Svara (1987) also stressed in his work that the preconditions necessary to form stronger mayors may not always be possible, and that mayors possess other qualities which still render them politically and usefully unique, such as their ability to broadly survey internal affairs. Boynton and Wright (1971) argued that "the major differences between the mayor as imagined and the mayor as an active institution in contemporary urban life are not to be found in the differences between formal power and its formal exercise…but in the consequences for leadership that flow from these powers—whether formal or informal" (p. 29).

It is also argued that a strong personality, while beneficial in a mayoralty, may not be able to rise to the position in the first place, on the grounds that elections do not always produce such candidates. Flanagan (2004) astutely points out that for mayors, especially mayors in bigger cities, that political patronage is key, and that "amateurs cannot win elections, and therefore, cannot sustain reform" (p. 191). There might be any number of strong, director-type personalities that would provide clear, unmistakably executive leadership, but they might hypothetically lack the political connections of weaker candidates and fail to show up in elections.

To summarize, the consensus of the literature finds that mayors can be diverse in their authority, and that stronger mayors are preferred, but that the extent to which their existence is possible depends on the degree to which both formal and informal powers align to provide the opportunity for strong elected leaders. Hence, when it comes to positional capacity, the role of the mayor in American municipal governments can oscillate between an executive and legislative function; and that this is heavily dependent on the degree to which the mayor is set apart from the council, and the extent to which the mayor carries a personal presence in the administration. In the instance that the mayor possesses no influence that would possibly oppose the council, they would then not very well be considered an executive, because they would be subservient to most (if not all) of the decisions of the legislature.

Powers of the City Manager

The city manager forms the center of the manager-council form of government, where the chief executive is not the mayor, but rather a hired professional that falls under the jurisdiction of the city council, who is tasked with managing city operations and rolling out the council's vision (Williams 2001). Therefore, they are in theory the "executive" in terms of their managerial

capacity, and not because of their personal imaginative leadership. The International City/County Management Association, led by the nation's leading city managers, maintains that the function of a city manager is to support "government that strategically limits undue political influence while strengthening the power of the elected body who represent the interests of the people" (Grant 2022, n.p.).

As an instrument of service, a hired manager is expected to rapidly accumulate expertise that allows them to both intelligently supervise city employees and facilitate implementation of the council's executive plans. They are also encouraged to maintain a degree of impartiality and separation from the "politics" of the city life; in essence, to be perfectly informed yet perfectly neutral at the same time. However, much of the recent literature about city manager impartiality belies a different narrative—that, in fact, the city manager is a very politically active person, and that neutrality in the position might be more performative than genuine. Burnett and Prentice (2018) address this in their analysis of the party affiliations of city managers and their commissioners in North Carolina. They found that city managers do tend to be politically unaffiliated more often than the average voter but highlight that the likelihood of being affiliated goes up significantly when the board of commissioners is clearly preferent of one party or another. Additionally, they point out that for the small subsection they analyzed of city managers who reside outside of their county of employment, most of them did join political parties. This hints that city managers are quite substantially aware of their own political influence, and that their actions, rather than their positional standing, is what contributes to their perceived influence as impartial leaders. This places them in an interesting position when it comes to being the default chief officer in a community (that is, when the council-manager system of government in question possesses either a weak mayor or no mayor).

This political pressure is greatly enhanced by the large amounts of pressure and scrutinization that city managers are made the subject of from the moment they first step into the office. Fursman (2012) writes that during the first 300 days on the job, city managers are expected to learn the ropes with little to no help, which, combined with the organization's immediate dependance on them as the chief administrator, makes for an extremely difficult transition into the new role. He writes, "A common experience of the new city managers was that it took three to six months into the job to acquire enough knowledge to become effective, even with their work before the start of their jobs and the intense study as they entered their positions" (p.89). This often leads to a weed-out process, where the managers must either sink or swim in those first crucial months. Lee and Lee (2021) found that longer tenures were correlated with lower turnovers in the position, but this points directly back to the pressure bottleneck that the new recruits go through in the early days of their hiring; to achieve long tenure, one must first dodge the most likely period of turnover. Lee and Lee acknowledge this, writing "city managers' fate [are] subject to the forces of both the political and the economic conditions in the communities they serve" (p. 24). Thus, city managers can be characterized through the research as very politically inclined, largely by necessity. Attempting to maintain an air of neutrality with the council, learning the managerial ropes in a high-pressure environment, and trying to boost city operations with speed and efficiency are all inherently political states of activity.

Additionally, competing opinions exist about whether the efficacy of council-manager government stems from its form, as opposed to other factors. For instance, Williams (2003) wrote that "the development of the council-manager system has proven to be the most significant step in improving the overall performance and credibility of local government" (p. 41). Divergently, B. Carr, who synthesized research on administrative efficacy about the form of

local governments, states that there is not actually enough evidence to conclude that a focus on city managers makes a difference, writing "for decades, analysts have presumed this gap exists, but they have yet to empirically demonstrate that any differences actually exist" (2015, p. 685). The perceived bifurcation of mayor and manager as two competing executives further encourages this narrative; rather than focusing on how interplay between the two speaks better of the form of government, the form is criticized because the isolated powers don't provide a clear direction of progress on their own.

By virtue of their obligations, city managers pose an interesting dilemma when it comes to defining their role in a Balance of Powers framework. The existing conception of separation is generally understood using three main categories: legislative, executive, and judicial. The city manager, however, does not fit neatly into any of the three. As a hired professional, the city manager is not a member of the legislative branch in local government because they cannot represent; and they are no judge or attorney, striking them from judicial consideration. Nor are they, despite their "leading" role, a true, constitutionally ordained executive, as any visionary activity must fit within the preordained desires of the city council.

Power of the City Council

The final power comprising a major party in the authority of local government is that of the city council, the most constant and routinely present of the three. They exist in nearly every city in America, aside from those that use commission forms of government, which altogether total less than 1% of municipalities (National League of Cities, 2022). They are simultaneously entrenched at the center of local government power, yet flexibly representative, due to their election cycles and continued dependence on community support.

What is notable about the city council for the balance of powers framework (given that they are clearly legislative) is the difference in their interactions between the mayor and the city manager. The mayor and the council, by virtue of their respective authorities both being grounded in legislative support, can possess both symmetrical and unbalanced relationships. This depends largely on the political reach of the mayor, since city councils do not possess much variation in their features, the biggest variable in city council form being whether the representatives are elected via district (City and Town Forms of Government, 2024). As stated, earlier, Svara (2003) found that mayors can exhibit different leadership strengths, which naturally then go on to affect dynamics with the council. When fulfilling their "articulator" and "mobilizer" possibilities, mayors can "work to coalesce the council into a cohesive team and establish a positive 'tone'" (p. 160). This relationship with the council is one of motivation and speaks to a mutuality between the two; the city council is naturally placed in the position of greater authority by virtue of their strength in numbers, but the mayor is allowed to play an influential role when they demonstrate political capability. If the mayor is less present, the council will dominate, being able to establish popular rule more easily.

Relations with the city manager are much more businesslike. Within the manager-council form of governance, including both those forms with mayors and those without, power and termination authority almost always resides with the council (Feiock and Stream 1998). According to Williams (2001), some municipalities also occasionally grant mayors the right to hire and fire managers. The vast majority of the time, however, this happens at the will of the council. Boynton and Wright (1971) found in their analysis of large council-manager cities (population <100,000) that mayors are also occasionally granted vetoes over council actions, but these powers totaled less than 7% of the cities analyzed. Together, this ability to terminate, and

the lack of counterbalanced influence from the city manager to the council, means that the city council is undeniably the most powerful branch of authority in local governance. A stronger mayor might be capable of possessing a more balanced relationship, but the city manager is difficult to consider truly separate or balanced with the council, given the service-based qualities of the position.

Given the council's blended legislative and executive responsibilities, and the hierarchical relationship between the council and the manager, it is difficult to make the case that local government fits well within a balance of powers framework. Svara (1987) illustrated the dilemma rather succinctly in one of the rare existing commentaries on separation of powers in the council-manager form:

"[There is] a fundamental characteristic of the council-manager form of government: it does not have separation of powers. It is based on a unitary model of governmental organization: all authority is lodged in the legislative body that delegates authority to a city manager selected by and accountable to the city council. (157)

As the body that is required to sign off on most major executive plans in the municipality, councilmembers enjoy de facto executive responsibilities, especially given that they are very often the party drafting the plans (City and Town Forms of Government, 2024). This means that they do not fit within the traditional understanding of a legislative branch, particularly when situated within the council-manager system. While it is true that federal and state legislatures also partake in the creation, formation, and execution of laws and proposals, the city council takes this principle a step further. Whereas higher legislative assemblies possess the counterbalance of a formal executive, through a governor or a president, in the council-manager

system, there is no *executive counterweight* to the council. Essentially, the council serves to check itself.

This unitary model leaves a lot to be desired when it comes to the potential benefits to be derived from utilizing a more mutually balanced separation of powers. This is the secondary ambition of this project; to propose an improvement in the ways the powers can support one another, and how they might begin to constructively redefine their roles and responsibilities to create more collaboration and success in their communities.

The Balance of Powers Reimagined

It is my opinion that there are relationships of authority in local government consistent with the separation of powers framework, but that they do not align with the traditional understanding of the principle, where the branches are legislative, executive, and judicial. Elements of this are still present, but an overall ambiguity and occasional friction between the central figures make it difficult to clearly delineate those roles. Therefore, I would like to propose a slight adjustment of the separation of powers principle, constructed especially for local government, and for the popular figures which govern our cities today. They are legislative (the city council), executive (the mayor), and administrative (the city manager). I argue that this can constitute a counterbalance of equal merit to the traditional understanding. Further, I argue that it is only with all three branch representatives present that a city government can fulfill its potential, by utilizing the same strengths of the model that our federal and state government uses.

One of the greatest strengths of the balance of powers framework is the fact that it comes with three parts, which all remain in constant tension to prevent any one branch from falling prey to control by the others. Just as the triangle is the most stable shape in nature, so too can it

constitute improved stability in politics. While some city governments can and do operate well enough with just two of the major players, there is good evidence supporting that when each of the roles plays to its more individual strengths, there is greater administrative harmony. That is to say, a clear and distinct separation of powers does not necessarily lead to an isolation of the powers, but the "balance" that is so integral to good, stable government. Lastly, trouble in local government relations can often stem from indecision or conflicts of interest, clearly demarcated responsibilities can facilitate even greater teamwork, and consequently, better service in those communities.

With this in mind, it will be beneficial to explore exactly what the strengths of each of those relationships are. By looking the positional strengths of the partnerships, a clearer picture emerges showing why having all three players (a city council, a city mayor, *and* a city manager) together creates the kind of government that is not just interested in efficiency, but a mutual trust as well. I will explore this idea by analyzing each of the relationships in turn, leading to a larger argument on the mutual political benefits that might be reaped when a more equal balance is created between local authority figures.

Mayor-Council Relationship

The first of these relationships is the mayor-council dynamic, where it is the case that a mayor can become a unique character within the Balance of Powers Framework through the materialization of two key strengths: the ability to address concerns that the council cannot, and the uniquely situated ability to protect the city manager from undeserved political stress.

The role that the mayor can play in the municipal separation of powers depends greatly on the scope of their authority, as they cannot contribute anything of substance or weight if they

are merely a member of the council without any sui generis abilities. It is now generally

accounted for that a mayor with special abilities can bring a lot to the table. Svara's defense of

the mayor's unique abilities in city governance is lengthy and argues that the position's benefits

include such strengths as city mission-setting, coordinating department efforts, and working to

establish a peaceable and effective council dynamic (2003). These benefits, when fulfilled, sets

the mayor apart as a clear executive. Even if the mayor sits on the council, the day-to-day

navigation of leadership in the city makes them different than the council, who convene much

less often.

　　　The mayor is also uniquely able to connect with constituents, since they are the most

publicly recognized member of the elected leadership in the city. Wikstrom (1979) states that

much of the mayor's utility stems from their connection to the public, enables them to address

the needs of the citizenry more personally, many of whom would not otherwise locate a suitable

outlet for their complaints. It has even been argued that visibility of the mayor is so important

that entire administrations are judged on the mayor's public communications performance.

Spence (2006) writes in his observations about the manger-to-mayor shift in Cincinnati in 2001

that "much more than structural change, the political and leadership skills of the mayor more

greatly affect perceptions of mayoral and governmental performance" (p.45). Thus, the mayor

can serve the larger community by being the outward-facing portrait of what is otherwise an

often-ignored institution.

　　　This means, as Svara (1987) writes in a separate publication, "the mayor is the single

most important agent of cooperation in relations among officials" (p. 213). This comes from their

role as the agent who has the easiest time being everywhere at once, and more than that, the

appropriateness and ease of their ability to do so. A hired assistant, us not in possession of the

vested authority of the people. Therefore, if tasked with delivering information to a variety of different city departments and citizens, they could not be perceived as a credible source of executive direction, whereas the mayor certainly can. Additionally, the slap on the wrist received if the mayor were to attempt to consolidate power would likely be nothing next to the volatility that, for instance, a rogue city manager would induce in an administration.

Mayors in the council-manager system can also still add a lot to the policymaking process, and frequently do, regardless of their formal standing. Morgan and Watson (1992) write that "the conventional wisdom now contends that in council-manager cities the most effective means for providing policy leadership is through some version of shared authority and responsibility between elected [meaning the mayor] and appointed leaders" (p. 438). The same specialized communication that the mayor can provide as a liaison between departments, combined with their bestowed authority as a leader of the public, makes them perhaps the most equipped citizen in the city to lead in this way. Furthermore, council meetings are often directed by the mayor, so even without the additional responsibilities (which vary by city) that mayors are often handed as part of their position, the mere expectation of facilitation can put authority and vision into the mayoral role. This is what makes them an e*xecutive*; being voted into office, yes, but also the authority that the council puts into them and the trust that comes from within the civic administration sphere itself. To obtain general trust from the public to make decisions is what makes a local government representative a legislator, but to be an executive, there must be an additional layer of acknowledgement: that of the legislator given to the executive.

The council-manager system often only acknowledges the mayor informally, thus making separation of powers more difficult to clearly articulate within the city. However, there is still research suggesting that these informal powers can be an important mechanism for

policymaking. Wikstrom, (1979) looking into the perception of mayoral leadership from a variety of angles, also accounts for the city manager's perspective on this, writing, "when queried on the policy leadership role of mayors, two-thirds of the managers sensed that council members usually followed the policy posture of the mayor and one-quarter of the managers even went as far as to state that the mayor *dominates* the policy-making process" (p. 274). This is a bold statement considering, as discussed earlier in the literature review, mayors do not generally hold very many formal powers in the council-manager system.

Additionally, mayors who are perceived as being more involved in the political process are also perceived as being more capable leaders in their communities. Svara (2003), through an analysis which sorted mayors into different categories depending on their leadership style, found that "caretaker" or "symbolic figurehead" type mayors, who did not take an active role in policy formulation or in chairing government activities, possessed only 35-55% "excellent" and "good ratings," whereas "coordinator" and "director type mayors, who were much more active in shaping the government, possessed on average 75-85% "excellent" and "good" ratings (p. 167). Therefore, it is not only the case that a mayor who is given special status in the council-manager government is perceived overall as being more effective, but such an endowment of abilities also gives the mayor an institutional place that can help to make the city government more stable. Even in cities with well-balanced city councils and high-quality city managers, the mayor is uniquely situated to bring to the table a variety of communication skills, visionary ideas, and executive function. This would be very difficult to achieve similar results for in a structure where the mayor is either not present, or only ceremonial in their leadership.

So, even in a system where the balance of powers is not a written agreement between the major stakeholders in authority, it appears to be the case that mayors, managers, and the city

council can all reach an unspoken agreement that mayors can and should utilize their unique abilities. Why?

When it comes to understanding the Separation of Powers doctrine in local government, we must shift our focus slightly from the traditional understanding if we are to best recognize its uses in the municipal setting. Unlike our national government, and even our state governments, where the theoretical merits of democracy are discussed just as much as its efficacy (sometimes even more so) local government is not described as often in terms of its philosophical underpinnings. But this is precisely what makes the Balance of Powers Theory in government different than just a cost-benefit analysis about how to keep branches of government from corrupting each other. Each branch becomes a thing of worth in and of itself, because only in its counterbalanced form can that area of governance be explored to its fullest potential, being both freer from encroachment by the other powers and more at liberty to use its own within its area of responsibility. This means that separation of powers cannot just be understood as the sum of its parts, since the parts themselves as constantly growing and evolving through the stability of the counterbalanced form.

This is also why, in acknowledgement of much of the contemporary synopsis from scholars of municipal government, the Separation of Powers Theory helps to explain why the form of government sometimes does not seem to matter as much as informal powers when it comes to overall performance. Governments, regardless of whether they are dictating it on paper, are attempting to separate their powers when they scale up or scale down informal responsibilities. If a mayor is reported as being viewed as a visionary leader by the manager and council, even as they are given very little positional responsibility according to the town charter, then that mayor is still technically fulfilling an executive function. The city has separated and

balanced its powers without even attempting to do so. It just so happens that in local government, those powers end up manifesting in different ways.

Supposing it were possible, this would be an interesting theory to present to our nation's founders, as it would suggest that a separation of powers framework is potentially a natural state of equilibrium in American democracy, rather than one maintained only through a consistently monitored, highly policed constitution. This is an idea that is probably helped, rather than hindered, by looking a smaller government as opposed to a larger one. In the city, where everyone is already pinioned under the authority of the state and federal governments, ideological battles are scaled down and a more neighborly politic is possible. It may be easier to create beneficial relationships when there is not quite so much at stake, local governments may be better situated in this regard to naturally settle into a mutually beneficial separation of powers.

Manager-Council Relationship

The manager-council dynamic is markedly different from the others in that it consists not of a relationship between elected officials, but that of a more traditional and hierarchical company structure. Despite the "chief officer" label commonly associated with the role of manager, it is almost always the case that the manager is subservient, placed in the position of needing to both please the city council and maintain an impartial outlook, while at the same time having to executively carry out the council's vision and maintain the city's day-to-day operations. Newell and Ammons (2004) state in their manual *The Effective Local Government Manager* that this perspective is meant to bring an "independent monitoring" to the operations of the city that will help keep things running smoothly (p. 20).

However, this demanded apolitical stance leads to issues; primarily, that the manager, often despite good intentions, cannot actually abstain from the political process. Morgan and Watson (1992) write that managers spend much of their time "formulating, initiating, and recommending policy options to the governing board" (p. 443). This control over the presentation of policies gives managers a large amount of political sway, because it is that same professional opinion that will be called upon to discern within the council chamber whether a motion ought to be approved or denied. Moreover, since the council is (especially in smaller towns) likely to be at least occasionally comprised of individuals reliant on the opinion of a more seasoned city administrator, the impetus for the city manager to break their political neutrality in to prevent ill-formed opinions from taking root can frequently occur. Skidmore (2001), writing on the case of the council-manager government in Kansas City, Missouri, stated that "when professors and practitioners alike admonished that administration was the manager's prerogative, policy that of the council, and that neither should encroach upon the responsibilities of the other, they were calling for the impossible" (p. 81). These results were recently seconded by Burnett and Prentice (2018) who conducted research on the partisanship of city manager and council relations in North Carolina counties. They found partisanship to be a prevalent concern despite the intended impartiality of city manager-council relations, and wrote that the "results call into question the degree to which one can conclude that the Council-Manager form of government can be immune from the normal political give-and-take that occurs in the administration of government" (p. 396).

Some suggest that to run a council-manager government successfully, it is perhaps better to dispense with the idea that political neutrality is needed at all. Stillman (1974) suggested that not drawing on the city manager's expertise more often actually inhibits the policymaking

process itself, because the "vital contributions" of the city manager are necessary to the formulation of good policy from the council (p. 103).

The manager thus often ends up in the difficult position of being relied upon for expertly managed impartiality, while also being frequently consulted for their expert *opinion*. However, leaning too much into the role of advisor can have complications for the city manager, where either the community or the council may perceive that the manager is being overly ambitious. Protasel (1988) writes that this is an integral part of the job description, stating that "no matter how well-intentioned, the manager runs risks that visible community leadership may be perceived as illegitimate" (p. 810). Additionally, the formulation and presentation of these professional opinions can end up being a minefield in and of themselves. The city manager is often known as "the chief nay-sayer" in the community, due to the onus of telling the council when an intended vision can become unrealistic (Kammerer and Degrove 1964, p. 104). Thus, to ask them to attempt crisis-management of council vision is herculean in expectation. This can counterintuitively lead to distrust between the manager and the council, and at worst, undeserved dismissal from the position. Given that the strengths of the city manager stem from their professional expertise, much of which is painstakingly accumulated through regional study and investment into the local know-how, these sorts of dismissals can have drastic consequences for the community. Fursman (2012), writing from the perspective of a city manager commenting on the journeys of other respective city managers, states that "changing city managers often disrupts the organization's effectiveness," because the cost of the new hire is that the city may not possess an adequate captain of its daily operational affairs in the interim period (p. 12).

These issues can lead to two fundamental problems: 1) the city council becomes hyperactive in their imagination of the issues present with their current city manager or 2) the

city council becomes overly trusting and reaps the consequences of bad management when a persuasive city manager gets in over their head. The separation of powers framework, being intended to foster counterbalances among the branches of government, could not be used to endorse such a slanted approach to relationships between city officials. No amount of individual city success in a council-manager system could alter what missing, what is essential, according to the principle: a third party meant to balance the scales. Even if executive power is technically fulfilled through the obedient right hand of the city manager, the relationship could not be considered a *counterbalanced* one.

It is worth noting that these issues are often rectified by highly capable city managers, who possess great political tact and who can balance both the expectations of the council and handle administrative concerns with relative ease, but such phenomenal members of government are also hard to come by. Additionally, having a top-notch administrator present does not prevent the other half of the relationship from souring; even the most vigilant city manager may find themselves seriously tried by a demanding and uneducated city council. Leroy Harlow, a venerated former city manager and eventual consultant for city management, presents a great many of these relational difficulties in his anthology of stories from city managers across the country, *Servants of All: Professional Management of City Government*. One of the more memorable excerpts comes from perhaps one of the nation's most famous (or the municipal government equivalent of "famous") city managers, Perry Cookingham, and his experience navigating the Sisyphean task of firing most of the Kansas City government in the 1940s:

"By this time I felt we had terminated about all we could without injuring municipal service, but the pressure to continue the terminations did not let up. I advised the council that not all the former employees were unqualified, that if they were the city government would have

fallen many years before it actually did…I think the session lasted more than three hours. At the conclusion of my report, the council member who had been most insistent upon more rapid terminations slammed his fist on the desk. As he did so, I reached for my prepared resignation, not knowing what he was about to say. What he did say was this: "I did not realize the city manager had such a tremendous responsibility in operating the facilities and the institutions of this city government. From now on, I am not going to say anything more about the termination of city employees. I think the job of running this city is in the hands of the city manager and from now on he should have all the say about who is to remain on the payroll and who is not." (p. 33)

Such reconciliations form the basis of a longstanding, enduring partnership between managers and city councils. At the same time, it is true that not every administrator possesses Cookingham's backbone, and not every councilmember the ability to reevaluate their opinion with humility (and vice versa). The establishment of protection for the city manager in situations like these, then, so that they might be more actively heard by councils, which still have rights to termination, is of importance for a balance of the powers. It is needed to prevent the birth of stressed managers who learn to equivocate out of self-preservation, and to guard against the establishment of entitled councils, both of which lead to the death of trust between the two parties.

Mayor-Manager Relationship

The relationship of the mayor and the city manager government is perhaps the least explored when it comes to the idea of a necessary counterbalance between the two branches. The city manager's relationship with the city council is well understood; the city council provides an elected base from which to draw credibility, and the city manager provides the professional

expertise necessary to continue government operations with efficiency over time (Washington State Legislature 1979, City Manager, Powers, and Duties). The separation of the powers of the mayor and the city council stems from the mayor's unique leadership abilities, and in the strong-mayor system (where a manager is either not present or weakly situated), providing administrative support as well. Detailing why the mayor and manager are also necessary but separate entities, however, has not been addressed with the same comprehensiveness. There is an understanding that possessing both a manager and a mayor is a useful (and perhaps the best possible) option when it comes to municipal structure, but the argument as to why these two positions might be considered mutually dependent is lacking. This is where the separation of powers is truly useful, going beyond just abstract political theory to become a substantive rationale for why local government is improved when there is a third relationship to lean on in the structure.

The relationship between the city manager and the mayor creates this third link. Together, they make up the two foremost personalities in the city and work day-to-day on the execution of the visions discussed at city council meetings. They are present often in the office with one another and have a much closer view of routine happenings at city hall.

Through this, they may form a mutually beneficial relationship that can help to alter and strengthen the weaknesses of each position. As discussed in the earlier section, the mayor is able to assist with the communication around the city and link different areas together. However, this sort of benefit is not immediately granted with the election of the mayor—it must be earned/educated. Just as in the election of the city council, there are few prerequisites required to run for the mayoralty in most American municipalities. Boynton and Wright state that within the council-manager government, "in the operation and coordination of bureaucratic tasks the

manager is the presumed expert. This is the assumption on which he is hired. When the mayor enters this arena, he is presumed a stranger" (pp. 34-35). As the executive, the mayor still needs to have administrative know-how to get a lay of the land, and the city manager, unless quite recently hired, is naturally going to fill that role. This is, in part, the reason cities rely on managers at all, as Svara (1987) writes, "the experience of mayor-council [only] cities suggests that dependency on a single leader chosen through the electoral process to provide broad-ranging leadership can lead to poor performance as well as spectacular success" (p. 226).

Ultimately, the manager is still limited by their ability as a hired agent of the city to adequately defend against the city council. There is good rationale behind this—the manager needs to be held accountable to the people, and the council as the governing board supply the necessary authority. But in the instance where the city manager needs defending, there is very little standing in between them and the threat of termination. Suppose, then, that the structure was described such that the mayor was given the responsibility of defending the manager in the event of a prejudiced council. Whether through informal or formal powers, the mayor is best situated to be this political buffer, since, as the city's executive, they will be a witness to much of the "behind-the-scenes" information about what the problem is stemming from. Svara (2003) writes that the mayor is the strongest link between the legislative and the administrative apparatus of the local government structure in the council-manager system of governance—and as such, they very often have a prime vantage point from which to understand and facilitate good communication. If the city's poor trajectory is in fact the fault of the manager, they can be called upon to testify. Alternatively, if the manager is being painted in a poor light, the mayor can utilize the counterbalance to state their reasons for believing why the city council is wrong in their estimation of where the blame lies.

This might seem to skew the separation of the powers, for if the mayor is theoretically always inclined to (at least initially) follow the lead of the city manager, would that not seem to push the balance in favor of the administrative branch? There is some truth in the idea that persuasive abilities might play a role here, and, given that this is likely to play a role in any political realm, it is probable that some level of persuasiveness would be present and upset the balance of the powers. However, there is reason to believe that the manager is likely to be held in beneficial tension with the mayor.

The support provided from the executive officer to the administrative officer means that the tension that the city manager normally experiences in the council-manager system has the potential to be reduced. Boynton and Wright state in their analysis of mayor-manager relationships that team-player mayors can help "free [the manager] from the constraints of politics as usual," so that the manager is free to be more innovative in their goal of accomplishing the tasks set by the council (p.34-35). When this does not happen, the city manager's onus of facilitating and defending city operations is done without support, leading to a relationship that is consistently weighted in favor of the city council, who through their increased insularity can fall prey to the lure of echo chamber opinions.

Additionally, the mayor can help to bring concerns forward to the city manager that otherwise would go unrecognized, thus setting them up for success by keeping their awareness of citizen's issues relevant. Wikstrom (1979) writes that "because of the visibility of the mayor and the widespread popular ignorance of the mechanics of the council-manager system, citizens often direct their concerns about municipal services and requests for assistance to the mayor" (p. 274). Oftentimes, inquiries to the city from citizens are most appropriately handed to the city manager, who works with the operations that form the basis of many complaints. The manager, however,

is not always in the best position to receive these inquiries, being largely consumed by the business of the day-to-day operations. So, the mayor can help to set the manager up for success by helping them to stay acquainted with the community and by providing support in the council chamber when things start to go awry; in essence, helping them to help everyone else.

The final point to make about this administrative-executive relationship is that this proposed teamwork does not lead to a union of the powers—the separation of powers is still very much intact. Rather than leading to fused responsibilities, the mayor and city manager are instead both granted the space to better pursue their existing tasks with less fear of retaliation. Svara (2003) asserts that there is no infringement on responsibilities in his work on examining director-type mayors, writing "there is no indication that an active mayor suppresses the manager's level of involvement in activities across the board" (p.164). Being intentional about fostering camaraderie between the two leaders opens up the possibility of a better operational government, where an educated mayor can inspire and assist the educated and performance-driven city manager. Creating a formally recognized relationship in this regard also encourages the mayor and the manager to take into consideration the ways in which they might most successfully work as a team.

Naturally, much of this rests on the tolerance of the mayor and manager working as a team to begin with, and formally drafted relationships in this regard do not always exist. Therefore, despite the earlier sentiments laid forth by Boynton and Wright regarding the utility of the form of government playing as much of a role as the informal powers present in local administration, the model can still be of high importance when considering the separation of powers framework. Even if the setup in a city may be different through one component compared to the traditional state and federal understanding of the balance of the powers, there

must be this underlying constant to both: relationships that are not codified risk losing their efficacy over time. In part, our constitutions are frequently cited because if it they were not, officials would begin to lack accountability for our actions.

Here the executive and administrative become clearly marked in their differences in local government; whereas the executive branch is encouraged when it reaches out to the broader community, the administrative is perceived as overstepping. Likewise, when the executive leaders in local government attempt to insert too much of their influence into the operational side, they risk being perceived as inadequate in their business expertise. These sentiments often become watered down in the publicity of state and federal leadership, where conversations about bureaucratic mismanagement frequently decay into symbolic battles over right and wrong. In local government, maintaining appearances of proper role function are paramount to retain the trust of the community, which is why the separation of powers principle is just as important, even when constructed informally by cities. And by acknowledging the strengths of the framework, municipalities can optimize their usage of whatever form they choose.

Concluding Remarks

One of the greatest strengths of the balance of powers framework is the fact that it comes with three parts, which all remain in constant tension to prevent any one branch from falling prey to control by the others. While some city governments can and do operate well enough with just two of the major players, there is good evidence supporting that when each of the roles plays to its more individual strengths, there is greater administrative harmony. That is to say, a clear and distinct separation of powers does not necessarily lead to an isolation of the powers, but the "balance" that is so integral to good, stable government. As much of the trouble of local

government relations stems from indecision about who is supposed to supply what sorts of

knowledge or leadership in their role, clearly demarcated responsibilities can facilitate even

greater teamwork, and consequently, better service in those communities.

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Appendix

Symposium Script

Thank you for the introductions, Dr. Walter! Now, I know you're all just on the edge of your seat to learn about local government, especially after lunch, but I genuinely hope this will be somewhat interesting to you all, and I have done my best to weave a narrative for you today from my research, because I knew that I needed a narrative if I was going to stay awake presenting in the afternoon session. So here's my project, "Deciphering Authority: The Balance of Powers in Local Government."

The Balance of Powers principle is an idea in political science that seeks to prevent any one part of the government from becoming too powerful. This is done by holding political branches in mutual tension with one another, and by separating responsibilities so that leaders don't double up or monopolize any one part of the system. In our American federal and state government, this is fulfilled between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches.

Local government, however, is different. When I began some personal research into what it might be like to explore a career in city management last year, I discovered and soon became fascinated by the fact that the forms of governance in our towns and cities do not utilize such separation. Whereas it is a mandate in our federal and state constitutions that powerful authority figures must maintain this type of relationship, no such requirement exists for most cities across our country. And that's because legally, it's considered a little irrelevant. In most places, "state authority" is considered to supply the necessary enforcement when it comes to the balancing of our local governments.

This was crazy to me as a poly sci student. I mean, I learned about the balance of powers principle in eighth grade. It felt to me like it would be ubiquitous, but believe it or not, when I

went looking, I found that while there is a great deal of commentary on other sorts of structural issues in local government, the balance of powers principle specifically was shockingly under-discussed. It's almost like we forgot that it might still be relevant on its own terms after we wrote our federal and state constitutions. In my paper, I give much more of an overview of how this gap exists, but for today, I'm going to focus on what the project resulting from that revelation was. So, seeking to fill what I considered an absence, I crafted a six-part thesis, split into two halves. Half number one is an investigative look into what separation and balance for local government authorities currently looks like and deals with the three major players: the mayor, the city manager, and the city council. Half number two is my argument, where I suggest ways to better capitalize on the strengths of that principle.

So, with that, let me tell you a little about the first powerful figure in your local government: the mayor. Now the mayor seems like a fairly simple figure to define, right? This is the person that cuts ribbons, that brews up some local change, and that is probably the first person who comes to mind when you think of what the "executive branch" might look in the city.

But it's not quite that simple. **[CLICK]** If you used the word "mayor," in a sentence right now, rather than referring to a ribbon-cutting, change-sparking extraordinaire who always captains the city's vision, you would be more accurately referring to a whole host of diverse leadership roles, all of which sit in different places on a spectrum of executive authority. Firstly, it would depend on whether that mayor you spoke of was in either one of the two most popular forms of local government: the mayor-council system of government, and the council-manager system. **[CLICK]** In the mayor-council system, the mayor is presumed the Chief Officer, and there they do tend to take a more active role. But in the council-manager system, a city manager

is the Chief Officer. In this form, there is not always a mayor, and when the mayor is present, they often only possess ceremonial duties. And very often, mayors and city managers are framed in this way kind of competitively, and it is oftentimes the case that city governments will choose to focus on just one of them, but even if they have both the city is always classified according to which figure in their particular setup carries a stronger presence.

So already, the mayor can range within these systems from being a strong leader who carries out visionary action and leads operational changes to being the city's political equivalent of the Queen of England, where they are pretty much just ornamentation. **[CLICK]**

And within the council-manager system this is especially complicated. Some authors say mayors do exercise strong policy leadership in those cities. But others say that their lack of formal power hinders them from really being recognized. One of my favorite authors, James H. Svara, categorized mayors as belonging anywhere within four unique role typologies: ranging from symbolic head, to caretaker type, to facilitator, to director type. This, to me is interesting and delightful, because I nerd out about local government. However — it is just not very easy to integrate this with a traditional understanding of the balance of powers principle, because not all these types are equally "executive" in their functions.

Lastly, the mayor's executive power in the community can also depend on the way they are elected, which is to say, whether they directed elected in an independent race via the popular vote of the citizens, or instead nominated from within an election of the city councilmembers. Some sources I found that claimed that directly elected mayors are much more "executive sorts" of leaders than nominated ones, and others disagreed that it really made that much of a difference.

So, the mayor is kind of a complicated individual. As far as they might be classified within the traditional understanding of the balance of powers principle, I decided they do constitute an executive force, but the strength and distinction of that "executive-ness" is just not clear.

And now I'm going to put the mayor down and tell you about the city manager (my personal favorite role to study in local government) **[CLICK].** The city manager is a hired professional and the political namesake of the council-manager form of government. Unlike the relative independence of the mayor, they fall under the jurisdiction of the city council. The council expects two things of the city manager. The first thing they expect is supervision of the city's operations, which includes things like zoning permits, your water and electricity, and all the city's department staff. The second is that they expect the city manager to assist them in rolling out council vision, because in the council-manager system, innovation and policy development tends to bypass the executive in favor of sourcing vision from the council. The idea behind this is to limit undue political influence, and to give a sort of professionalism to bureaucracy, for what the manager usually brings to the table is a professional education in how to organize well and curate good financial management. It's a compelling picture, right? A city manager, perfectly informed, perfectly willing to carry out council expectations in everything they do—yet perfectly neutral at the same time. And because of that, perfectly unrealistic.

You see, research on the actual impartiality of city managers reveals that they are just not actually that robotic—that they too, fall prey to caring about this thing we call community politics. For example, city managers are very active voters in local elections, much more so than ordinary citizens. Simultaneously, they often will go to lengths to conceal these political preferences when it suits their interests. When working with bipartisan city councils for example,

they are not at all likely to reveal their political sympathies in council meetings, but when

working with partisan city councils, they are a great deal more likely to reveal them. And it's

kind of understandable why they might choose to do so. Their assumed neutrality places them in

a really interesting position when it comes to being the default chief officer. After all, one of the

things that typically delineates executives in our government is being able to be firm in a party

stance, and being able to do that without fear of dismissal.

So, despite the fact that city managers are often referenced using executive language, it's

difficult to fit them in that box. And there will be more on this later…I could spend forever

talking about city managers—and I hope you all ask me more questions about them afterwards,

but now I must tell you about city councils.

The city council was great to study—because I very quickly found they are consistent

creatures. And that consistency made them the easiest to categorize for this project. **[CLICK]**

City councils exist in nearly every city in America. In fact, only 1% of municipalities

utilize alternative forms of representation. (National League of Cities, 2022). They are made up

of elected town residents and approve most of the major happenings and policies proposed in the

community, making them the overarching authority within your local government. They are also

fairly easy to categorize as legislative, which simplified the "where do they go?" part of my

inquiry.

However. Just like the mayor, and just like the city manager, there is more than meets the

eye to the city council. Which just seems to be the case with researching anything, I have found.

When I moved past just observing political descriptions of councils and started focusing on their

relationships with other parties, it became clear that city councils possess political dominance in

local governments.

The foremost example of this is the mere existence of the council-manager system. Directing the city manager gives the city council executive control in addition to legislative power. A dynamic of encouraged impartiality from the city manager exacerbates this too and gives the council political license to both direct and approve pretty much everything.

And their relationship with the mayor is not really counterbalanced either. Mayors can and do occasionally wield separate and strong authority, but it is by no means a constant thing, thanks in large part to the fact that the mayor's role is so diverse. And from the side of the mayor, their responsibilities with the city council can be very open-ended. Mayors are often tasked with "Presiding over council meetings" for instance. But does that sort of language mean facilitating, or directing? It wasn't really clear to me. And I think they just don't have generalizable relationships with the council like that.

And if the mayor is nominated from within the council, then another question arises: can they really relationally free themselves from council influences? After all, in that instance they owe their nomination to that group, not the broad citizenry. It would be hard to separate oneself from a group of people who have essentially become your political donors for your role.

Therefore, I came to conclude that the city council possesses no formal executive counterweight to their activities. This authority, while providing a strong democratic foundation for our towns and cities, is not compatible with the Balance of Powers principle as it is traditionally understood. After finding out that it's not necessary for local governments to have a separation in their powers, I expected less of a presence. But what I've found is that we don't really have a balance of powers at all in our cities.

And this doesn't mean those governments are terrible, or not worth having. It's just that they can't qualify for this principle, as separate or balanced when one branch has that much

power, or when there are only two of those powers serving actually functional roles. Which leads me to the second part of this project, where I indulged a bit of hubris, and attempted to make suggestions for what a more balanced version might look like. Not necessarily a better version, because I don't know enough to claim that that would be the case, but theoretically speaking, a version that probably aligns more closely with this principle.

So, you may have noticed, earlier, that I kept using phrases like "the traditional" understanding of the balance of powers, and that's because what I'm offering now is an alternative take, that seeks to keep the spirit and merit of the idea, but takes creative license with the figures. **[CLICK]**

And that led me to this setup: executive, legislative, and administrative. Because, as opposed to the judiciary playing a real role in the day-to-day political interactions and policy formulation, it was the administration that I found to be much more present. We just don't have an equivalent local substitute for the Supreme court.

So for this half of my paper, I swapped out focusing on each party at a time and instead looked at their relational dynamics, so I'll go ahead and jump into the first one. **[CLICK]**

For the mayor-council dynamic, I argue that there is a more balanced relationship to be had when the mayor is given more license to assert themselves as an executive. It is now generally accounted for among scholars of municipal forms that the mayor holds a whole lot of potential to take the lead in more areas, especially on all things communication-oriented, such as: helping to navigate conversation between city departments and the council, setting the city's mission, and working assertively with the council to help them be more peaceable and effective. One author I found went so far as to state that "the mayor is the single most important agent of cooperation in relations among officials." And this is what would more concretely make them an

executive in the city; being voted into office, yes, but more than that, being able to command some level of trust from the council. Mayors can further this by making sure that they capitalize on the unique relationship that they have with the public. The mayor, after all is, the most well-known point of contact that a citizen might think to reach out to. It has even been argued by some researchers that visibility of the mayor is so important that entire administrations are judged on their public communications performance. Since council meetings are often "presided over" by the mayor, when the mayor interacts extensively with the public, they are able to chair those meetings with a little more authority, and with real knowledge of what citizens would like to see on the agenda.

Additionally, I believe this balance would be positively enhanced if it was always the case that the mayor was elected via a direct election. It helps to provide a social buffer between council and mayor, setting up the expectation that the two possess different, but complimentary forms of authority. And finally, I propose that one unique practice I found be utilized more often; and that is for the mayor to have a veto over the hiring/firing of the city manager. The city council can still direct most of the content of that decision and remain in communication with the mayor, but this helps to even things out a little bit more. So, all of this is mostly to say, the mayor could not be tolerated as just a ceremonial figurehead. They simply have too much potential. **[CLICK]**

For the relationship between city manager and city council, the most important thing is to do away with the idea that the city manager must be entirely impartial, because even in the best-case scenario, that will never happen. The manager, often despite good intentions, cannot actually abstain from the political process. Since the council is (especially in smaller towns)

likely to be comprised of individuals who will lean on the manager's expertise to carry out their vision, the manager will naturally be pressed for their personal opinions in that process. It is simply what happens when you have a group of elected officials with regular turnover who will require assistance as they seek to provide the city with good stewardship.

Because of this dynamic, the city manager is often known as "the chief nay-sayer" in the community, due to the onus of telling the council when an intended vision can become unrealistic. It is just rather herculean in expectation, and at worst, can lead to undeserved dismissals from the position, which can have drastic consequences for the community. The failure to establish a continuous, communicative, and merciful relationship between these two parties will always eventually lead to one of two problems: 1) the city council becoming hyperactive in their imagination of the issues present with their current city manager or 2) the city council becoming overly trusting, and reaps the consequences of bad management when a persuasive city manager gets in over their head.

And so I argue that what a counterbalance between the council and the manager looks like is to attempt to provide space for the manager to discuss, politically, ramifications of plans, as well as to facilitate the best hiring processes possible from the very beginning, because then the trust in the manager's capabilities will make the council inclined to listen when they put their foot down on a plan, and also grant the council more of a right to instances of termination because they will have gotten the fullest perspective. **[CLICK]**

And this is where the relationship of the manager and the mayor really gets to shine; and where the triangular shape of the balance of power framework arrives at the peak of its possibility. While some cities do have both mayors and managers, I think both of these authority

figures are necessary to have in the city if a balance of powers principle crafted for local governments was to be fulfilled.

Together, the mayor and the manager make up the two most individually important personalities in the city, and work daily on the execution of visions discussed at city council meetings. When a city has both, they are present often in the office with one another, and have a much closer view of routine happenings at city hall than the council, who do not meet every day, or take as much of an active role in city life. And in my research, I found multiple sources showing how both mayors and managers prefer when they are able to work closely with one another. It enables them to form a team, of sorts.

As I stated earlier, the mayor has a lot of potential to take the lead in the imaginative leadership spaces in city politics—but they are still ordinary citizens. The mayor can be practically anyone, usually so long as they are of age, and they reside in the city they are running in. They do not have to be experts in city logistics to take on that role, and so will require help. The manager, as the residential expert in operations, can provide the mayor with the answers and tools to get them on their way to drafting innovative policy.

And I think this is also individually in the best interest of the city manager too, as assisting the executive gives them a more appropriate conduit with which to occasionally introduce knowledge to the council chamber without risking themselves coming across as authoritarian. The manager is just always going to be limited by their role as a hired agent in this way. There is good rationale behind this—the manager needs to be held accountable to the people, and the council as the governing board supplies the necessary oversight; but that employer-employee style relationship is not conducive to a balance of powers, so the solution

here is to always have a third party. And in those instances where the city manager might

defending, the mayor is actually best situated to be this political buffer, since, as the city's

executive, they will be a witness to much of the "behind-the-scenes" information about what the

contexts of problems might be.

Finally, to address potential concerns that such proposed teamwork between the

administrative and the executive relationship would in fact lead to a union of the powers instead

of their separation — I believe that part of the theory is still intact within this relational model.

Rather than leading to fused responsibilities, there is simply greater communication.

A neighborly and friendly city hall is founded on a group of local government

bureaucrats who can find it within their public service to trust one another. And trust is built, in

part, on a clear and cogent understanding of who does what, and why. And regardless of the

place in our political food chain that our public servants find themselves in, whether that's as the

governor of Washington state or the city manager of Walla Walla, or the mayor of Snoqualmie

there can still exist an irritating friction that makes possible leaders of excellence question

whether or not they want to devote their lives to making our cities better. And some principles of

good government may seem antiquated, cliche, unoriginal—like the ones we learn about in

eighth grade, but that doesn't mean there still isn't something to learn from revisiting those

principles and turning them into a better practice.

So—will this undergraduate thesis change the foundations of our local government?

Probably not. But I like to think that maybe someday a city manager or a mayor will read this,

and in their eons of free time, they'll think of their role in a new light. As freshmen we enter here

under the banner of the question, "What does it mean to be human?" and as I suspected when I

first walked in, I still have no amazing answer to that question. But I think this project has

brought me to believe that in some small capacity, being human involves plunking down in a seat at your local city council meeting every now and then and learning how to get better at this thing we call government. To capitalize on the one place where your political leaders don't necessarily have to be strangers. So, I hope that I might have inspired you to ponder, with new energy vigor, those aspects of leadership that exist close to home, to the very center of your citizenship. Or maybe I've just given you a craving to watch Parks and Rec. [**CLICK**] I'll take that as a win too.

Symposium Slides

The Two Forms

The Council-Manager Form
- City Manager is the Chief Officer.
- Council hires manager to run operations.

A city will usually have a mayor, and sometimes have a manager...

...But they are *classified* according to which figure is *stronger*.

The Mayor-Council Form
- The elected Mayor is the Chief Officer.
- Mayor takes a more active role in directing operations.

The Mayor
Powerful Exec? Or a ribbon-cutter?

Research on the Mayor led me to conclude this role is highly diverse.

- Act differently depending on whether they are in the mayor-council or council-manager form of government.

- Leadership styles are all over the board.

- Whether or not they are popularly elected can also make a difference.

The City Manager
Your *hired* leader.

The City manager is a hired professional, who is expected to:

- Run city operations
- Carry out the vision of the council
- Promote a businesslike and impartial council relationship that helps limit the "politics" of the city.
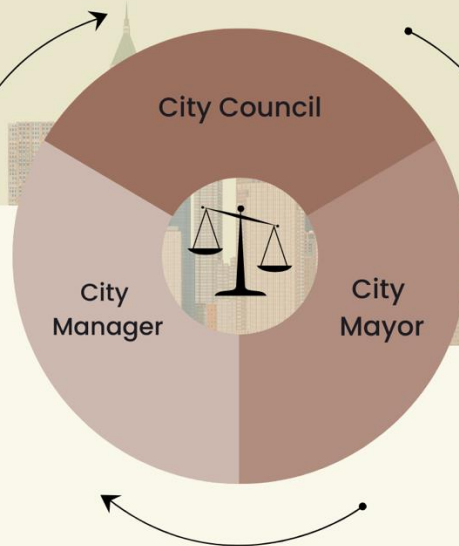
The Council
Ubiquitous...and powerful.

The City Council:

- Is the most consistent figure in local government.
- Are thoroughly legislative in origin.
- Possess dominant power in relationship to both the mayor and the city manager.
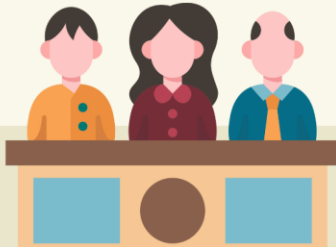
The Proposed Balance

All three parties, in mutual, beneficial tension.

City Council

City Manager

City Mayor

Mayor-Council Relationship

The mayor can lean more into their unique executive qualities.

- The mayor is best positioned to facilitate departmental communication.
- They have a unique relationship with the public.
- Separation is enhanced by direct election .

Manager–Council Relationship
Closeted impartiality is old news.

City Managers could be given more license to express their opinions without fear of dismissal.

- The manager will inevitably be asked for their opinion on the execution of the council's vision.

- A more informally pursued counterbalance, focused on improving conversations around performance expectations.
  - It is the Mayor that serves as the codified counterweight.

Mayor–Manager Relationship

The mayor and manager can work as a team!

- They share a similar experience of daily interaction and oversight of city happenings.

- Mayors and Managers prefer to work closely with one another!

- Together, they can pose a more substantial unit to counterbalance the council.

Thank you!
I look forward to your questions!