

Does Canada have a ‘weak mayor’ system?

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Introduction¹

In every Canadian city, the mayor is an important figure. Mayors lead elected councils, serve as chief executives of municipal corporations, and are generally the most well known local officials. Big city mayors are directly elected by more people than any other federal or provincial politician in Canada.² In times of celebration and crisis, mayors are the voices of their cities on the provincial, national and international stage. They are praised for their communities' successes and blamed for their failures. In many ways, the mayor is "the living symbol of [their] city" (Ruchelman 1969, 4).

Despite the significance of the position, remarkably little is known about the role of Canadian mayors. The responsibilities of mayors in Canada are "vague" (Lightbody 2006, 156) and "generally quite unclear" (Sancton 1994, 175). There is no 'job description' for mayors; in fact, there are more than 50 pieces of provincial legislation in Canada prescribing duties of mayors, not including municipal bylaws and policies. A surprisingly small volume of literature exists on the topic. To date, there has not been a comprehensive study of mayors in Canada, and foundational questions about the role and the degree to which it is equipped to provide leadership in Canada's cities remain unanswered.

Not only is the role unclear, expectations about the power of Canadian mayors are starkly contested. On one hand, the literature emphasizes the relative weakness of the position. It is often said that Canada has "weak mayors" or a "weak mayor system", a term borrowed from an American context and applied throughout the Canadian literature and popular discourse.³ On the other hand, the public believes mayors are powerful. It is common for mayoral candidates offer bold promises during election campaigns about their ability, once elected, to transform their cities – promises which can be rewarded by the electorate. A survey of 12,000 Canadians

¹ This paper draws from a larger study examining the role and power of mayors in Canadian cities, being pursued as the PhD dissertation of this author. The study examines the mayoralty as an institution in Canadian local government, and explores the role of the mayor "in practice" informed by interviews with mayors, past mayors, elected officials, administrators and local observers in the 10 cities included in the sample. This project is currently still in progress. More details are available online at mayorsproject.ca.

² There are 28 mayors in Canada whose municipalities' populations were greater than the most populous federal or provincial electoral districts, and who were directly elected by a larger population than any federal or provincial politician in Canada. This number has almost doubled in the more than two decades since Sancton (1994) produced the same calculation, finding that there were 16 mayors in Canada in 1991 directly representing more residents than any federal or provincial politician.

³ The term "weak mayor" or "weak mayor system" is a common reference in textbooks, articles, media stories, and more. A Google search of these terms and "Canada" yields nearly 25,000 results. Interestingly, these terms were also used during a majority of interviews conducted for the larger research project as a way to describe the role of the mayor.

found three in four people believe their mayor has the power to make things happen in their community.⁴

Which is it? Does Canada have “weak mayors”, or do Canadian mayors have the power to make things happen? What is meant by the term “weak mayor”, and how well suited is it to local government in a Canadian context? Finally, what can be learned about leadership in Canada’s cities through an examination of the role of mayors?

This paper explores these questions by first examining the concept of the “weak mayor” and “weak mayor system” drawing on literature from their original American context. Second, the role of the mayor is examined in a sample of 10 Canadian cities, selected by virtue of being the largest city by population in each province:⁵ Vancouver, British Columbia; Calgary, Alberta; Saskatoon, Saskatchewan; Winnipeg, Manitoba; Toronto, Ontario; Montreal, Quebec; Saint John, New Brunswick; Halifax, Nova Scotia; Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island; and, St. John’s, Newfoundland and Labrador. Central elements of a “weak mayor system” including executive power and administrative control are examined. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion on whether the term “weak mayor” suits the Canadian context, and meaningfully contributes towards advancing knowledge and dialogue about the conditions for effective local leadership in Canada.

⁴ As a part of the larger study, Ipsos Public Affairs surveyed 12,000 Canadians in October 2015 seeking perceptions about mayoral power. Respondents were asked to identify agreement or disagreement with the statement, “Canadian mayors have the power to make things happen in their communities” using a Likert scale. Overall, 72.1% of respondents indicated agreement (including 17% who indicated strong agreement and 55.1% who indicated moderate agreement). 22% of respondents disagreed with the statement (including 4.9% who strongly disagreed and 17.1% who moderately disagreed). The remainder of respondents indicated that they did not know or chose not to answer. Responses tended to be more affirmative in larger cities.

⁵ The case selection approach identified was selected for three main reasons. First, in order to produce a Canada-wide study, it is critical to examine cities all provinces, particularly as the formal authorities of mayors are primarily assigned through provincial legislation and because municipalities in Canada are creatures of the provinces in which they reside. Examining the mayoralty in only one or a few provinces would not provide a ‘Canadian perspective’. Second, this method of case selection includes diversity in city size and scale. The sample represents approximately 20% of the Canadian population, and includes some of the largest cities in Canada with more than a million residents (Toronto, Montreal, Calgary), as well as smaller cities with fewer than one hundred thousand residents (Charlottetown and Saint John). The sample includes five provincial capital cities and five non-capital cities, and both French and English speaking cities. Finally, this approach follows an established precedent for case selection in national studies of local government in Canada (Horak and Young 2012). The territories have also been excluded, consistent with this precedent. The authority of territorial governments differs from that of provincial governments, and their relationships with local governments also differ. This analysis is beyond the scope of this study, and so cities located in the territories were intentionally excluded.

Core Concepts: Strong vs. Weak

America has an established tradition of defining its forms of local government, dating back to the late nineteenth century.⁶ Today there are at least four common forms of local government in the United States: the mayor-council system, the council-manager system, the commission system, and the town meeting system.⁷ There are variants of all four. Almost all local governments in the United States today use one of the first two – the mayor-council form (34%) and the council-manager form (55%) (National League of Cities).

The oldest form of local government in America is the mayor-council model (Ridley and Notling 1934, 1; Phillips: 1938, 93). In 1895, the National Municipal League was established, partly in effort address mounting corruption in local government. The initial task of the League involved developing a “model city charter”, first published in 1899, to promote transparency and accountability in local government. The charter envisioned a separation of executive (mayor) and legislative (council) powers, in effort to introduce the “checks and balances” of the federal system into local government (Ridley and Notling 1934, 1; Svara 1994, xxi). The charter envisioned democratically elected mayors with responsibility for the administration of local government services, including appointing all department heads. Direct election, a separation of powers, and concentrated executive power were viewed as steps towards greater accountability to the public, protection from corruption, and independence from business interests (Schragger 2006, 2547). The “model city charter” established the basic blueprint for the mayor-council form of government that remains in many American cities today.

By the early twentieth century, the need for and complexity of municipal services was rapidly expanding. As the nation urbanized and innovations in technology – including electric lights, motor vehicles and machines – altered the functions of local government, a more “professional” approach to municipal administration was desired.

⁶ A 1925 book on *American City Government* suggests there was little interest in local government structures in Colonial America. “[Municipal] activities and the forms of their government did not greatly concern Colonial authorities [...] Their powers and functions as then construed were strictly local and largely ‘private’” (Anderson, 283). By the mid nineteenth century, however, increasing complexity and cost of local government led to an interest in defining and evaluating forms of government. Some sources point to the establishment of the National Municipal League in 1895, created in part to establish a model city charter, as a departure point for national-scale discussions about forms of government (Ridley and Notling 1934). A 1938 article states, “In recent years a great deal of emphasis has been placed upon improvements in form of government. In numerous instances, reformers have insisted that a change from an existing form of city government [...] would solve the city’s governmental problems. [...] While a form of government of recognized merit may not be considered a panacea for the many ills which beset our municipalities, it is nevertheless important” (Phillips: 91).

⁷ For a helpful overview each form, see: National League of Cities, “Forms of Local Government,” Accessed May 17, 2017. Available online: www.nlc.org/resource/cities-101-forms-of-local-government.

Modern city government thus became a great business enterprise calling for administrative ability and leadership at a high order and a greater variety of skilled and technical workers than found in any private enterprise of similar size. [...] The theory that democracy depended upon the diffusion of power among many officials elected for a short time became increasingly impracticable and gradually disappeared with the rapid growth and complexity of urban life in general and of municipal services in particular (Ridley and Notling 1934, 4).

These conditions led to the emergence of the council-manager form of government. In 1905, a University of Chicago professor advocated for the hiring of a professional manager to oversee administration and establish the budget. This idea became popular with the United States Chamber of Commerce due to its “businesslike” model, where voters (viewed as akin to stakeholders) select a council (akin to directors) who appoint a manager (akin to the chief executive) to oversee operations (Rabin and Dodd 1985, 23). In 1908, the Council of Staunton, Virginia appointed a “general manager” and delegated authority over day-to-day administration of municipal services to the manager. In 1914, eight general managers from cities across the United States met and formed what would later become the International City Managers’ Association (ICMA). In 1915, the National Municipal League modified its model city charter to reflect the design of what has now become known as council-manager form. By the 1930s, more than 440 American cities had adopted this form (Ridley and Notling 1934, 7).

The council-manager form is now the predominant form of local government in the United States (National League of Cities). This model is based on a principle of unity. Power is concentrated in a legislative body (council as a whole) which controls the executive (led by an appointed professional manager, not the mayor) (Svara and Watson 2010). There are no “checks and balances” in this form as the appointed manager serves at the pleasure of the council, and has no power to “check” the council (Svara 1994). A comparison of the mayor-council and council-manager form is presented in Table 1.

There are variants within both (and other) forms of local government – including, notably, based on the role of the mayor. The terms “strong mayor” and “weak mayor” refer to variants of the mayor-council form, reflecting the on the extent to which executive authority is concentrated in the office of the mayor. A mayor-council form “strong mayor” has extensive executive authority including unilateral ability to appoint and dismiss city managers and department heads, prepare budgets, and direct the efforts of departments. A “weak mayor” model is characterized by a fragmentation of power, a more limited ability to appoint or remove staff (as some are directly elected and/or appointed by other officials), and a more limited role in preparing the budget. “Weak mayors” are those in mayor-council forms who lack integrated administrative control over the operation of city government (Svara 1990, 47).

Table 1: Comparison of Mayor-Council and Council-Manager Forms of Government

Mayor-Council Form ⁸	Council-Manager Form
Based on principle of separation of powers	Based on unitary principle
Often described as similar to American national and state governments	Often described as similar to parliamentary systems, and somewhat similar to corporate governance models
Mayor is directly elected	Mayor often chosen from among elected Council, or can be directly elected
Mayor oversees administration – and can have “strong” or “weak” powers depending on authority to oversee administration, make policy and set the budget	Council oversees administration, makes policy and sets the budget
Can appoint a professional manager who reports to the mayor	Appointment of a professional manager who reports to council
Second most common form; often found in very small or older, larger cities (eg. New York, Houston, Salt Lake City)	Most common form; growing in popularity, particularly with populations over 10,000 (eg. Phoenix, San Antonio)

Although many mayor-council cities have “strong mayors” and many council-manager cities have “weaker” mayors, the terms “weak mayor” and “council-manager” are not synonymous. Similarly, “strong mayor” and “mayor-council” are not synonymous. This is a common misconception, acknowledged in the American literature as well (Svara 1994). Generally “strong” and “weak” refer to the extent of power held by mayors within mayor-council systems.

The terms *strong* and *weak* should only be used to refer to variations in the mayor-council form, where mayors have formal powers over other participants in the governmental process but vary in the extent of these powers. The terms are often used inappropriately to distinguish between the mayor-council mayor and council-manager mayor, who does not have such formal powers. Their use is inappropriate because mayors cannot be measured on a single scale that extends from strong to weak (Svara: 1994, xxii).

In some cases, the “strong” and “weak” mayor variants of the mayor-council system are positioned as being different enough to be described as distinct forms of local government. Rabin and Dodd describe three variants of the mayor-council system, including “weak mayor-

⁸ Chart adapted from Svara 1994; Svara 2009; Watson and Svara 2010; and National League of Cities, “Forms of Local Government.”

council”, “strong-mayor council” and “strong mayor-council with CEO” (1985, 23). New York State legislation describes “council-manager”, “strong mayor-council”, and “weak mayor-council” as distinct options for New York local governments in their respective charters.⁹ Some authors identify variants of the council-manager form depending on the power of the mayor, including Hansell’s “council-manager with empowered mayor” variant (1998; DeSantis and Renner 2002).

To add to the confusion, numerous hybrids between the forms and other variants have been established over time (or in the clever words of Phillips in 1938, “a certain amount of pioneering has been done”). Observers note a “general convergence” of forms over the past several decades (DeSantis and Renner 2002, 95), with the distinction between them growing increasingly blurry (Renner 1998; Boynton and DeSantis 1990; Frederickson and Johnson 2001). Some have argued that, in practice, differences between forms are more apparent than real.¹⁰ A degree of confusion is to be expected. In a country with tens of thousands of local governments, there are bound to be differences across them – particularly in a nation with a continued interest in categorically defining (and re-defining) their forms of local government.

Core Concepts in a Canadian Context

If one were to look for a similar discussion on the forms of Canadian local government and their evolution throughout history, the search would be met with great disappointment. While there is recognition throughout the literature that the form and function of local government varies across Canada – in terms of structure, size and scale, powers and authority, responsibilities, institutional features such as the presence or absence of political parties, and more – there is no established nomenclature or classification system to distinguish one “form” of Canadian local government from another. Is this because local governments are more homogenous in Canada than in the United States? This is unknown. It also could be

⁹ New York Department of State, “Local Government Handbook,” 6th Edition, Published in 2009.

¹⁰ In the words of Lockard, “It is sometimes said that the difference between mayor-council and manager-council government is that the former retains the traditional American principle of separation of powers and that the latter system has legislative supremacy. The reasoning is that the mayor stands in somewhat the same theoretical position as a governor of the President, both of whom deal with a separate legislative body in a government where both branches have independent authority and neither is subordinate to the other. [...] This distinction is more apparent than real. On one hand, specialization of governmental tasks has produced in the British government a sharp separation of actual power between the executive and the legislative elements of government, the classic interpretation of the British government notwithstanding. By the same token, it is nonsense to talk of American government at the national or state level as if the executive and legislative branches were islands apart. [...] Exactly the same thing can be said of mayor-council relationships. True, they are apart in a sense [...] but they must share power not only between themselves but with other governmental elements and with nongovernmental elements so they all bargain, deploy, and maneuver in the making of public policy. So too with managers and their councils” (1969, 142).

symptomatic of a larger issue: that local government has traditionally occupied only a small part of Canada's political science agenda, and is a field which has received considerably less scholarly attention north of the border.¹¹

As a result, the Canadian local government literature has a tendency to borrow American terminology and concepts. There are references throughout the literature – including in textbooks and articles – that Canada generally employs the “council-manager” form of government, and has a “weak mayor system.” A strict interpretation of these terms in their original American context would find such references inconsistent. Although American terminology has been appropriated in Canada, the literature lacks systematic discussion or analysis about their applicability in a Canadian context. There are important differences between Canadian and American local governments – not to mention the influence of British traditions on Canada's history, systems of government, and political culture. As such, the applicability of American terms and concepts to local government in Canada is also unknown.

What is clear is that the concept of the “weak mayor” has had a pervasive influence in how the Canadian mayoralty is understood. Although literature on the Canadian mayoralty is limited,¹² a consistent theme within it is an emphasis on the weakness of the role. The role of the mayor in Canada is described as “remarkably limited” (Sancton 2015, 228) with “no strong mayors in Canada” (Sancton 2015, 229). The power of the mayor is often described as being no greater than that of any other member of Council (Crawford 1954, 56; Lightbody 2006, 156) with

¹¹ Only within the last few decades have scholars studied Canadian local government in its own right, with early works including Crawford (1954), Plunkett (1968), and Rowat (1969). Today Canada has just a “handful of urban academics” (Stewart and Smith: 2007, 266) and less is known about politics at the local level (Lightbody 2006; Horak and Young 2012). This is a serious deficit, particularly given increasing recognition of the economic and social importance of Canada's cities on a national and global scale (Andrew et al 2002; Bradford 2002; Sewell 2004; Lorinc 2006; Courchene 2007; Broadbent 2008; Florida 2008; Wolfe and Gertler 2016).

¹² While there is a vast body of media articles, books, blogs, websites, and other popular content about mayors in Canada, a review of academic literature finds a much smaller volume of work. There is considerably less literature on mayors compared to works on other political leaders in Canada (Siegel, Kushner and Stanwick, 2001). Mayors feature as characters in many related and sub-fields of study including economic development and urban planning, but have not been a serious object of study in Canadian political science. What little has been written about mayors is found in textbook chapters (Lightbody 2006; Sancton 2011; Sancton 2015), a small volume of work on specific mayors (Armstrong 1967; Caulfield 1974; Coulton 1980; Persky 1980; Levine 1989; Urbaniak 2009; Tossell 2012; Urbaniak 2014; Doolittle 2014; Ford 2016), and a few autobiographical texts (Phillips 1967; McCallion and Brehl 2014). A description of the role of Canadian mayors is a chapter by Andrew Sancton in a book on political leadership in Canada (1994). There are a few studies on specific aspects of Canadian mayoralty, including the electoral determinants of success (Siegel, Kushner and Stanwick 2001), the process of recruiting candidates (Long and Slemko, 1974) and assessments of specific municipal elections (Kushner, Siegel and Stanwick 1997; Stanwick 1997). Recent works on the role of the Canadian chief administrative officer also discuss the role of mayors (Siegel 2015; Fenn and Siegel 2017), and a book called *Mayors Gone Bad* profiles the antics of some of Canada's most controversial mayors (Slayton 2015).

duties described as primarily procedural and administrative in nature (Rogers 2009). Some argue that the responsibilities of mayors actually serve to limit their power in practice:

Because [the mayor's] power in council is no greater than that of any other member, he can hardly be held to account for action or inaction on the part of his council. Because he does not and cannot act as the head of a party in the council, he has no weapon, comparable to party discipline, to compel support of the measures he proposed. He is also handicapped in giving leadership to his council because some of the other members may be potential competition for the mayoral chair and they may not be anxious to see his proposals succeed (Crawford 1954, 56).

In most Canadian municipalities, mayors preside over meetings and have a special role in determining the agenda, but this gives them little in the way of special advantage. Presiding over council meetings often puts mayors at a disadvantage. In order to contribute to debates, mayors usually have to leave the chair and ask someone else to take over (Sancton 2015, 230).

The literature takes a consistent position that Canada has “weak mayors” – perhaps argued most clearly by Sancton (2015, 229) in stating, “mayors in Canada are weak in that they control neither the bureaucracy nor the council.” However, some observers note that the broad ambiguity of the role can create conditions where mayors, in practice, can be “strong”:

While the legislation does not on its face appear to create a “strong mayor system”, it has generally been the case that a head is in a position to be as “strong” as he or she has the desire or ability to be. (Rust-D'Eye 2010, 23)

Because of the vagueness of their specified powers and duties, their relationships with other members of council can vary greatly even within a particular city with the occupant of the mayor's chair changes. The extent to which a mayor is pre-eminent in council depends much on the personality of the particular incumbent. If the mayor has a forceful personality and has developed a network of close working relationships with other members of council, then the incumbent mayor may acquire informally a position of strong leadership in council and be able to exercise the powers of a strong chief executive. (Higgins 1997, 96)

This is a confusing picture. Are Canadian mayors are indeed “weak”, particularly if the ambiguity and confusion about their role creates conditions for them to be “strong” in practice? Are these terms being used clearly, consistently and accurately? And does the “strength” of a Canadian mayor stem solely from formally constituted powers?

Examining the Mayoralty in 10 Canadian Cities

This discussion has presented an overview of what a “weak mayor” system entails, based on American local government literature. This discussion identifies that:

1. It is a variant of the mayor-council form of local government; and
2. It is a model where the mayor holds executive power, such as administrative or budget controls, but which is limited or diffused.

To examine whether Canada has a “weak mayor” system, these characteristics are considered using a sample of 10 Canadian cities.¹³ Where practicable, the discussion also highlights variation between cities. Not all Canadian urban local governments are the same; similarly, the mayoralty in Canada is at least somewhat unique to each city.

1. Form of Local Government

The most obvious initial observation is that the Canadian local government literature and popular discourse reflects far less interest in defining “forms” of local government.¹⁴ The general consensus is that Canadian local governments use the council-manager form. This has been consistently referenced in the literature spanning decades (Plunkett 1968; Fenn and Siegel 2017), and is identified in popular sources as well.¹⁵ Recent works on the role of the city manager (Siegel 2015; Fenn and Siegel 2017) add to the literature by illuminating the evolution of this form in Canada over time. There is also variation in the model in practice:

The actual authority granted to the [city manager or equivalent] varies significantly. Municipal acts in the various provinces and the relevant bylaw in each municipality can provide an outline of the legal situation, but [...] much depends on the culture of the municipal organization and the management style of the particular individual. In any event, there are no major Canadian municipalities in which the city manager or CAO has as much authority as envisioned by the original designers of the council-manager plan (Sancton 2015, 271).

Regardless, no legislation in Canada includes the term “mayor-council” (and more generally, the various forms of government are not enumerated as they are in state legislation in the

¹³ As noted earlier in this paper, the sample includes the largest city in each Canadian province. The rationale for this case selection method is presented in Footnote 5.

¹⁴ Siegel (2015, 4-5) provides a helpful overview of notable exceptions, including the work of Plunkett (1968) and Rowat (1960), a report by Hickey prepared for the Ontario government (1973), and two graduate student theses.

¹⁵ The Wikipedia article on “Council-Manager Government” identifies that this model is used for local governments in Canada.

United States). This term is not found in municipal bylaws. The American notion of “checks and balances” through a separation of executive and legislative bodies is not evident in Canadian local government literature, legislation or professional discourse – and there are no known examples of a local government in Canada modeled on the principle of a separation of powers. As such, one can comfortably conclude that local government in Canada is closer to the council-manager form of government – albeit a varied model which varies and has been largely unstudied. This also suggests that Canada does not have a “weak mayor” system if this term is strictly interpreted to mean a variant of the mayor-council form of government, as this form is not present in Canada.

2. Executive Power

Do Canadian mayors hold executive power? This is a tricky question, particular because of the varied use of language. The mayoralty in every Canadian city is established and empowered through legislation of the city’s respective provincial government. Each province has at least one statute establishing the general structure of municipalities in that province, generally titled the ‘Municipal Act’ or something similar. Some provinces have more than one primary municipal statute, specific to particularly municipalities, types of municipalities, or geographic areas of the province.

In some provinces, mayors are literally defined as the “chief executive officer” of their respective municipalities. This term is found in legislation in British Columbia, Ontario and Prince Edward Island. Other provinces use terms such as “chief elected official”, “the chief officer”, “the official head” and, in one case, “the president of council”. Some provinces provide no such titles. A summary is presented in Table 2.

Curiously, there is no obvious relationship between the terminology used and the provision of formal power or authority by Canadian provinces to mayors. The use of specific terminology has evolved at least somewhat independently in each province. For example, mayors in Ontario under the former *Municipal Act, 1990* were responsible to “ensure laws were executed and obeyed” and to “oversee the conduct of all subordinate officers in the government” – duties which appear consistent with the American notion of “executive” power. This section was amended through a review of the *Municipal Act* in 2001, with both of the previous clauses removed and the addition of the language describing the head of council as the “chief executive officer” and a suite of more broadly phrased duties. One legal scholar states that the revised *Act* is “at the same time more general and more restrictive than the former, and it will remain to see how it will be interpreted. However, it is submitted the chief executive and leadership roles alone are broad enough to cover the duties of the former Act” (Rogers 2009, 53.1). Just as

Table 2: Language Used in Provincial Legislation, by City

	Vancouver, BC	Calgary, AB	Saskatoon, SK	Winnipeg, MB	Toronto, ON	Montreal, QC	Saint John, NB	Halifax, NS	Charlottetown, PE	St. John's, NL
Mayor is the “chief executive officer”	X				X				X	
Mayor is the “chief elected official”		X								
Mayor is the “president of council”	X									
Mayor is the “chief officer of the city”				X						
Mayor is “the official head of the city”										X
None of the above / No title			X			X	X	X		

language varies across provinces, the application and interpretation of terms may also be inconsistent across Canada. However, use of the term “executive” does not translate into executive power:

The term “chief executive officer” does not, of itself, confer any powers or duties upon him; they must be sought in the express provisions of the Act. Whether the office of mayor is statutory or not, however, it is a public one to which common law principles are applicable in the absence of statutory provisions relating to his power and duties (Rogers 2009, 53.1)

Mayors are generally considered to be executive officials in some sense in Canadian cities, but this seem more the result of holding duties associated with the administration of local government services. This can includes having a formal role in emergency management, holding authority to sign documents or bind the corporation, and in other ways. An analysis of the duties of mayors across cities offers additional insight.

Table 3 provides a comparison of provincially enumerated powers and responsibilities of mayors in the cities in the sample. The three basic and shared duties of mayors spanning all provinces are presiding over meetings (or having the option of presiding over meetings), calling meetings, and signing official documents.¹⁶

¹⁶ Interestingly, these basic duties are very similar to those identified in the *Baldwin Act* of 1849, which provided that mayors were responsible to preside over meetings, summon special meetings, and administer oaths.

Table 3: Comparison of Provincially Enumerated Mayoral Powers, by City

	Vancouver, BC*	Calgary, AB	Saskatoon, SK	Winnipeg, MB*	Toronto, ON*	Montreal, QC*	Saint John, NB	Halifax, NS*	Charlottetown, PE*	St. John's, NL*
Mayor presides over meetings (or has option to)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Mayor calls special meetings at own discretion	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Mayor signs bylaws, contracts, cheques, etc.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Mayor makes specified appointments	X	X	X	X	X	X			X	
Mayor appoints deputies, committees and/or chairs	X			X	X	X			X	
Mayor “provides leadership” (or equivalent)	X				X		X			
Mayor “provides direction” (or equivalent)	X					X	X			
Mayor “communicates information” (or equivalent)	X				X	X	X	X		X
Mayor “makes recommendations”	X				X	X				X
Mayor “reflects the will of council”	X									
Mayor “prosecute and punishes all negligence”										X
Mayor oversees employees’ conduct	X			X		X				X
Mayor temporarily suspends employees or officers	X			X		X				X
Mayor suspends Council decisions for limited period				X		X				

* Denotes cities with city-specific legislation

Beyond these, some Canadian mayors hold powers and responsibilities also held by American mayors in mayor-council systems, including overseeing employee conduct, temporarily suspending employees and officers, and temporarily suspending council decisions. Four provinces provide mayors with unilateral power to make appointments. For example, the Winnipeg Charter (2002) states, “the mayor must appoint (a) a deputy mayor; (b) an acting deputy mayor; (c) the chairpersons for the standing committees; [...] and (d) members of the executive policy committee.” This may be an important lever for securing and rewarding political support from other council members, particularly where appointments are accompanied by financial compensation.

In half of the cities in this sample, the councils through procedure bylaws or otherwise have provided mayors with additional appointment powers. Some examples are presented in Table 4, highlighting cases where local practices and norms can also serve to empower mayors. For example, the Mayor of Winnipeg has issued ‘mandate letters’ to council colleagues when appointing them to committees, akin to common practice in parliamentary systems (City of Winnipeg Media Release, November 2016). Locally established practices can also have the effect of disempowering mayors. In some cities, such as Charlottetown, mayors only vote in the case of a tie as the deciding vote. In some cases, procedure bylaws limit the participation of the mayor during council deliberations. In the City of Saskatoon and City of Calgary, for example, the mayor must vacate the chair in order to participate in debate or make a motion. Policies

Table 4: Comparison of Locally Enumerated Mayoral Powers, by City

	Vancouver, BC	Calgary, AB	Saskatoon, SK	Winnipeg, MB	Toronto, ON	Montreal, QC	Saint John, NB	Halifax, NS	Charlottetown, PE	St. John's, NL
Mayor can make additional appointments	X			X	X	X			X	
Mayoral appointments include salary increase	X			X		X			X	
Mayor-appointed executive committee				X	X					

other than procedure bylaws can also establish higher restrictions or expectations on the mayor than what are held for other members of council.¹⁷

Do Canadian mayors hold executive power? The answer is unclear. There are no known examples where a Canadian mayor is empowered as the “executive branch” of a local government, as in the American mayor-council model. However, there is evidence of mayors having executive-type powers. In some cities, the mayor is legally identified as the “chief executive officer” and there are more than a few examples where mayors have executive-type powers such as making appointments and overseeing staff. These vary by city and in application.¹⁸ This evidence does not add support the claim that Canada has a “weak mayor system” – and not because Canadian mayors appear to be particularly “strong”, but because there are differences between cities that are not captured through the universal application of a single term. Other variables explored elsewhere¹⁹ such as the presence of political parties, the size and composition of council, budget and staffing resources, and leadership roles on various external organizations (regional governments, universities, police boards, other municipal boards and commissions) can further add to the executive-type power of the mayor. On closer examination, the mayors of some Canadian cities may in fact be closer to the “strong mayor” end of the spectrum – including mayors of Vancouver and Montreal who govern with the support of a political party, ostensibly translating into the ability to make administrative and budget decisions, and have integrated authority spanning into regional governance models. Mayors in Winnipeg can leverage an executive committee structure to exercise greater administrative and financial control. In sum, Canadian mayors can and do have a range of executive-type powers, so do not fit uniformly into the definition of a “weak mayor” system.

Conclusion

The role of the mayor in Canada is unclear, and contested. Despite public perception that big city mayors are powerful, the literature and professional discourse emphasize the weakness of the role. The idea that Canada has “weak mayors” has had a shaping influence in how the mayoralty is understood and taught – and yet there is confusion about the meaning of this term.

¹⁷ For example, the City of Calgary’s Gifts and Benefits Policy includes requirements for disclosures that apply only to the mayor and not to other members of council.

¹⁸ One interview completed for the larger project illuminated this point. A mayor with provincially enumerated power to “oversee employee conduct” was asked whether this had ever been in practice. The mayor’s response to the question was, “I have that power? Oh. Wow. Well, I guess I haven’t used that very much.”

¹⁹ Due to page and word count restrictions, this analysis was omitted from this paper but is contained in the larger forthcoming study.

The analysis presented in this paper demonstrates that the term “weak mayor system” does not neatly describe the mayoralty in a Canadian context. The term carries more meaning than simply referring to the opposite of the powerful executive American mayor, an archetype not found in Canada. It refers to a variant of a specific form of government, which is also not present in Canada. More importantly, the power of Canadian mayors may be more nuanced and complex than what is captured in the formal/legal dimensions of how the role is defined. Therefore, the term “weak mayor” is not ideally suited to describe Canadian local governments.

In its original context, the term “weak mayor” is relative – that is, it reflects one end of a continuum. It is useful because it helps distinguish variants and forms of local government from one another, enabling informed examination and debate about optimal conditions for local leadership. When the term is universally applied to describe mayors in Canada, it loses this relativity, fails to capture differences in the mayoralty across Canada’s cities, and may even limit curiosity to investigate local leadership in Canada. Challenging foundational assumptions about the mayoralty in Canada may open new research horizons aimed to better understand governance, politics and power at the local level.

Perhaps the most significant observation in this discussion, however, is the curious lack of examination into the various forms of local government in Canada, particularly in comparison to the United States. This may reflect differences in political culture and academic traditions, but it also may have important practical implications. Perennial discussions about the empowerment of cities and mayors have taken place in cities and provinces across Canada. Typically, these discussions target provincial governments, seeking greater power for cities and their leaders through provincial legislation. This, too, is different from the experience in the United States. Having defined and well known forms of local government has enabled active discussion at the local level within cities about optimal structures and conditions for effective local leadership. Many American cities have transitioned between forms of government²⁰ triggered largely by local debate and exercised following local referendum. In Canada, framing discussions about mayoral power as a provincial decision furthers patterns of paternalism in provincial-municipal relations. Any council in any Canadian city has the ability to make changes – through procedure bylaws, delegation, budgets and otherwise – to empower the role of the mayor within their own city. This may or may not be a desirable objective, depending on circumstance, personality, political culture and other factors. However, engaging in discussion at the local level about the role of the mayor is a worthy pursuit. Establishing a shared understanding and clear expectations of the role may be an important ingredient in building conditions for effective local leadership.

²⁰ Svava and Watson (2010) provides a helpful glimpse into these transitions through the presentation of 14 case studies of American cities which have changed their form of government.

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