

Conflict and Cooperation in Municipalities: Do Variations in Form of Government Have an Effect?

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While disagreements among city officials are a normal part of the political process, at some point conflict will lead to dysfunction. Recently, in Warner Robbins, Georgia, a heated exchange between two council members devolved into the use of racial slurs (Rae 2010). High levels of conflict or low levels of cooperation can hamper the decision-making process and lead to stalemate in government. An assessment of the quality of the governance process is therefore incomplete without determining the levels of conflict and cooperation between municipal officials.

Earlier research points to variables related to the form and structure of government as primary contributors to the level of conflict or cooperation in a local government (Svara 1988, 1990).

However, a second line of research suggests that the two most common types of municipal government, the mayor-council and council-manager forms, have been adapting into less distinct forms of local government. An implication of this stream of research is that form of government no longer makes much difference in the outcomes of the governance process, since local governments are essentially becoming hybridized in form.¹ The purpose of our article is two-fold, to determine what factors influence levels of conflict and cooperation in the municipal governance process and to test a new typology of local government form (Nelson and Svara 2010) that challenges the adapted cities hypothesis. Our research contributes to the literature in urban governance and public administration by providing the first analysis of both conflict and cooperation in a national sample and by using an expanded typology of form of government to test the relationship of form and structure on levels of conflict and cooperation.

This study provides a comprehensive examination of both perception of conflict and the attitudes related to cooperation between and among elected officials and the chief appointed official. Most existing studies of relationships between elected officials focus solely on conflict, not cooperation (Welch and Bledsoe 1988; Whitaker and DeHoog 1991; Kaatz, French, and Prentiss-Cooper 1999; Ihrke and Niederjohn 2005). In addition, whereas other studies have been limited to small sample comparative case studies or single-state surveys, our study uses a national survey, an expanded typology of local government forms, and a set of other variables suggested by the literature to determine what factors are likely to lead to greater cooperation and conflict in the local governance process. By improving both the quality of the variables—both dependent and independent—and using a more

comprehensive sample, our study provides a better picture of the factors related to cooperation and conflict at the local level.

Variations in Local Government Form

Although American local governments can be structured in a number of ways, the two most common variations are the council-manager and mayor-council forms. While some scholars consider a host of factors as indicators of local government form, in order to differentiate form of government, researchers must determine whether separation of powers exists between an elected executive and council.

In the council-manager form, legislative and executive powers are unified under the elected council; the mayor is a member of council and has limited powers beyond that of other members of council. Mayor-council governments have separation of powers between an elected mayor (the chief executive) and an elected council (legislative). A mayor-council government often has an appointed chief administrative office (CAO) to handle daily operations.

Recent research suggests that city leaders may be attempting to achieve the best qualities of each form by selecting aspects of each model to include in their governments (Hansell 1999; DeSantis and Renner 2002; MacManus and Bullock 2003; Frederickson, Johnson, and Wood 2004). Not all institutional features of local governments distinguish between forms of government, but researchers have selectively applied a combination of features of form with other structural features to construct their re-classifications of council-manager and mayor-council forms. Since each study uses a different set of characteristics by which to compare the types of government, it is difficult to determine whether there is a definitive direction or trend in creating adapted or hybridized forms of government.

Svara and Nelson (2008) argue that variations distinguishing among form of government should be dependent only on those features that affect the balance of power between local government officials. In a later study (2010), Nelson and Svara created seven variations in form for council-manager and mayor-council governments (see Table 1) using the variables—nominal form, presence or absence of a CAO, and who appoints the CAO (when present). For council-manager governments, they added the variable of mayoral selection method.

Table 1 about here

The table shows the total number of cities in the United States (with populations greater than 10,000) that fit each variation of form. In the case of council-manager cities, there have been limited changes to the institutional

features of the form. The most common variation is the direct election of the mayor. Mayor-council cities show greater variation. Although nearly half of the cities use an unmodified strong mayor form, another half have added a CAO to their governing structure. When the mayor is the person responsible for appointment and removal of the CAO, without council input, the balance of power between the mayor and members of council remains relatively the same as for the strong mayor form. However, council involvement in the selection of the CAO can indicate a greater level of influence by the council members than when council has no appointment or removal authority.

Using the seven-variation typology for form of government, we seek to determine whether form of government is related to the reported levels of conflict and cooperation in different communities. Although there is considerable research assessing whether form of government matters for policy outcomes, development choices, and adoption of efficiency measures (Lineberry and Fowler 1967; Liebert 1974; Morgan and Pelissero 1980; Nunn 1996; Feiock and Kim 2001; MacDonald 2008; Coate and Knight 2009), there has not been an application of a new form of government typology to local government decision-making. One of the objectives of this study is to determine whether the adaptations of government as described by Frederickson, Johnson, and Wood (2004) have nullified the differences in perceived conflict and cooperation in the decision making process in different governmental forms. We argue that governmental forms are still significant factors in the levels of conflict and cooperation as perceived by local government officials.

Conflict and Cooperation

Conflict within organizations has been the subject of a number of studies in the private sector. However, studies of conflict and cooperation in public sector organizations are much more limited. Svara's (1988, 1990, 1999) work is the most comprehensive research to date of the levels of conflict and cooperation in the governmental process within cities.

Conflict represents an escalation of a disagreement when group members with incompatible goals seek to impose their preferences on others (Svara 1990); as referred to in this research, conflict is not simply the presence of tension and disagreement but rather a situation that exists when the tension escalates into a higher level of negative interaction. Alternatively, cooperation means positive interactions or active contributions that seek to accommodate participants' preferences. When cooperation is predominant, elected and administrative officials may be assumed to have compatible goals, whereas low cooperation results from the absence of positive interactions or from unmet

expectations (Svara 1990). When interactions become negative, such as blocking behavior and activities that disregard the preferences of other participants, the result is conflict.

While there are differences in opinion on the effects of conflict and cooperation in the decision-making process, the quality of the policy decisions can be affected by the levels of conflict and cooperation in the process (Svara 1990). Although it is not always the case, high cooperation levels and low conflict levels can facilitate higher quality decisions through the collaboration of the participants in the process while low cooperation levels and high conflict levels can inhibit collaboration that would influence the quality of the decisions.

Although cooperation has not been studied empirically in local government, there is an existing body of literature on conflict. Measurement of conflict varies in earlier studies. Research on the relationship between conflict and city manager turnover (Whitaker and DeHoog 1991; Kaatz, French, and Prentiss-Cooper 1999) used respondent assessments of policy and political conflict. Conflict was measured differently by Kaatz, French, and Prentiss-Cooper (1999) who asked respondents whether there was a perception of a high number of political or policy disputes. In two separate studies of conflict in Wisconsin municipalities, Ihrke and Niederjohn (2005) and Johnson and Ihrke (2004) used additive indices to measure conflict that asked respondents to evaluate the level of council agreement or disagreement on issues, consensus, cooperation, conflict, and whether disagreements go on forever.

Using the literature on conflict and cooperation in local government and earlier work on decision-making, we can identify prospective factors that may mitigate conflict or promote conditions for cooperation. Svara (1988, 1990) argues that council-manager governments are likely to have greater levels of cooperation and lower levels of conflict than other municipalities because of the separation of powers inherent in the mayor-council form. Svara (1988) conducted interviews and surveys, observed meetings, and analyzed newspaper coverage in six pairs of cities. In each pair, the cities were similar in population size and socioeconomic characteristics but differed in form of government—one was a mayor-council city and the other council-manager. He concluded that council-manager cities generate less conflict and are more conducive to cooperation.

Welch and Bledsoe (1988) evaluated the relationship of conflict and city government structure (district or partisan elections of council members), but not form of government. They found that conflict was related to district elections versus at-large elections of council members. Ammons' research (2008) on professionals who had served as administrators in both council-manager and mayor-council governments, found that administrators viewed the

mayor-council positions as more political. This is consistent with Svava's findings. The mayor, whose powers are separate from those of council in a mayor-council government, is likely to have goals that diverge from those of council members, leading to greater conflict. Ihrke and Niederjohn's (2005) findings were inconsistent with those of Svava and Ammons. Surveying Wisconsin municipalities, they used dummy variables to compare the mayor-council form to the council-manager and hybrid forms (mayor-council with CAO). They did not find form of government was related to their index for council conflict.

This line of research provides the basis for our first hypothesis, that form of government (operationalized using the Nelson and Svava (2010) typology) will be related to perceptions of levels of conflict and cooperation in municipal government.

Hypothesis 1: Council-manager municipalities will report higher levels of cooperation and lower levels of conflict than mayor-council municipalities.

In addition to form of government, other factors have been examined to determine whether they have an effect on the creation of conflict and cooperation in the exercise of policy development in a city organization. Svava (1988) argues that low levels of cooperation and high levels of conflict are more likely to be associated with greater population size, lower growth rates, a high minority population, lower education levels for residents, a lower government bond rating (an indicator of the fiscal health of the municipality), larger councils, more district seats for council members, and partisan elections.

Most of the variables in this list have not been the subject of significance testing in relation to conflict and none have been evaluated for their potential effects on cooperative behavior. Researchers have found that the election method of council members (at-large versus by-district) changes the racial, income, gender, and partisan composition of city councils (Engstrom and McDonald 1982; Grofman and Davidson 1994; Karnig and Welch 1980; Welch and Bledsoe 1988). Although the results of studies on the effects of district elections are mixed (Dalenberg and Duffy-Deno 2002; Feiock and West 1994; Newland 1994; Southwick 1997; Svava 1986), they are based on the theoretical proposition that differences in election methods lead to different incentives for council members—due to having either a citywide or neighborhood focus, depending on the election type. The conclusions from this literature provided the rationale for our second hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2: Municipalities with a lower proportion of council seats allocated by district will report higher levels of perceived cooperation and lower levels of perceived conflict than those municipalities with a higher proportion of district seats.

A second electoral option at the local level that may be related to levels of conflict and cooperation is whether to have partisan or nonpartisan ballots. Electoral features typical of the reform model of local government, including nonpartisan and at-large elections, are linked to lower rates of voter turnout and lower proportions of minority representation on city councils (Engstrom and McDonald 1982; Grofman 1994). The greater diversity in the partisan-elected council, of both race and party, may lead to greater levels of conflict in the policy process, but empirical studies of this effect are limited and mixed (Haley 1973; Welch and Bledsoe 1988; Newland 1994). Partisan elections may not lead to greater conflict on city councils but probably highlight schisms that already exist (Svara 1990).

Hypothesis 3: Municipalities with non-partisan elections will have higher levels of reported cooperation and lower levels of reported conflict than municipalities using partisan elections.

Demographics of the municipalities may also influence the level of conflict and cooperation on council. Population growth has been linked to higher property taxes (Ladd 1994; Weber and Buchanan 1980), decreased incentives for economic development (Feiock, Jeong, and Kim 2003), and the adoption of the council-manager form of government (Lineberry and Fowler 1967; Dye and MacManus 1976). As with the other variables however, the limited empirical research on conflict and cooperation related to growth is inconclusive (Johnson and Ihrke 2004; Ihrke and Niederjohn 2005). In addition, for the same reason that district elections potentially influence policy divisiveness on council, the overall diversity of the community may lead to greater conflict (Svara 1988).

The level of economic stress a municipality is under can also have implications for the governance process. For this reason, scholars have argued that a financially successful municipality may tend to foster greater levels of cooperation and lower levels of conflict in decision-making (Svara 1988; Bowers and Rich 2000). We chose two variables to measure the fiscal stability of the municipality, median household income and the bond rating of the municipality. Using the findings in the literature, we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 4: As population growth rate increases, reported cooperation will decrease and reported conflict will increase.

Hypothesis 5: As diversity (percent minority population) increases, reported cooperation will decrease and reported conflict will increase.

Hypothesis 6: As median household income in a municipality increases, reported cooperation will increase and reported conflict will decrease.

Hypothesis 7: As a municipality's fiscal health improves (bond rating), reported cooperation will increase and reported conflict will decrease.

Earlier attempts to study conflict and cooperation at the local level are incomplete, most use a single-state sample and therefore have a limited perspective on certain variables—particularly government form. This is the first study that uses a national statistical analysis to measure reported conflict and cooperation and conditions commonly associated with conflict and cooperation in municipal government. In addition, our study categorizes form of government in a way that allows for the examination of different structural options in form, while also considering separation of powers as the critical element distinguishing the two major forms in the United States.

Methodology

Survey Design and Sampling

In order to evaluate the perception of the levels of conflict and cooperation in the governmental process we used a written survey administered to a national sample of municipal elected officials and chief appointed officers. Svava's questionnaire (1990, 1999) was used to develop the instrument for this study.

Surveys were mailed in 2006 to all 562 municipalities in the U.S. with populations greater than 50,000 and fewer than 250,000, as determined by the 2000 census. The choice of medium-sized municipalities had two rationales; the first was manageability. Second, in the public administration and political science community, there has been relatively little attention given to the study of medium-sized cities in this country while larger cities have received much more attention and analysis.

The survey was sent to the 562 mayors and the 491 city managers/CAOs in the cities meeting the population criterion. For municipalities whose mayors responded to the first mailing, a second set of surveys were sent to the council members. Since levels of conflict and cooperation are a result of the interaction between mayors, council members, and CAOs, survey results from all three elements (in communities having an appointed administrator) of the decision-making process were needed to develop a composite score for a city.

Table 2 provides details on the response rates. All cities from which at least two council members responded are included in the database (n = 158). The overall response rate from the population is 28%.

Table 2 about here

The sample municipalities were very similar in structure and demographics to the overall population (see Table 3). The resultant database includes the results of the scoring for mayors, averages of the responding council members, and the city manager/CAO, where the position exists.

Table 3 about here

Dependent Variables—Conflict and Cooperation

In this study, the primary dependent variables are latent constructs for reported conflict and cooperation among elected officials, between elected officials and the chief executive officer (CEO—mayor in mayor-council cities), and between elected officials and the chief administrative officer (CAO or city manager, when present) and those conditions that are associated with conflict and cooperation. Using Svara's (1990, 1999) operationalization of cooperation and conflict and a number of earlier works for conflict (Welch and Bledsoe 1988; Whitaker and DeHoog 1991; Kaatz, French, and Prentiss-Cooper 1999; Johnson and Ihrke 2004), a set of survey questions was selected to examine tensions in municipal government that are likely sources of greater or lesser levels of cooperation or conflict.

The conflict index includes questions that asked directly about conflict, those that attempt to ascertain whether respondents believe other officials are overstepping their roles, and questions that measure the alignment between actual and preferred responsibilities of the council members, mayor, and CAO. The respondents were asked to identify the level of unanimity of council decisions; to assess whether there were factions on city council; and to render a judgment as to whether conflict was a problem on city council. As described in the literature review, prior research has often considered the presence of factions and the unanimity of council votes to be indicators of conflict (Welch and Bledsoe 1988; Svara 1990, 1999; Johnson and Ihrke 2004; Ihrke and Niederjohn 2005). Factions on the council create perceptions of cliques attempting to achieve their goals to the detriment of others.

The remaining questions asked respondents to judge whether council members were too focused on short-term and administrative matters and to evaluate the involvement of the city council and the mayor and administration in different areas according to the actual level and the preferred level of involvement. Both of these groups of questions evaluate whether there is agreement of the council members, mayor, and administrator about the appropriate roles for each. This role agreement is an important element to the level of conflict in a municipality (Svara 1990). The responses from these twelve items were added to create the index variable for conflict (see Table 4 for descriptive statistics). For each municipality, council members' responses were averaged, and then added to the responses of the mayors and CAOs (when present). The final index score for each municipality was the mean of the CAO, CEO, and council scores. Cronbach's alpha was used to measure internal consistency of the index. Alpha for conflict is .742, meeting the widely accepted minimum cut-off of .7 (Garson 2008).

Table 4 about here

Cooperation has greater complexity and has not been measured quantitatively in earlier work. Cooperation can be assessed by examining the relationships among elected officials, whether council members have attitudes that emphasize long-term, broad issues, the performance ratings officials give to each other, and the level of council involvement in policymaking versus administration (Svara 1990). Although high levels of conflict are not necessarily a sufficient condition for low cooperation, the presence of a low level of cooperation can promote the development of conflict (Svara 1990, 1999). The primary assumption is that where expectations among the mayor, council members, and city manager/CAO differ regarding the involvement of each in policy development and city management, conditions are ripe for conflict, whereas expectations held commonly among all participants support cooperation. With this as our basis, and using Svara's 1990 questionnaire to construct our own, we used questions asking respondents to evaluate the performance of the mayor, council, and CAO as part of the cooperation measure. We used factor analysis to confirm that the performance variables were appropriately correlated.² As hoped for, the analysis resulted in a three factor model—council performance, mayoral performance, and CAO performance.

The second component of cooperation, according to Svara (1990) is the quality of the relationships between elected and administrative officials. To this end, we included in the cooperation construct two items that ask respondents to evaluate the quality of the working relationship between the council and mayor and the council and the CAO. These two items were combined with the three performance variables to create an additive index for cooperation. As with the conflict variable, council member responses were averaged and then added to the scores for the CEO and CAO (when present); the final index score is the mean of the three responses (See Table 4 for descriptive statistics). Cronbach's alpha for the cooperation variable is .932.

Providing examples from this project's survey respondents helps to enhance the descriptions of conflict and cooperation. The mayor, council members, and CAOs were given an opportunity to provide their perspectives on both conflict and cooperation within their respective organizational settings. When commenting on conflict, one city manager said that there was a great deal of conflict between some members of council and the mayor, these council members "would want to exercise executive prerogatives and have a poor understanding of the difference between executive and legislative functions...on occasion, to an extreme." Another manager commented that "some councilors do not like or respect the mayor and would like to unseat him." A council member from another city stated that the mayor holds back information from council and instead releases new information to the media, further straining the relationship between the mayor and council members.

Respondents also gave examples of cooperative efforts between the mayor, council members, and staff. A city manager remarked on the importance of the annual goal setting process by council. According to the manager, this process ensures that “staff know what needs to get done.” In a different municipality, a council member emphasized the importance of communication in cooperative efforts. He said, “there is a lot of cooperation because we believe in talking with each other and not at each other.” This council member believes that better communication leads to better outcomes for the community. These examples serve to illustrate what the respondents see as conflict and cooperation in the local governance process.

Independent Variables

Though the empirical literature on conflict and cooperation in local governments is not extensive, we did use previous research to identify factors associated with conflict and cooperation in local government decision-making to identify potential independent variables for our study³. As indicated in the hypotheses, we identified seven potential independent variables from earlier research—form of government, population growth or decline, median household income, percent minority population, method of council selection (at-large, by district, or a combination of the two), financial condition of the municipality, and partisan/nonpartisan elections.

Form of government is operationalized according to Nelson and Svara’s (2010) seven-category typology. This variable is designed as a scale beginning with the traditional reform model—council-manager with appointed mayor, to the strong mayor-council form of government. Population growth or decline is the percentage increase or decrease in the population figures from 1990 to 2000 as reported by the U.S. Census Bureau. Median household income and percent minority population are from the 2000 U.S. Census. Standard & Poor’s, Moody’s, and Fitch rating services provided the bond rating for each municipality. Data obtained from the community include the proportion of council members elected by district and a dichotomous variable for partisan or non-partisan elections⁴.

A regression model was used to correlate the independent variables for these factors, by city, to the reported level of conflict and cooperation in those cities. The relationship of these independent variables to the levels of reported conflict and cooperation among the responding cities provided the basis for the analysis that follows.

Findings

The descriptive statistics of the independent variables for the sample are shown in Tables 5 and 6. Grouping the sample cities according to the seven-category typology indicates that only one city fell into the

empowered mayor-council-manager group and the mayor and council-administrator group. Since there are only 22 cities in the U.S. (with populations of at least 10,000) that fit the empowered mayor-council-manager group (a true hybrid form), it is not surprising that only one showed up in our sample. The mayor and council-administrator type is found in 212 cities in the nation with populations of at least 10,000. These cities, which self-designate as mayor-council form but function similarly to council-manager form, are fairly common in states like Illinois and Wisconsin where a manager can easily be added by ordinance.

The largest category of cities (52.5%) are those with the mayor-council-manager designation—a council-manager government with a directly elected mayor. In order to meet the assumptions of multiple regression, the form of government variable was recoded as a dummy variable, with council-manager cities acting as the reference group.

Tables 5 and 6 about here

Regression Results for Conflict and Cooperation Models

We ran two sets of regression models using the ordinary least squares (OLS) method. One model used the dependent variable for reported conflict; the other used the cooperation index as the dependent variable.

The OLS multiple regression model, using reported level of conflict as the dependent variable and form of government as a set of dummy variables, was significant ($p < .000$). The r-squared (R^2) was .265, meaning that more than 26% of the variation in the variable conflict is explained by the model, a moderate finding.

As shown in Table 7, the only variable significant at the .05 level for the conflict model was form of government, mayor-administrator-council (a mayor-council government with a CAO in which the mayor appoints the CAO), and the mayor-council form. The positive beta value indicates that the levels of perceived conflict in communities with the mayor-administrator-council and mayor-council forms are significantly higher than in those communities with the council-manager form of government.

Table 7 about here

All of the cities with a professional administrator hired with council involvement showed lower levels of reported conflict in the decision-making process than the cities without such a position or the municipalities that have a CAO who is appointed by the mayor (Table 7). Of interest is the fact that the other two council-manager categories—those with greater mayoral roles—showed lower perceived conflict than the council-manager form with the mayor appointed by the council.

Results from the analysis of cooperation model showed similar results to that of conflict model (Table 7). However, with an r-squared of .477 the model had a better fit than that for perceived conflict. In the cooperation model, the mayor-council-administrator form was the only category that differed significantly from the council-manager form. There were lower levels of reported cooperation in the mayor-council-administrator municipalities than in the council-manager governments. The percent of council members elected by district had a statistically significant negative relationship with levels of perceived cooperation—the greater the proportion of council members elected by district, the lower the levels of cooperation. This finding confirms the second hypothesis. All mayor-council governments except those in which the council has a role in the appointment of the CAO have lower levels of cooperation than do council-manager governments, according to the results. In addition, council-manager municipalities with mayors elected at-large have higher levels of cooperation than do council-manager municipalities with mayors appointed by council. Municipalities that have higher percentages of council members elected by district have lower levels of cooperation.

Table 8 presents the results from the second set of models—using the seven-category typology of government form as an ordinal variable. Both the conflict and cooperation models were significant for the form of government. **Table 8 about here**

To revisit our initial hypotheses, we find that only hypothesis 1 and part of hypothesis 2 were confirmed. As stated in hypothesis 1, council manager municipalities were found to have higher levels of cooperation and lower levels of perceived conflict than mayor-council municipalities. For hypothesis 2, we found that higher proportions of by-district council seats were associated with lower levels of reported cooperation, in the model with the categorical form of government variable. Although the coefficient for the by-district variable in the conflict model was positive, indicating that higher proportions of district seats are associated with higher levels of reported conflict, the results were not statistically significant.

There were no other statistically significant independent variables, so the other hypotheses cannot be confirmed. In addition, only the diversity variable had coefficients in the directions hypothesized—as the percentage of minorities in the community increases, perceived conflict increases and conditions conducive to cooperation decline. However, the results were not statistically significant.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

Of the independent variables selected for this analysis, form of government proved to be the only variable that was significantly related to both perceived levels of conflict and cooperation in the decision-making process. Specifically, this study found that communities using the mayor-council form of government without a CAO, and those using the mayor-council form with a CAO appointed by the mayor, were associated with higher levels of reported conflict and conditions that were less likely to promote cooperation in decision-making than the council-manager form (with or without an elected mayor) and mayor-council forms with a CAO jointly appointed by the mayor and council. The existence of a professional administrator appointed by both parties was the telling factor in the analysis. Communities without a professional administrator had higher levels of perceived conflict and lower levels of reported cooperation than any other form of government variation, except for the mayor-council form in which the mayor selects the CAO without council input. In fact, the highest levels of reported conflict were found in municipalities with mayors who select the CAOs.

Although the differences between all categories of the form of government variable were not statistically significant, it is interesting to look at the patterns of perceived conflict and cooperation according to governmental form. Figure 1 shows the distribution of mean scores of conflict according to form of government. Mayor-council cities (the last four categories) have higher levels of perceived conflict than those cities using the council-manager form.

Figure 1 about here

An inverse pattern was seen with the cooperation scores. Council-manager municipalities with empowered mayors had the highest cooperation scores (see Figure 2). All four categories of mayor-council municipalities had lower cooperation scores than did the council-manager municipalities.

Figure 2 about here

While it could be argued that cities with lower tendencies for conflict and greater tendencies for cooperation are more likely to adopt a form of government that includes a city manager or CAO, it also plausible that the existence of the professional managerial position helps to reduce conflict and increase cooperation. Operating under the principle of unification of powers, the council-manager form is likely to see a lower level of political friction than in mayor-council cities. Higher levels of perceived cooperation and lower levels of perceived conflict in the mayor-council form with a council-appointed CAO may indicate that the existence of a council-appointed professional administrator helps bridge the separation of powers divide. An exception occurs when the

mayor has the right to appoint the CAO. In this case, the mayor-council government retains its strong mayor characteristics, with the mayor determining which duties are delegated to the CAO.

The mayor-council form of government, in which the mayor often sees leadership as the acquisition and use of power, functions through the separation of powers and thus creates an environment for competition and disagreement similar to that found on the national level. In the council-manager form, on the other hand, the mayor's role is of the presiding officer of the city council; having little independent power, the mayor serves more as a facilitator to promote communication and effective interaction in the decision-making process, and so the relationship between the mayor and the council members requires more cooperation and less conflict. Since city managers are typically hired and fired by the entire council, not by one individual, the security of their position depends on developing a favorable relationship with the entire council.

Why might directly elected mayors influence conflict and cooperation even when their formal powers are limited? This question certainly deserves additional investigation. Although council-manager municipalities with directly elected mayors had higher cooperation scores and lower conflict scores in this study, additional research is needed to determine whether that pattern can be replicated and proven statistically significant. We suggest that mayors in council-manager governments who are elected at-large tend to have a mediating effect on conflict and are able to garner greater cooperation and consensus, due to their greater leadership role in council. A mayor selected from the council has equal footing to other members of council while a mayor elected at-large has the power of the "bully pulpit", whether or not formal powers are accorded to the office, the public still will look to the mayor as a leader. The other members of council know this and accord the mayor greater deference than when selected from council members.

Although the finding only presented in one model, the negative correlation between the percent of council members elected by district and perceived cooperation indicates that councils with higher proportions of members elected by district have lower levels of cooperation (as measured in this study). District councils tend to be larger and members represent individual constituencies instead of the population at large. It is possible that members elected by district will place the needs of the neighborhood above those of the city as a whole. However, the fact that the relationship was not statistically significant indicates that conflict on councils with high proportions of district seats is not necessarily inevitable.

Given these findings, we believe that local government structure, particularly form of government, is an important variable to use in studies of local government. In addition, we believe that it is important to use a form of government variable that distinguishes fundamental differences within and across forms, rather than a set of criteria that fail to present mutually exclusive choices and allows an individual community to be assigned to multiple form of government categories.

We also believe that future research should seek other variables that may contribute to conflict and cooperation in the local government decision-making process. For example, decision-making research has found that both interpersonal relationships among group members and demographics of the group members themselves have an effect on the levels of conflict and cooperation (Pelled, Eisenhardt and Xin 1999; Brewer and Kramer 1986). However, among the factors that have been identified in our study, form of government and proportion of council members elected by district are the only ones that are statistically significant. District elections are closely associated with mayor-council form of government. It is telling that government form was still significant when controlling for district elections. The variables representing elements in the municipality's external environment—fiscal stress, population change, and diversity—showed no significant relationship with conflict or cooperation in municipal government.

These findings may provide guidance for city leaders considering modifying governmental form. In council-manager cities facing pressure to adopt modifications that bring them closer to the mayor-council form, the finding that council-manager governments have fewer conflicts and greater cooperation in formulating public policy should serve as a yellow light towards those who endorse changes—other than electing the mayor at-large. Likewise, in mayor-council cities in which a change to council-manager form or the addition of a professional CAO is being discussed, proponents can argue that the existence of a professional manager reporting to the entire council has a mediating effect on conflict in the policy process.

Additionally, the r-squared of our model was not high for the conflict models, indicating that there are other variables not included here that influence the levels of cooperation and conflict in local government. However, our r-squared values were similar in level to most of the existing studies on conflict in local government⁵. We believe the most likely source for other explanatory variables is in the characteristics of the council members themselves—age, education, tenure on council, and others. While the method of council elections captures some of these

differences, in a community with a relatively homogeneous population or on a council with a small number of seats, diversity is likely to be low.

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Table 1. Method of Coding Variations in Form – Cities over 10,000

| | Variation | Mayoral selection* | Nominal Form | CAO? | CAO appointment | % (N) |
|---|---------------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|------|-----------------------------------|--------------|
| 1 | Council-Manager | Appointed by council | Council-Manager or other | Yes | Council | 21.0 (606) |
| 2 | Mayor-Council-Manager | Directly elected | Council-Manager or other | Yes | Council | 35.4 (1019) |
| 3 | Empowered mayor-council-manager | Directly elected | Council-Manager or other | Yes | Mayor nominates, council approves | 0.8 (22) |
| 4 | Mayor and Council-Administrator | | Mayor-Council or other | Yes | Council | 7.3 (212) |
| 5 | Mayor-Council-Administrator | | Mayor-Council or other | Yes | Mayor nominates, council approves | 9.0 (259) |
| 6 | Mayor-Administrator-Council | | Mayor-Council or other | Yes | Mayor | 5.1 (148) |
| 7 | Mayor-Council | | Mayor-Council or other | No | N/A | 21.3 (617) |
| | Total | | | | | 100.0 (2883) |

* Council-manager form only.

Table 2. Survey Responses*

| City type | No. of cities surveyed | Mayors | Council members | CAOs |
|------------------------|------------------------|--------|-----------------|------|
| | | No. | No. | No. |
| Total | 562 | 265 | 745 | 266 |
| By form of government: | | | | |
| Mayor-council | 190 | 74 | 275 | 55 |
| Council-manager | 372 | 191 | 470 | 211 |

* 158 cities (28%) provided responses from the mayor, at least 29% of the council members, and the city manager/CAO—the criteria needed to meet the standard for inclusion in the analysis.

Table 3. Representativeness of the Sample

| Variables | Total Population Municipalities (N=562) | | Sample Municipalities (N = 158) | |
|---|---|----------|---------------------------------|----------|
| | Mean | SD | Mean | SD |
| Growth: % change in population, 1990–2000 | 15.8% | 24.4% | 18.5% | 32.8% |
| Diversity: % white population | 70.7% | 18.7% | 77.2% | 14.4% |
| % by district | 41.4% | 43.0% | 43.7% | 39.55% |
| Median household income | \$45,055 | \$14,520 | \$44,760 | \$14,707 |
| Form of government | | | | |
| Mayor-council | 34.7% | | 34.2% | |
| Council-manager | 65.3% | | 65.8% | |
| Election method | | | | |
| Partisan | 8.7% | | 12% | |
| Nonpartisan | 91.3% | | 88% | |

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics for Dependent Variables

| | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|-------------|-----|---------|---------|------|----------------|
| Conflict | 158 | .04 | .57 | 0.29 | 0.12 |
| Cooperation | 158 | .23 | .96 | 0.73 | 0.17 |

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics for Continuous Independent Variables

| Variables | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|---|----------|-----------|----------|--------------------|
| Growth: % change in population, 1990–2000 | –14.3% | 275.8% | 18.5% | 32.8% |
| Diversity: % white population | 9% | 97.3% | 77.2% | 14.4% |
| % by district | 0% | 100% | 43.7% | 39.55% |
| Median household income | \$21,180 | \$100,411 | \$44,760 | \$14,707 |

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics for Categorical Independent Variables

| Variables | No. | Percent |
|--|-----|---------|
| Form of government (N = 158) | | |
| Council-manager | 20 | 12.7 |
| Mayor-Council-Manager | 83 | 52.5 |
| Empowered Mayor-Council-Manager | 1 | .6 |
| Mayor and Council-Administrator | 1 | .6 |
| Mayor-Council-Administrator | 10 | 6.3 |
| Mayor-Administrator-Council | 10 | 6.3 |
| Mayor-Council | 33 | 20.9 |
| Partisanship | | |
| Non-partisan elections | 136 | 86.1 |
| Partisan elections | 22 | 13.9 |
| Fiscal Health/Bond Rating (N = 158) | | |
| Aaa (coded 1) | 15 | 9.5 |
| Aa (Aa1 = 7; Aa2 = 27; Aa3 = 32) (coded 2) | 66 | 41.8 |
| A (A1 = 34; A2 = 13; A3 = 15) (coded 3) | 62 | 39.2 |
| Baa (Baa1 = 6; Baa2 = 3; Baa3 = 6) (coded 4) | 15 | 9.5 |

Table 7. Regression of Conflict and Cooperation

| Independent Variables | Models | |
|---------------------------------|-----------|-------------|
| | Conflict | Cooperation |
| Mayor-Council-Manager* | -.035 | .039 |
| Empowered Mayor-Council-Manager | -.086 | .142 |
| Mayor and Council-Administrator | -.054 | .083 |
| Mayor-Council-Administrator | .045 | -.178** |
| Mayor-Administrator-Council | .094* | -.088 |
| Mayor-Council | .082** | -.238* |
| Partisanship | -.013 | .051 |
| Percent council by district | .028 | -.036** |
| Financial Condition | -.003 | -.006 |
| Diversity (% white population) | .000 | -.001 |
| Median Household Income | -2.897E-7 | -6.413E-7 |
| Growth/Decline Rate | .000 | .000 |
| Constant | .265*** | .906 *** |
| R-squared | .234 | .477 |
| <i>F</i> | 3.697*** | 11.029*** |

Values shown are unstandardized regression coefficients. *p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001
Form of government as dummy variable with council-manager as the reference category.

Table 8. Regression Models—Variation in Form as Scale

| Independent Variables | Models | |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|-------------|
| | Conflict | Cooperation |
| Form of government (7 variations) | .021*** | -.048*** |
| Partisanship | .014 | .030 |
| Percent council by district | .022 | -.021 |
| Financial condition | -.002 | -.005 |
| Diversity (% white population) | .000 | -.001 |
| Median Household Income | -4.505E-8 | -1.074E-6 |
| Growth/Decline Rate | 7.7076E-5 | .000 |
| Constant | .190** | 1.015*** |
| R-square | .202 | .418 |
| <i>F</i> | 5.432*** | 15.393*** |

Values shown are unstandardized regression coefficients. *p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001

Figure 1. Plot of Means for Conflict According to Form of Government

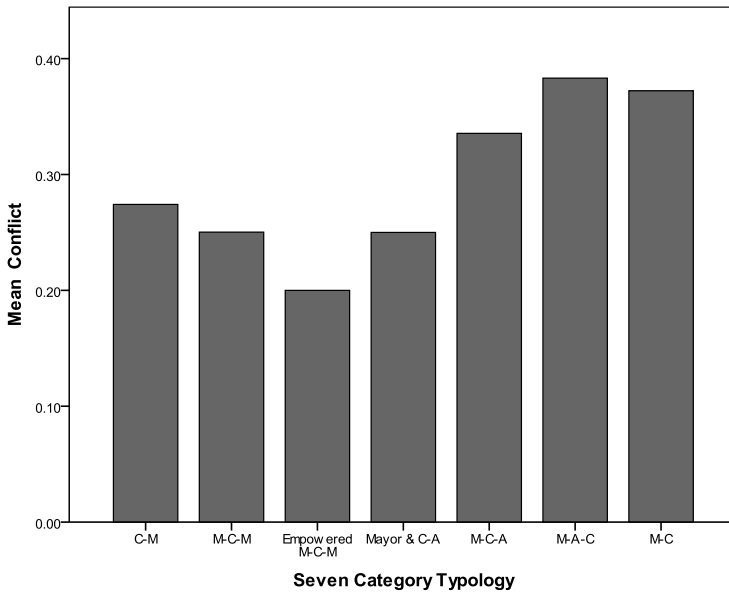
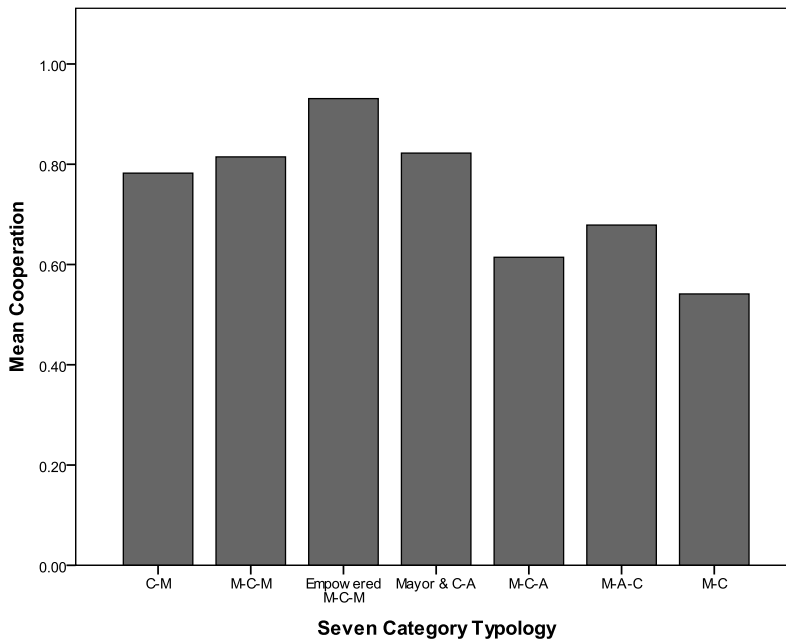


Figure 2. Plot of Means for Cooperation According to Form of Government



¹For example, Frederickson, Johnson, and Wood (2004) argue "that the detailed features of these traditional models have been so mingled as to all but eliminate the importance of the formal designation of a city as either a

mayor-council or council-manager" (7). Similarly, DeSantis and Renner (2002) state that "if these hybrid forms of government continue to emerge, the practical and theoretical relevance of the broad types (i.e., the council-manager and mayor-council forms) may become obsolete" (103). MacManus and Bullock (2003) also weigh-in, stating that there has been "a blurring of the traditional lines demarking various forms of government" (17).

² We ran a principal components analysis with varimax rotation on the performance variables. The three factors had Cronbach's alpha scores of .912, .891, and .858 respectively. KMO = .932; Bartlett's test $p < .000$.

³ For a number of reasons, we did not include some other variables used in earlier work. There is some literature that supports the idea that larger groups operate with greater levels of conflict (Brewer and Kramer 1986). Another variable not included in the sample is overall population size. The sample was limited to cities with populations ranging from 50,000 to 250,000 persons, limiting the variation in the population variable. Finally, due to the need to limit the length of the survey to maximize response rates, we did not ask about individual characteristics of the elected or appointed officials. However, individual characteristics of council members such as age, education, and tenure on council may influence conflict and cooperation and should be considered in future research.

⁴ We ran preliminary correlations and multicollinearity tests to confirm that all variables warranted inclusion in the model. Despite high correlations between form of government and electoral features, tolerance and VIF were within acceptable ranges for the independent variables.

⁵ Welch and Bledsoe (1988) reported an R^2 value of .02 in their study of council factions. Johnson and Ihrke (2004) reported pseudo- R^2 values ranging .161-168. Only one study had R^2 scores on conflict that were superior to our findings. Niederjohn and Ihrke (2005) obtained an R^2 of .444. They included

variables related to council member characteristics and specific board behaviors. However, they did not attempt to evaluate cooperation and they only studied Wisconsin municipalities. We believe that the new and expanded typology for form is an important component. Wisconsin has little variation in government form in municipal government.