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The International City/County Management Association (ICMA) will soon celebrate its 101st year. The first century of “reformed” local government has produced many significant achievements. The Pew Research Center reports that local governments continue to have favorable ratings above 60 percent.1 Council-manager government has continued to grow and now serves more than 60 percent of cities with populations between 25,000 and 250,000. This record of community adoption of the council-manager form speaks positively to the confidence in the form demonstrated by citizens.

Based on its level of public acceptance, I was disappointed to learn that the body of research knowledge does not provide stronger evidence about the council-manager form. Jared B. Carr reviews a sizable body of research on form of government (76 studies) in his article “What Have We Learned about the Performance of Council-Manager Government? A Review and Synthesis of the Research.” Despite the popular preference for council-manager government—demonstrated by its growth over the past century—Carr concludes that we have barely scratched the surface in learning about the performance of this form of local government.

What does the research show? Carr’s literature review examines two broad areas: (1) studies that examine the diversity of policy choices between important political interests and the overall interests of the base of residents and (2) the functionality or performance of the organization. The policy choice research gives credibility to the council-manager form adopting comprehensive, nonsymbolic policies. The organizational performance research gives evidence that the council-manager form is able to focus on managing the organization and its policy initiatives without generating as much conflict as the mayor-council form. However, Carr concludes that although the scorecard shows some pluses for the council-manager form, the general proposition that council-manager governments are better managed has not been “seriously engaged in this literature.”

Why do we know so little after 100 years of council-manager government? The answer to this question is at the core of my commentary. Unfortunately, I do not have the research experience to answer this question—and I do not want to speculate about the many contributing factors that led to Carr’s assessment. I do want to encourage those who conduct research to consider how we might make future research more focused on the key question of governmental form.

I have extensive personal experiences and anecdotes to “prove” that the council-manager form yields extraordinary benefits for the citizens it serves. I was heavily influenced to become a city manager by what I saw in my hometown. I was born in the city-owned hospital. My grandmother spent her last days in the city-owned nursing home. The city-owned and city-managed cemeteries provide a resting place for her and many relatives. The schools, water, sewer treatment, recreation, and electricity were everyday services provided by the city. This range of services was carried out in a community of 13,000, which adopted the council-manager form in 1927.

My hometown experience inspired me, and it gave me all the proof I needed to pursue city management as a career. As I progressed in my career, I increasingly expected my staff, who were also inspired by their commitment to public service, to provide data to support our strategies and program choices—“good data make good decisions.” I am struck by how little help the research on form of government provides guidance that gives us better insight into how to conduct the business of local government.

At the core of the presumed value of council-manager government is that the form yields better operational performance and higher-quality services. Carr explores the research related to functionality of the organization and finds that this is a critical question about efficacy of form, but useful research has been seriously
limited. One of the basic tenets of management is that the manager must produce results that contribute to the community’s mission. Is there a broad statement of purpose and priorities for the university community to conduct research that aids governing and serving citizens at the local level? We need to explore a way for the research community to develop a research agenda and priorities that will support the work of local government and its practitioners. Perhaps this is where the ICMA needs to begin its next century by convening the research community to build this agenda.

Let me share one concrete example for the future research agenda. Significant data have been generated over the last 20 years that could help us better understand the foundations for “good government.” One prime example is the National Citizen Survey, which is conducted by the National Research Center and endorsed by the ICMA and the National League of Cities. The National Citizen Survey has collected data in communities across the country—both council-manager and mayor-council—seeking to understand how citizens perceive their quality of life and how effectively their communities perform key municipal services. These data, which have not been analyzed on a national scale, may shed light on the efficiency, economy, and effectiveness of municipal operations. The research community needs to begin to identify opportunities to advance our knowledge, especially on those issues key to sorting out what makes local governments more effective.

We are indebted to Jared Carr for his review of this body of research and establishing what we know and what we do not know, especially the latter. We need to take another step forward. I attended my first American Society for Public Administration conference in Chicago this past March. I was stimulated by the ideas and enthusiasm of the large group of “academic practitioners.” The conference attendees, program, and literature celebrated many universities that are in the business of educating the next generation of public administrators. Yet somehow it seems woefully inadequate that we are passing on to this next generation of future public administrators and professors of administration a body of knowledge that speaks so loudly about what we do not know.

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