

Types of City Government

Adapted from: "Outline of U.S. Government" usinfo.state.gov

The business of running America's major cities is enormously complex. In terms of population alone, New York City is larger than 41 of the 50 states. City governments are chartered by states, and their charters detail the objectives and powers of the municipal government. But in many respects the cities function independently of the states. For most big cities, however, cooperation with both state and federal organizations is essential to meeting the needs of their residents.

Types of city governments vary widely across the nation. However, almost all have some kind of central council, elected by the voters, and an executive officer, assisted by various department heads, to manage the city's affairs. There are three general types of city government: the mayor-council, the commission, and the city manager. These are the pure forms; many cities have developed a combination of two or three of them.

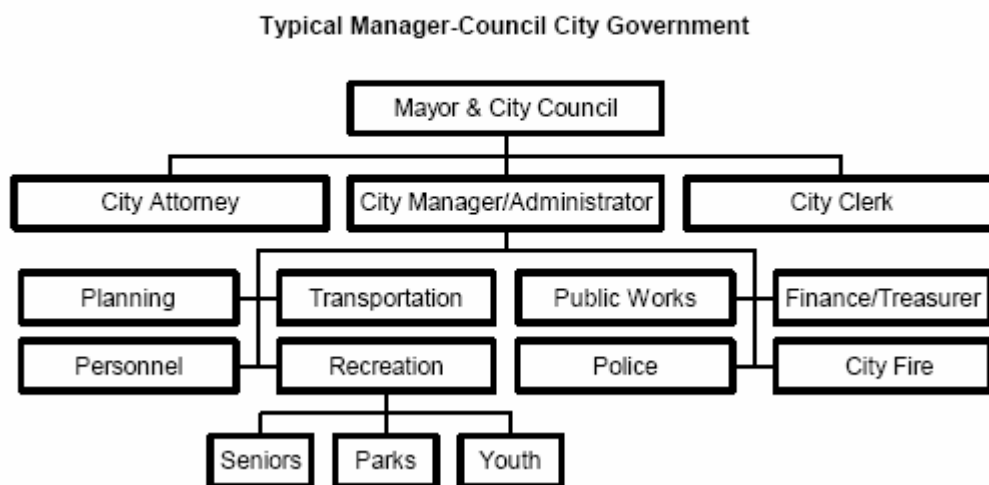
Mayor-Council: This is the oldest form of city government in the United States and, until the 1900's, was used by nearly all American cities. Its structure is similar to that of the state and national governments, with an elected mayor as chief of the executive branch, and an elected council representing the various neighborhoods forming the legislative branch. Today, this is often referred to as a "strong mayor" system. The mayor appoints heads of city departments and other officials, sometimes with the approval of the council. He has the power of veto over city ordinances and frequently is responsible for preparing the city's budget. The council passes ordinances, the laws of the city, sets some of the tax rates, and apportions money among the various city departments.

The Commission: This system combines both the legislative and executive functions into one group of officials, usually three or more in number, each of whom are elected by city residents. Each commissioner supervises the work of one or more city departments. One is named chair of the commission and is often called the mayor, although his or her power is equivalent to that of other commissioners.

Manager-Council: The city manager plan has been adopted by a growing number of cities. Under this plan, an elected council makes the city ordinances and sets policy, but hires a paid administrator, also called a city manager, to carry out its decisions. The manager draws up the city budget and supervises most of the departments. Usually, there is no set term; the manager serves as long as the council is satisfied with his or her work. In some cities the council selects one of the members to act as mayor and in other cities, the mayor is elected separately. However, this mayor position only has as much power as the other city council members.

The city manager is a response to the increasing complexity of urban problems, which require management expertise not often possessed by elected public officials. The answer has been to entrust most of the executive powers, including law enforcement and provision of services, to a highly trained and experienced professional city manager.

Sample City Organizational Chart¹



¹ Primary source: *Participating in Local Government*, 3rd Edition, 1994, Institute for Local Self Government

