



# *City Council Legislative Committees and Policy-making in Large United States Cities\**

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*Theory:* Legislative committees are extensive and integral to the structure and policy-making functions of Congress and state legislatures. Scant research exists on current roles of committees of city councils.

*Hypotheses:* We hypothesize that city council committee systems are less common and not as vital to policy-making than is true of other legislative bodies. Contrary to much urban research, we further expect that city government structure, not the political environment, shapes development of committee systems and their policy roles.

*Methods:* Logistic and OLS regression are the methods used to analyze the structure of city council committee systems. Differences in policy outputs are analyzed with *t*-tests and OLS regression. Data are from a 1992–93 mail survey of 160 large United States cities, and from Census Bureau reports on city government finances.

*Results:* Committees are widely used in large cities and their use is directly due to structural aspects of city government, particularly size of city council. Broad policy-making roles are found to be uncommon, but a substantial part of city legislative business is assigned to committees. Legislative committees have a small impact on policy outputs.

Urban scholars have devoted considerable attention to policy-making in United States cities. Much of this research has focused on the environmental influences on policy-making and how reform government structures affect city policy (Liebert 1974; Lineberry and Fowler 1967; Morgan and Pelissero 1980). By contrast, and despite an apparent increase in their use (Svara 1991, 44), little is known about *city council legislative committees*—where policy initiatives may begin. Compared to extensive study of congressional and state legislative committees, we have minimal knowledge of how legislative committees function in the policy-making process on the local level. This paper addresses this gap in the literature by analyzing legislative committees and their policy-making functions and impact in large United States cities, contributing to the renewed interest in research

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on city government institutions (Bledsoe 1993; Clinger Mayer and Feiock 1993, 1994).

### **Legislative Committee Structures and Policy**

The purposes of legislative committees can be understood in the general context of structural-functionalism (e.g., Gulick 1937) and the specific behavior of legislative bodies (Wilson 1981). With few studies available on city council committees, the literature on congressional and state legislative committees is a logical beginning for understanding committee structures and functions in our research.

#### *Congressional Committees*

At a simple level, committees were created to enable the larger Congress and state legislative chambers to manage their policy-making duties more efficiently and effectively (Cooper 1970; Gamm and Shepsle 1989). Committees and subcommittees and their leaders serve as gatekeepers, repositories of expertise, and policy incubators, causing other members to defer to them when making collective decisions (Hall and Evans 1990; Smith and Deering 1984). In addition to their policy-making duties, Fenno (1973) argues that committees serve as political instruments for legislators seeking to satisfy personal goals such as reelection, power within the chamber, and influence over public policy.

Empirical studies of congressional committees are supported by a formal literature suggesting that reelection-seeking members (Mayhew 1974) move the committee system in directions favoring their personal goals, often to the detriment of congressional policy-making. Distributive theorists argue that members self-select onto particular committees that favor reelection constituencies, creating bias in the assignment process and, more importantly, in congressional policy-making (Shepsle 1978). Deference to committee expertise leads to logrolling between committees, which ultimately protects committees' policy interests. In addition to their gatekeeping or *ex ante* powers, committees composed of "preference outliers" also are powerful because of their effect on conference committees created to iron out differences between House and Senate bills. In situations where the chamber's majority votes against (rolls) the wishes of the committee's majority, committee leaders have a second chance (in conference) to move the bill back toward the committee's original position. This so-called "ex post veto" power of committees gives them leverage over outcomes on conference reports, which typically receive only an up or down vote in the full chamber (Shepsle and Weingast 1987). Thus, congressional policy-making is dominated by powerful committees who control both the agenda

setting phase of policy-making and the final stages of the legislative process.

Distributive theory has been challenged by those who argue that legislatures have objectives of their own and mechanisms available to them to channel the self-interests of their members in ways preferred by the organization. This theory of legislative organization suggests that Congress controls committees, not vice versa. Krehbiel (1991) presents evidence rejecting the ideas that legislators self-select onto committees and that committees are composed of preference outliers whose legislative demands diverge significantly from parent chamber majorities. Political parties and party leaders control committee assignments and work to create an environment that "efficiently taps the special talents of its legislators" (Krehbiel 1991, 136). Members are encouraged by leaders to specialize in specific policy areas because specialization creates expertise that is used to better inform the legislature. "Organization of informative committees by a rational legislature is not a process culminating in committees that are composed of preference outliers" (Gilligan and Krehbiel 1990, 558). In response to claims that committees disproportionately control the legislative process (especially in the post-conference stage), Krehbiel (1987, 935) argues that committee power is constrained to a large degree by parent chamber powers such as the "discharge petition, open rules, and amendments between the houses." This perspective is consistent with historical interpretations of the development of legislative committees as mechanisms through which legislatures are educated on matters of public policy (see Cooper 1970; Gamm and Shepsle 1989) and is consistent with a structural-functionalist interpretation.

### *State Legislative Committees*

Committees' structures and roles in state legislatures are similar to those in Congress, but vary extensively from state to state. Compared to congressional committees, state committee systems are relatively weak and are controlled, for the most part, by party leaders (Patterson 1990, 185). Despite their weaknesses, scholars have shown that legislative committees have been transformed in recent years and now are the true workhorses of state legislatures (Rosenthal 1990, 45). State legislative committees serve traditional functions of investigating, proposing, debating, and recommending legislation to the parent chamber (Hamm 1980), and legislators have come to depend upon the expertise of committee members (Patterson 1990, 190). They are disadvantaged by internal rules, such as discharge petitions that make it easy for parent chambers to penetrate committees and remove bills for floor consideration, a common practice among city councils, also. Higher membership turnover rates in state legislatures relative to Congress

also inhibit policy specialization, thus reducing the likelihood that these committees will institutionalize (Basehart 1980).

A more developed legislative committee system is often a sign of legislative professionalism (Bowman and Kearney 1988; Grumm 1971). By developing committees, legislatures are often establishing a structure that can lead to a better functioning and informed legislative process. More committees help to manage the legislative workload, provide for study of legislative proposals, and enhance the expertise among legislators. It is not entirely clear from the literature whether the development of a large committee system to further its legislative capacity is to counter strong executive power, develop expertise when the executive branch is small or the governor weak, or simply occurs in concert with greater professionalism in state government (see, for example, Mooney 1995). But clearly, a more developed committee system improves the policy-making resources of the legislature.

### *City Councils and Legislative Committees*

Unlike congressional and state legislative committees that play significant policy roles, surveys point to more limited policy functions and legislative roles for city council committees (DeSantis 1987; Svara 1991). Much of the variation in city councils' use of committees appears related to structural or political factors (and to a lesser extent, environmental ones), in particular cities. First, city councils' use of committees is likely to vary with council size. We expect larger cities to have more council members and thus a greater need to accommodate a variety of individual and collective policy goals. Larger cities also are more likely to use committees for policy-making because they are expected to face greater demands from the public to address a broader range of issues than those faced by smaller cities (DeSantis 1987, 3; Svara 1991, 44). The effect of city size on committee use and policy-making may be mitigated somewhat by the structure of city government. Cities with reform structures (e.g., council-manager government, nonpartisan councils, at-large council elections) are less likely to need committees (DeSantis 1987, 3; Svara 1991, 45) because councils are smaller and policy-making is centered in the professional bureaucracy and city manager's office, and not in the city council. Further, a rational city council would probably have a developed committee system if the city had a weak mayor-council form of government. In such a situation, the council's need for information would dictate the organization of a committee system to achieve the expertise warranted for policy-making in a weak executive environment (Gilligan and Krehbiel 1990). When mayors have strong powers in a mayor-council form of government, the policy-making expertise would reside in the executive branch; city councils would create

developed committee systems only to counter the policy-making power of the executive (Mooney 1995). Thus, different governmental structures enable cities to balance (albeit in different ways) the demands placed on them by government organization and the public to produce policy outputs that satisfy the community.

A second factor affecting cities' committee structure is the nature of council work. City councils in all but the largest jurisdictions are part-time bodies and thus meet less frequently in their official capacity than full-time councils. Their members have other occupations besides the city council and therefore less time to devote to committee work. Council members are likely to be volunteers motivated by feelings of civic obligation rather than a desire to exercise power or build political careers (Prewitt 1970). This expectation presumes, however, that larger communities will place greater demands on city councils, which, in turn, will meet more frequently and conduct more of their legislative business in committees. We suggest that city councils meeting more frequently do so because the volume of demands placed on them by the public is sufficient to warrant more "official" attention to city issues. Because councils meeting more frequently are likely to confront a broader range of issues, we expect to see more sophisticated committee systems to manage them.

Third, like other legislative committees, council committees may serve valuable political functions for city councilors. Committees may facilitate members' representational roles and styles (Bledsoe 1993). Eulau and Prewitt (1973) showed that representational role orientations of city council members are likely to influence the development and functions of committees in city councils. Welch and Bledsoe (1988, 77) argued that members elected at-large view the city as their primary constituency, whereas members from districts tend to focus more on the neighborhood or area from which they are elected. The different representational focus of these members may motivate them to create and use committees to help their constituents, promote themselves, and claim credit for district projects (Mayhew 1974). This may alter the perceived importance of committees because a particular committee assignment may bring representational advantages to members elected from districts that members elected at-large would not realize.

Research showing that council members are active in addressing constituent concerns, especially in the area of economic development, has implications for committee organization. Citizens contact councilors about development issues more frequently when these issues are highly salient, have media attention, councilors are full-time, and members represent districts (Clinger Mayer and Feiock 1994, 463). Councilors can be more effective in providing personal services to constituents from a committee posi-

tion or chairmanship, and thus place more emphasis on using committees to meet their representational goals.

A final component of this study asks what difference committees make to city policy outputs. Svvara (1991, 45) learned that while policy functions have expanded in council committees, more than 40% of cities do not use committees for such basic legislative functions as proposing legislation or conducting public hearings. Another survey also revealed that the amount of legislative business conducted by city council committees is low, except in the largest cities (DeSantis 1987, 8). Overall, the influence of city councils and their committees on policy matters has been found to be limited compared to other legislative bodies (Svvara 1990). City council policy-making roles appear to vary with city size—councils in larger cities have more important roles.

Previous research has pointed to the importance of structural and environmental variables in determining levels of city taxing, spending, and borrowing (Dye 1967; Farnham 1986; Liebert 1974; Lineberry and Fowler 1967; Morgan and Pelissero 1980; Sharp 1986). Despite a lengthy debate in the literature over this question, the bulk of the evidence suggests that city fiscal policy is largely a function of cities' environmental conditions—income, region, fiscal strain, population change—rather than cities' political structures (Morgan and Pelissero 1980; Morgan and Watson 1995). Recent research on economic development policy, however, has shown the importance of political structures in this policy area. Sharp (1991, 144) reported that unreformed cities with formal political structures for citizen input responded to conditions of economic distress with specific economic development policies more frequently than reformed cities. Fleischmann, Green, and Kwong (1992, 683) found that cities with specialized political structures for economic development were significantly more active in promoting economic development policies than cities without such structures.

Similarly, one might expect that city policy is related to the institutional structures for creating policy within councils. Committees, especially those with jurisdiction over distributive policy, facilitate logrolling on legislation and may increase spending. This leads one to ask if city councils with more committees spend more money, both overall and in specific policy areas, than city councils with fewer committees? Do city councils with particular types of committees (e.g., parks and recreation) spend more money in distributive policy areas (e.g., parks) than on policies of citywide importance (e.g., hospitals)? In other words, do committee members' preferences dominate policy outputs in cities rather than the wishes of the council in general (Shepsle and Weingast 1987)? City council committees, via public hearings and deliberations, also provide public access to policy-making. Does this greater access result in larger public expenditures? Our study goes beyond

the limitations of earlier work to address these policy questions as we attempt to understand city council committee structures, functions, and impacts.

### Research Design

A survey on city council legislative committees' roles in policy-making was mailed during 1992–93 to 187 city clerks whose cities had 1990 populations of 100,000 or more. Following three mailings, we received responses from 160 of these cities, or 85.6%. This sample represents large cities from each region and nearly every state. Large cities are more likely to have legislative committees because their city councils are larger and more fully-engaged in legislative work on a daily basis.

Our *dependent variables* are derived from survey responses to the following questions:

1. Does your city council use legislative committees?
2. How many legislative committees exist?
3. What legislative functions do committees perform?
4. How much of the council's legislative business is conducted in committees?

A final question is examined with secondary data from the U.S. Census Bureau (1994):

5. What are the policy outcomes associated with legislative committees?

We hypothesize that the above variables will be associated with or predicted by several key *independent variables*. Unlike most studies of city policy and government structure, we expect that environmental forces will be less significant determinants of city council committee organization and roles. Rather, the structure of city government should largely determine whether cities have legislative committees, the number of committees, and the policy-related functions of these committees. For this reason, we look to aspects of city government structure to be the key determinants of committee roles.

Consistent with this hypothesis, we expect that size of city councils will determine the use of committees and their policy roles. Larger city councils are hypothesized to rely more on committees. Second, we hypothesize that the relative time that city council members devote to legislative affairs should affect committee functions. We use frequency of city council meetings as a proxy measure for full-time councils and expect that councils that meet more often will use more committees. Third, a rational city council would organize committees under conditions of weak executive powers.



We believe that mayor-council governments with weak mayors will be more likely to have committees than in more powerful executive systems. We expect reform-style governments to have a negative effect on the use and number of committees and to reduce the amount of legislative business and range of policy functions performed by committees. We measure reform as an additive index with values ranging from 0–7.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, council-manager governments, nonpartisan councils, and those with at-large representation systems are expected to have less reliance on committees. Unreformed structures should have more committees and more uses for such.

We expect larger cities to rely more on committees and have included population in 1990 as a predictor variable. Because city councils in the northeast region are generally larger and more often unreformed, we expect to find regional differences in the use of committees, with northeast cities having more committees with broad functional responsibilities. Finally, we expect structure of council committee systems to affect policy outputs in large cities. Cities with committees and more developed committee structures should have significantly different policy outcomes than cities with less developed committee systems.

### **Analysis**

The 160 cities responding to our survey include 81 council-manager systems (50.6%), 78 mayor-council governments (48.7%), and one commission government. Most of the cities have a nonpartisan electoral system (77%), with members serving two (24%), three (4%), or four-year (72%) terms. Considerable variation in the method of representation is apparent: a plurality (41%) used a mixture of district and at-large seats, while exclusive use of at-large seats was found in 31% and districts were used in 28%. The size of city councils in these cities ranges from four to 50 members, with the modal number of council members being seven. Regular meetings of these cities' councils are held weekly (51%) or twice a month (46%).

#### *Use of Committees*

The survey revealed that 70% of cities over 100,000 population have legislative committees, while 30%, or 48 cities, do not. Unreformed cities (mayor-council government, district representation, nonpartisan elections) are more likely to use committees than those that have adopted one or all

<sup>1</sup>REFORM is a seven-point scale based upon the degree to which classic reform elements are present in a city. The presence of council-manager government, at-large representation, and nonpartisanship is scored as 7, none of the above is scored as 0, and various combinations of each with unreformed elements are scored between 1 and 6.

of the three key elements of municipal reform. For example, mayor-council cities are decidedly more favorable to committees (86%) than council-manager governments (56%).<sup>2</sup> Similarly, 89% of partisan cities use committees, compared to 65% of nonpartisan communities.<sup>3</sup> Incorporation of the reform-style method of city council representation also reduces the likelihood of having legislative committees. Only half of at-large representation systems use committees, but 84% of district systems and 76% of mixed systems employ committees.<sup>4</sup>

In general, the likelihood of having committees decreases with the presence of more reformed government features. As expected, when we convert ballot type, form of government, and representation method to a seven-point scale, all cities without any element of reform ( $n = 11$ ) have committees. In fact, 86 to 100% of cities with reform index values of 0 to 3 use committees, compared to only 38% of those at the top of the reform scale (7).<sup>5</sup>

Smaller city councils—those with 11 or fewer members—are less inclined to use committees than larger ones. Indeed, every city with a council size of 12 or more has a system of legislative committees. Among small councils—with four to seven members—48% have committees. Council time—the frequency of council meetings—affects use of committees, also. The more time devoted to council work, the more likely a city is to use committees. Seventy-three percent of councils that meet weekly have committees, compared to 67% of councils meeting less often. Finally, some association between committee use and environmental variables is observed. Committees are used by nearly all of the largest cities (populations of 300,000+). Committees are also more likely to be used by city councils in the northeast region (90%).

We tested the effects of these independent variables in three logistic regression models in which responses to a question “Does your city council use legislative committees?” is the dependent variable. Table 1 shows an initial model in which council size is the only independent variable. Size of council is significant and alone correctly predicts 77% of the cases. The second model includes two additional exogenous structural variables—council time (frequency of formal council sessions) and our reform index. Each of the predictors is significant and model 2 correctly predicts 80% of the cases, increasing the proportional reduction in error to 30%. Model 3, in which the environmental variables, population and region,<sup>6</sup> are included,

<sup>2</sup> $X^2 = 19.77$  (2 df),  $p < .0001$ .

<sup>3</sup> $X^2 = 7.46$  (1 df),  $p < .01$ .

<sup>4</sup> $X^2 = 14.73$  (2 df),  $p < .001$ .

<sup>5</sup>Gamma =  $-.55$ ;  $X^2 = 26.79$  (7 df),  $p < .001$ .

<sup>6</sup>REGION is a dummy variable for Northeast = 1, Other = 0.

**Table 1. Logit Models for Use of Standing Committees by City Councils, 1992–93**

| Predictors               | Model 1              | Model 2             | Model 3             |
|--------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Council Size             | 0.546***<br>(0.116)  | 0.458***<br>(0.122) | 0.411***<br>(0.128) |
| Council Time             |                      | 0.829*<br>(0.383)   | 0.666<br>(0.420)    |
| Reform                   |                      | -0.268*<br>(0.120)  | -0.240*<br>(0.122)  |
| Population               |                      |                     | 0.003<br>(0.002)    |
| Region                   |                      |                     | 0.663<br>(0.886)    |
| Constant                 | -3.538***<br>(0.882) | -4.476*<br>(1.828)  | -4.487*<br>(1.990)  |
| Model Chi-square (df)    | 42.137 (1)***        | 49.96 (3)***        | 56.88 (5)***        |
| Correctly Predicted      | 77%                  | 80%                 | 80%                 |
| Prop. Reduction in Error | 22.9%                | 30.4%               | 32.6%               |
| N                        | 160                  | 157                 | 157                 |

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$  (standard errors).

correctly predicts 80% of the cases, and shows a modest increase in the proportional reduction in error coefficient, also. Only council size and reform have significant coefficients, however. Overall, the size of the council is the best predictor of whether a city will use committees, but the addition of other structural variables, including reform and council time, enhances the predictive power of the model. Regional differences and population do not have a direct impact on the use of committees.

We estimated the probability of size of council predicting committee use with the output from model 3. Using the logit coefficients and mean values for the independent variables, we then estimated the likelihood of having committees by varying council size by one standard deviation from its mean position.<sup>7</sup> Table 2 shows that an average size council of 10 members has an 87% probability of using legislative committees. A below average council of just four members would have only a 35% chance of having committees. Virtually every council whose size would be one or more standard deviations above the mean size would have council committees. These findings confirm the importance of structure in predicting the use of legisla-

<sup>7</sup>Formula: Constant + (B(Council Size) \* Mean(Council Size)) + (B(Council Time) \* Mean(Council Time)) + (B(Reform) \* Mean(Reform)) + (B(Population) \* Mean(Population)) + (B(Region) \* Mean(Region)). Mean for Council Size is varied  $\pm 1$  s.d.

**Table 2. Estimated Probabilities for Use of Legislative Committees Under City Councils of Varying Sizes**

| City Council Size Range | City Council Size | Probability of Committees (%) |
|-------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------------|
| Below Average           | 4                 | 35                            |
| Average                 | 10                | 87                            |
| Above Average           | 16                | 99                            |
| Large                   | 22 and above      | 100                           |

*Notes:* Logit tests controlling for council time, reform, population, region. Council size is varied by one standard deviation in each example. Mean size = 9.85, standard deviation = 6.24 (n = 157).

tive committees and validates the significant findings of the logit models shown in Table 1.

#### *Development of Committee Systems*

Significant variation is found in the level of committee system development in these cities. Although we found cities to have as many as 31 legislative committees, the group average was five committees, with six as the most common number. Committees have between two and 13 members, but the mean "average number of committee members" is 4.5. Typically, committee membership is determined by council leaders (46%) or mayors (30%). Seniority is used rarely (7%) in the committee assignment process in these cities.

Table 3 presents two models predicting the number of committees in city councils. In model 1 (which has only structural variables) council size is the strongest predictor of the number of committees (Beta = .52), showing that larger councils have more committees. Also of significance are council time and the term of council members; councils meeting more frequently and those with shorter terms are shown to have more committees. Reform is not significant in this model, which accounts for 31% of the variation. Model 2 adds the environmental variables, population and region, to the equation. Although council size remains the best predictor, council time, council terms, population, and region are all significant predictors. In explaining 37% of the variation with this model, we find that larger councils, meeting more frequently, located in the Northeast, and having larger populations are apt to have more developed committee systems.

#### *Institutional Structure and Legislative Committees*

Given the findings in Tables 1, 2, and 3 that demonstrate the overwhelming importance of institutional structure on legislative committee use

**Table 3. Regression Models for Number of Standing Committees in City Councils, 1992–93**

| Predictors         | Model 1            |       | Model 2            |       |
|--------------------|--------------------|-------|--------------------|-------|
|                    | B (S.E.)           | Beta  | B (S.E.)           | Beta  |
| Council Size       | 0.445***<br>(.065) | .519  | 0.357***<br>(.068) | .416  |
| Council Time       | 2.007**<br>(.638)  | .218  | 1.738**<br>(.635)  | .189  |
| Council Terms      | -1.070*<br>(.424)  | -.170 | -0.988*<br>(.423)  | -.157 |
| Reform             | -0.130<br>(.178)   | -.055 | -0.032<br>(.177)   | -.013 |
| Population         |                    |       | 0.003**<br>(.001)  | .230  |
| Region             |                    |       | 2.970*<br>(1.198)  | .178  |
| Constant           | -1.872<br>(3.064)  |       | -2.015<br>(3.168)  |       |
| Adj R <sup>2</sup> | .31                |       | .37                |       |
| F                  | 18.28***           |       | 15.62***           |       |
| N                  | 153                |       | 153                |       |

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

and development of committee systems, a closer look at the impact of city government form is warranted. What are the effects of mayoral power on committee systems? We examined mayor-council cities ( $n = 78$ ) more closely to assess the impact of strong versus weak mayors on city council structures. We have already established that 86% ( $n = 67$ ) of mayor-council cities use legislative committees. Most cities with a strong mayor (90%) have a city council committee system, while just 72% of weak mayor systems have a committee system.

Analyzing the relationship between mayoral power and committee systems in an inferential fashion, we discover few significant findings. The Pearson correlation between mayoral power (coded 0 for weak, 1 for strong) and the presence of a committee system is  $-.17$  (n.s.). Similarly, the relationship between structure of the committee system (number of legislative committees) and mayoral power is also weak and negative ( $r = -.15$ , n.s.). It is clear from these correlations that strong mayor executive branches do not exert a significant influence on committee systems, at least not one that is different from weak mayor systems. Part of the reason for this is that mayor-council governments are also more likely to have large city councils ( $r = .35$ ,  $p \leq .01$ ). The structural influence has more to do

with the form of government and size of the city council than the power of the mayor within that structure.

Similarly, we studied the influence of other structural features more closely. One of our interests stems from the thesis that committee systems may advance the political or electoral interests of a legislator's district. As shown earlier, cities with district representation are most likely to use committees (84%), followed by mixed systems (76%), and then at-large systems (50%). Do district representational structures lead to a more developed committee structure within city councils? The correlation between a district dummy variable and size of committee systems is weak and not significant ( $r = .14$ ). Therefore, although legislative committees are significantly more likely to be present under district-style structures, councils with district representatives do not have more developed legislative committees. Under such circumstances, committees are unlikely to be used for political or electoral objectives of council members.

We also examined the additive effects of structure on legislative committee systems. In a multiple regression model that included six structural predictors: mayoral power, method of representation, partisanship, size of council, council terms, and time devoted to council duties, we were able to explain 36% of the variation in size of the legislative committee system. The only significant predictor was size of the council, however, which positively determined larger committee systems. None of the other structural variables came close to achieving statistical significance. At this point it appears that mayoral power, district representation, and traditional reform have no significant independent effect on the development of council committee systems.

### *Policy Functions of Committees*

One of the most understudied areas of city council legislative processes is the policy role of committees. Focusing on the 112 cities with committees, we explore policy functions and outputs of committees. We identified five major policy functions of legislative committees and asked responding cities to indicate if their committees performed each function. Most cities use their committees to *study* proposed legislation (90%) and they spend an average of 40% of committee time performing this function. Committees spend nearly equal shares of time *evaluating* current programs (68%) or *proposing* legislation (67%). Slightly more than 20% of committee work, on average, is devoted to each of these functions. Somewhat surprisingly, *conducting* public hearings on issues occurs in only about half of the cities, which on average spend less than 19% of their time on hearings. Further, legislative *oversight* of the executive branch is performed in just 35% of committees.

What determines the range of policy roles for committees? A composite function index that measures the range of policy functions (1 to 5) performed by committees was constructed and studied for association with a number of structural and environmental factors. The best correlates of policy roles are reform and number of committee members. The greater the degree of municipal reform, the less likely committees are to study bills, conduct hearings, or perform oversight. Having reform features, in general, decreases the range of policy-related tasks found among the committees. As Svava (1990) has noted, this is likely due to executive dominance of councils in council-manager and strong mayor cities. Form of government is negatively associated with several policy functions, indicating a significant relationship between mayor-council governments and higher proportions of cities conducting oversight and public hearings.

Larger city councils and larger average membership on committees significantly increase the share of cities with broader policy functions. Both public hearings and oversight are significantly correlated with council and committee size. Although council time is not correlated with policy tasks, committee meeting frequency is associated with broader policy functions, particularly in the area of public hearings. Environmental variables had little effect on committee policy roles. Although structural variables are far better correlates of committee policy functions, few have significant correlations and we did not pursue a multivariate model of specific policy roles.

### *Committees and Legislative Business*

Respondents were asked how much of the policy-making business of the city council is conducted in committees. An average of 56% of legislative business is performed by committees in these cities. Table 4 shows regression models for the proportion of city council policy-making performed by committees regressed on three key predictors. In Model 1, two structural variables—council size and the policy function index—are used to predict policy-making by committees. Both predictors are significant, indicating that larger city councils and committee systems with broader policy-making functions handle more policy business for their city councils. (Other structural variables had very low correlations with this endogenous variable and were not used in the model.) Only one environmental variable—population—is correlated with the proportion of policy-making performed by committees. Model 2 shows, however, that this variable has no significant effect on the amount of policy-making done by committees. Although the models are significant, they account for only a small portion of the variation in committee policy-making.

**Table 4. Regression Models for Proportion of City Council Policy-making by Committees, 1992-93**

| Predictors         | Model 1            |      | Model 2            |       |
|--------------------|--------------------|------|--------------------|-------|
|                    | B (S.E.)           | Beta | B (S.E.)           | Beta  |
| Council Size       | 1.249*<br>(.500)   | .257 | 1.313*<br>(.527)   | .270  |
| Function Index     | 7.616**<br>(2.850) | .275 | 7.680**<br>(2.869) | .278  |
| Population         |                    |      | -0.003<br>(.007)   | -.044 |
| Constant           | 15.405<br>(11.077) |      | 15.664<br>(11.153) |       |
| Adj R <sup>2</sup> | .15                |      | .14                |       |
| F                  | 8.05***            |      | 5.36**             |       |
| N                  | 84                 |      | 84                 |       |

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

### *Committees and Policy Outcomes*

Finally, what are the policy consequences of city council legislative committees? To answer this question, we collected budget data for city general expenditures and seven policy areas for 1992 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1994) and began by comparing per capita (p.c.) spending in cities with committees to cities without committees. Table 5 displays our results.

The first analysis shows that spending in cities with committees is \$1,043 p.c., but is much lower (\$854 p.c.) in cities without committees. *T*-tests were performed and this difference in spending is significant and suggests that higher spending is found in cities with legislative committee systems. Analysis 2 reveals that cities with more developed (larger) committee systems have significantly higher average spending than cities with smaller committee systems. Regression analysis (not shown) confirms that general expenditures are \$28 higher for each additional committee.<sup>8</sup> When we control for other structural and environmental variables, however, the committee variable is no longer significant, indicating that other predictors are associated with city spending per capita.

We expected that spending would be higher in functional areas that have committees responsible for policy-making for that function, particularly where committees could be used to increase distributive policy spend-

<sup>8</sup> $b = +\$28.44$ ,  $p < .01$ .



**Table 5. Policy Impact of City Council Committees: Average Per Capita Expenditures, 1992 (N)**

| Analysis | Policy Area                       | Cities without council committees |  |  |
|----------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|--|
|          |                                   | Cities with council committees    | Cities with large committee systems <sup>1</sup> | Cities with small committee systems <sup>2</sup> |
| 1        | General Expenditures              | \$1,043.29 <sup>+</sup> (110)     |  | \$853.61 <sup>+</sup> (47)                       |
| 2        | General Expenditures              | \$1,152.14* (72)                  | \$837.04* (38)                                   | n/a  |
| 3        | Police                            | \$145.70 (51)                     | \$143.17 (58)                                    | \$140.07 (47)                                    |
| 4        | Fire                              | \$ 95.22 <sup>+</sup> (51)        | \$ 85.10 <sup>+</sup> (59)                       | \$ 81.32 (47)                                    |
| 5        | Highways                          | \$ 85.37 (36)                     | \$ 86.82 (74)                                    | \$ 86.30 (47)                                    |
| 6        | Housing and Community Development | \$ 76.49 (54)                     | \$ 39.38** (56)                                  | \$ 66.27 (47)                                    |
| 7        | Parks and Recreation              | \$ 89.43 (22)                     | \$ 69.87 (88)                                    | \$ 73.80 (47)                                    |
| 8        | Sewerage                          | \$ 86.05 (42)                     | \$ 90.21 (68)                                    | \$ 61.58** (47)                                  |
| 9        | Solid Waste                       | \$ 50.19 (42)                     | \$ 43.13 (68)                                    | \$ 50.06 (47)                                    |

<sup>1</sup>Cities with six or more committees.

<sup>2</sup>Cities with one to five committees.

<sup>+</sup>*t*-test  $p \leq .10$ ; \**t*-test  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\**t*-test  $p \leq .01$ .

ing. Analyses 3 to 9 display policy outcomes under three different committee structures: (1) cities that have a functional committee in this policy area, (2) cities without a functional area committee, and (3) cities without council committees. The analyses demonstrate that only two policy areas are affected by the presence of a functional committee. Budgets for fire departments and housing and community development programs are significantly higher where the city council has a related functional committee. None of the other policy areas had significantly different spending based upon the presence of a functional committee. And sewer policy is the only budget area with significantly lower average spending in cities without committees. (Regression analysis reveals that this finding is attributable to regional differences, not committees.)

Based upon the *t*-tests performed on average per capita spending in

these municipal policy areas, inferential analysis was not expected to reveal much. Correlational analysis confirms that the existence of a functional committee related to a policy area is associated with higher spending in just two areas: (1) cities with public safety committees have modestly higher fire spending ( $r = .17$ ) and (2) cities with housing or development committees have higher housing and community development spending ( $r = .16$ ) ( $p \leq .05$ ). Multivariate regression (not shown) using the functional committee as a predictor of policy spending, along with other structural and environmental variables, shows that only the existence of a housing or development committee significantly predicts higher average per capita spending in this policy area. This analysis shows that when controlling for use of committees, size of council, policy functions of committees, structure, region, and population, the presence of a housing committee will increase housing and community development budgets by about \$33 p.c. In general, committees may have their greatest impact in increasing city budgets overall, while having more limited impact on specific policy areas.

### Discussion

Expectations about council committees and their impact can be drawn from the more developed scholarship on national and state legislative committees; however, that research does not fit city council committees well. In fact, the structure of city governments creates conditions for varied use and different policy roles among cities with council committees. Our study has shown that most large cities employ legislative committees but their use varies due to structural, not environmental, variables. As we hypothesized, environmental variables, such as population size and region, mattered little in the organization of committees, contrary to other research on urban political structure (e.g., Hawkins 1971). But structure—particularly council size and reformism—made a difference. As expected, the use of committees was found to be greater in mayor-council cities and in cities with district methods of city council representation. Cities with district representation systems, whose members have a different representational focus than at-large members (Prewitt 1970; Welch and Bledsoe 1988), tend to be associated with greater numbers of committees. Time devoted to council work also made a difference; as anticipated, committees were more widely used in more active councils.

The development of legislative committee systems was also a function of structural variables, although, contrary to our expectations, population and region had more influence here than expected. The key structural predictor was council size, with larger city councils having bigger committee systems. Frequency of council meetings and shorter council terms also were found to predict larger committee systems.

An important finding of this research was that city council committees had narrower policy roles, fewer policy functions, and handled less legislative business than we know to be true of congressional and state legislative committees. Some cities' committees seem to engage in the same types of activities that have been observed among state and congressional committees (e.g., Fenno 1973; Hamm 1980); namely, they study and propose legislation, evaluate existing programs, and conduct hearings on legislative matters. The most common role for council committees was to study legislative proposals. Committees also regularly evaluated existing programs and initiated legislation. But less than half conducted public hearings on bills and few were engaged in legislative oversight of the executive branch, a real departure from the findings of other legislative studies.

Broader policy roles were found with fewer reform features and larger membership on legislative committees. The policy function index was higher among cities with less reform, larger councils, more committee members, and more committee meetings. But another aspect of structure—the number of committees—had the greatest impact on policy functions. More committees produced narrower policy functions for all committees. Larger city councils and those with broad policy functions were associated with higher shares of a city's legislative business being conducted in committees.

Despite some similarities to state and congressional committees, council committee systems are different. Most of these differences are due to structural features of the city government. Reformism has produced executive dominance of city council policy-making. Both council-manager governments and strong mayor-council systems represent structures in which the executive branch functions as the repository of information on policy-making. City council committee systems are somewhat unnecessary—perhaps nonrational (Krehbiel 1987)—except under weak mayor-council structures in which the council must develop expertise to make policy. Further, many at-large, more volunteeristic councils do not have the same compelling demands for committee structures. Their representational roles are not the same as that of a district-based congressman or legislator. The implication of this research is that structure, more than environment, affects policy-making by council committees. Where committee structures are more extensive, the policy-making functions and responsibilities will be greater.

Council committees have a small impact on policy outputs. This finding runs contrary to congressional literature that demonstrates the powerful role of committees (Shepsle and Weingast 1987). Cities with legislative committees and councils with more developed committee systems have significantly higher average spending per capita than other cities. But the presence of a committee in a functional policy area of city government

produced significantly higher spending in just two areas—fire protection and housing/community development. These findings show that in areas subject to distributive politics, committees may increase spending to benefit their constituents with fire protection and housing or community development dollars. And although the policy findings are not consistent across areas, they demonstrate that the structurally-determined nature of council committee organization and development may affect policy—even if it is in a limited fashion.

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