The Adoption and Abandonment of Council-Manager Government” by Cheon Geun Choi, Richard C. Feiock, and Jungah Bae uses event history analysis of 191 cities with populations of more than 30,000 over a 75-year period (1930–2005) to isolate adoption and abandonment trends in the council-manager form of government.

The authors readily admit that “despite dozens of empirical studies, we lack a systematic understanding of these forces over time because previous work has relied on cross-sectional designs or analysis of change over short periods.” I am pleased that the authors note that “this article begins to fill this lacuna” (emphasis added) using the aforementioned event history analysis.

Population size, Republican vote, nonwhite population, and home ownership were identified as institutional preferences, and unemployment rate, manufacturing establishments, fiscal health, and population growth were used in the methodology to identify sociological context and the severity of environmental change in a community. Each of these variables is quantitative in nature; I offer that there are many more data points, quantitative and qualitative, that need to be researched before we land on why communities adopt or abandon the council-manager form of government.

Nearly 100 years ago, in December 1914, the City Managers’ Association, the forerunner of the International City/County Management Association (ICMA), was formed when eight of the 31 existing city managers met in Springfield, Ohio, “to promote the efficiency of city managers and municipal work in general” (according to the ICMA Constitution adopted at the second annual conference in Dayton, Ohio, November 1915). Today, the ICMA is a member organization of 6,000 professional local government managers in the United States.

Only 10 years later, in 1924, the ICMA adopted a Code of Ethics that today serves as a hallmark for professional local government management. In addition, as former ICMA president Dave Mora has noted in his reflections on his career (see http://icma.org/en/icma/about/anniversary/experience), quality, dedication, and professionalism are also hallmarks of the profession. I share these more qualitative elements that are embraced by members of our profession because, although difficult to measure, they might add to “filling the lacuna” in helping us understand why communities adopt or abandon the council-manager government.

I think it is important to note that in the past 10 years, 28 communities have adopted the council-manager form of government.
form of government and 10 abandoned the form. Of the communities that adopted the form, only nine communities have populations of more than 30,000. These data only represent communities that the ICMA either assisted with guidance and/or a Fund for Professional Management contribution or came across in a Google alert. While the research design is focused on cities that exceed 30,000, the Web site Newgeography.com notes that “the average local jurisdiction population in the United States is 6,200.” In my opinion, true trend analysis needs to include a sampling of communities with populations under 30,000.

Further, as a practitioner in local government and an ICMA member for more than 30 years, I believe it would be quite interesting to add to the body of knowledge on this subject of adoption and abandonment a longitudinal study on the awareness that citizens may have of the form of government on which they are governed. This may better inform why communities adopt or abandon the council-manager government.

Because of this void in understanding local governance, the ICMA began a public awareness campaign a few years ago to promote the profession of local government management building up to the celebration of our hundredth anniversary in 2014. Featuring elected officials, among others, the initiative is called “Life Well Run.” As president of ICMA (October 2012–September 2013), I am proud that we are focusing on raising awareness of the role professional local government managers play in building communities that we are all proud to call home.

In conclusion, I think the research raises more questions than answers. Such questions include the following: Does community awareness of the form of government impact adoption or abandonment? Does the commitment to a Code of Ethics impact the adoption or abandonment of the council-manager form of government? Are there other drivers, such as disaster recovery, tax rates, quality of education, availability of high-speed wireless technology, success or failure of economic development growth, or transportation network/access to rail and/or air service, that impact the abandonment or adoption of the council-manager form of government? Would the conclusions change if the sample were expanded to include communities of fewer than 30,000?

While I applaud and thank the authors for beginning the study regarding the adoption and abandonment of the council-manager form of government using event history analysis, I indeed think there are many more questions to be asked, and answered by being more inclusive of small communities.

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