

Common Issues and Pro/Con Arguments in Elections to Change Form of Government

What are some of the most common issues and arguments pro and con that have come up in elections to change forms of government?

In our experience, the most common issues revolve around:

- **Responsiveness and accountability** – which form will be the most responsive?
- **Professional management** – which form provides the best quality of management?
- **The appropriate role of politics in administration** – should politics be removed from administration?
- **Effectiveness and efficiency** – which form produces the most efficient and effective management?
- **Political harmony (an oxymoron?)** – which form produces greater harmony and less divisiveness?

These “arguments” have been collected from a variety of sources and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of MRSC or MRSC Staff.

Arguments For the Mayor-Council Form

- This is the form that is familiar to most Americans because it is patterned after our traditional national and state governments. There is a separation of powers between the executive and legislative branches. There are checks and balances. The council can refuse to confirm the mayor's appointments and the mayor can veto the council's legislation.
- Also separation of powers provides healthy independence, debate and creative tension. Separate legislative and executive branches provide the best opportunity for debate and consensus building.
- By electing, rather than appointing a mayor, political leadership is established. The city has a political spokesperson who has a high degree of visibility.
- Some argue that an elected mayor will have a higher standing and greater voice in regional affairs of the city
- The mayor is vested with the veto power and can serve as a check on an unpopular council decision
- A skilled administrator can be hired to minimize weaknesses in the mayor's management background or experience, but the mayor is still fully responsible. (This refers to the appointment of a CAO and the addition of professional expertise to the mayor's office)

Arguments Against the Mayor-Council Form

- The office of the mayor gives too much power and authority to one person. It permits an incumbent to make decisions based largely on political considerations, and to use the office to further personal political objectives
- They also point out that the qualities needed to win an election are not the same qualities needed to manage a modern city. A mayor, while politically astute, may not always possess the necessary management training and experience.
- If an elected mayor proves to be incompetent or worse, he/she cannot be removed until the end of their term, or after an expensive and divisive recall election.
- A separately elected mayor may resist requests from the council. The mayor may attempt to isolate the council by controlling staff, information, and reports.

Arguments For the Council-Manager Form

- Administration of city business is removed from politics
- Efficiency of professional management based on a business model also the familiar model of school board to school superintendent relationship
- Since city managers are appointed rather than elected, greater attention can be given to selecting a qualified manager. The pool of qualified candidates is larger since city managers traditionally are paid better than mayors and since candidates can be recruited from outside the city including a nationwide search. (mayors must be a resident of the city prior to their election).
- Emphasis is placed on the role of the legislative body and its policy-making function. Council gets better cooperation and information because the city manager is their employee.
- Since manager serves at the pleasure of the council without a definite term, he/she can be removed at any time, limiting the danger of an abuse of authority.

Arguments Against the Council-Manager Form

- Critics of the council-manager plan argue the following:
- The council-manager form gives too much power to one person - the city manager
- A professional manager, often chosen from outside the city, does not know the community and is too far from the voters

- Councils may leave too much decision. making to the manager, who is not directly accountable to the public
- Without an elected chief executive, the community lacks political leadership
- The council-manager form is too much like a business corporation which is not suitable for managing community needs
- City managers cost too much, local people could handle the job for less cost
- Citizens may be confused about who is in charge. Most expect the mayor to respond to their problems. The mayor has no direct control over the delivery of services and can only change policy through the city council
- City managers may leave a city when offered higher salaries and greater responsibilities in other cities