Some cities are stronger than others in governing power.
Detail of Tacoma City Hall clock tower. Next: Boise police officer directs traffic at Capital City Public Market on a summer Saturday.
Celebrating 15 yrs in the heart of downtown

LOCAL PRODUCE
LOCAL HERBS AND FLOWERS
IDAHO SPECIALTY FOODS
LOCAL WINE AND ART

8:30am - 1:30pm  See you at the market!
City government structure influences local politics, the balance of power between the mayor and council, and citizen participation. Municipal classification systems are the result of state laws that sort out authorities or limitations on each type of city. Municipal forms of government—mayor-council or council-manager—are largely determined by state laws that provide a varying menu of options mixed with some degree of local flexibility. State law and municipal charters determine electoral systems, whether they are at-large or by district. But, as in the case of Modesto, electoral structures have been recently impacted by both federal and state court action.

Classification Systems

Classification systems are typically based on population, and may, for example, assign different taxation, electoral, annexation, or home rule charter
Washington Cities Classifications

Municipal governments in Washington are classified according to their population at the time of organization (usually incorporation) or reorganization.¹

I. First Class—A city with a population of 10,000 or more at the time of organization or reorganization that has adopted a charter. RCW 35.01.010.

II. Second Class—A city with a population more than 1,500 at the time of organization or reorganization that does not have a charter and does not operate as a code city under the Optional Municipal Code. RCW 35.01.020.

III. Town—A town has a population of less than 1,500 at the time of its organization and does not operate under the Optional Municipal Code. RCW 35.01.040. As a result of some 1994 statutory amendments, the threshold population required to incorporate as a city is now 1,500, up from 300. RCW 35.02.010. Since a new city cannot be formed unless it has 1,500 inhabitants, no sparsely populated areas may now incorporate to form a new town.

IV. Optional Municipal Code—Created in 1967, the Optional Municipal Code (Title 35A RCW), provides an alternative to the basic statutory classification system of municipal government. It was designed to provide broad statutory home rule authority in matters of local concern. Any unincorporated area having a population of at least 1,500 may incorporate as an Optional Municipal Code or "code city," and any city or town may reorganize as a code city. Optional Municipal Code cities with populations more than 10,000 may also adopt a charter.

Pictured: Old City Hall, Spokane.
powers to municipal governments in different classifications. The rationale for such a scheme: legislative convenience in dealing with various types of cities by providing additional authority or by limiting authority. For an example, see the Washington Cities Classification in the sidebar opposite.

Of our Urban West states, four have classification schemes in addition to Washington. Colorado has two categories: less than 2,000 in population is a town and greater than 2,000 is a city. Arizona has three categories: incorporated places are defined as towns with 1,500 to 3,000; incorporated places are designated as cities with populations from 3,000 to 3,500; and another classification is for all cities more than 3,500. Utah has four categories; Nevada has three. Of the three non-classification states, California dropped its system in the 1950s; Idaho repealed its in 1967. Oregon has never had a classification scheme; all municipalities have home rule charters.

As a non-classification state, Idaho treats all cities the same, which is to say, all Idaho municipalities are considered cities regardless of their population size. They all have the same grants and prohibitions of power unless the legislature finds a way to circumvent the state constitutional prohibitions against “special legislation” (i.e., targeting a certain city or group of cities). For example, the Idaho Legislature in 1987 gave all cities of more than 100,000 population the authority to use tax increment financing. Only Boise qualified. In the early 1990s, all counties more than 200,000 were given impact fee authority. Only Ada County (home to Boise) qualified. However, in both cases, the legislature later expanded the authorities statewide.

**Home Rule Powers**

Unlike state governments that have powers reserved to them through the 10th Amendment to the United States Constitution, cities have only those powers and authorities granted to them under their specific state constitutions. This general limitation is commonly referred to as “Dillon’s Rule,” after the judge who penned the precedent-setting opinion that noted, “cities are creatures of their states.” States, through their constitutions, their legislative statutes, and citizen initiatives, have developed widely varying approaches to their city governments and what powers and authorities to grant them. In their recent book, *City Bound*, Gerald Frug and David Barron argue for an “understanding of local power that takes as its starting point an analysis of
Progressive Reform

The Progressive Reform Era, generally considered to have been prominent from the 1880s to the 1930s, focused on a series of reforms to government that were intended to remove the corruption of the political machines running most large cities in the U.S. at the time. Even Dillon's Rule is a part of the Progressive Reform Era. Dillon was expressing the hostility most reformers had toward mistrusted city officials. Alan Saltzstein quotes Judge Dillon, saying cities were not led by those "best fitted by their intelligence, business experience, capacity and moral character." Their management was often "both unwise and extravagant." (Dillon's) solution was judicial supervision of city actions ... state judges, then asserted authority over cities to correct the evils of the machine and encourage progressive governments.”

Reform Elements:
Reform elements commonly considered part of the Progressive Reform Era agenda and relevant to our study of western cities are:

- Council-Manager form of city government
- Non-partisan elections
- Civil Service systems for public jobs
- Initiative, referendum, and recall processes

Mayor Tom Johnson of Cleveland pushed for parks and public transit as a municipal champion of Progressive reform.
the extent and limits of the state-defined power of American city governments.”3 They further note that “(e)very city will always operate under some kind of state control. The question is what should that be.”4 Among the many things defined by state government law and constitutions are:

- Whether city officials are elected or appointed
- Whether they have substantial autonomy to act on their own
- Whether services are provided locally or by others
- Whether they have discretion over their own tax base
- What powers they have to regulate land use laws within their boundaries
- What discretion they have in determining their own boundaries5

Cities in many states enjoy home rule powers through either their original state constitution or by constitutional amendment. Home rule grants local voters the authority to adopt their own municipal charters. However, the meaning of home rule varies widely. The essential concept is that cities may act in many cases without seeking state legislative approval and in many cases without legislative interference.

There are basically two types of home rule powers. The first is called a “residual powers” provision, designed to turn Dillon’s Rule on its head. Cities that possess residual powers have the authority to engage in local functions and services that are not denied to them by either the state constitution or state law. In the second type of home rule, cities have used home rule charters to create spheres of influence in which they expect to exercise wide discretion. Issues of “municipal affairs” are
not of statewide concern and should not be subject to legislative interference. These spheres include such things as governmental structure, types and levels of services, municipal boundary issues (including annexation), and local taxation. Two "municipal affairs" areas of particular relevance to our study are the annexation and taxation powers of cities. Of the 10 Urban West focus cities, both Tempe and Pueblo exercise home rule authority and have certain unique powers granted in their charters that are not available to non-home rule cities that operate under the general laws of their respective states. This power is particularly evident with regard to their ability to impose alternative forms of local taxes.

Home rule is important for cities especially in granting them the authority to determine revenue options and to design governmental structures consistent with the unique needs of their communities. But home rule likely does not represent the panacea that early reformers envisioned. According to Frug and Barron, "the fact that (a) city is a 'home rule city' doesn't answer the question of the extent of its authority." Even where cities enjoy home rule authority, they are limited in each of these areas of municipal concern either by state legislative initiatives or judicial interpretation. For example, while Tempe and Pueblo both heavily use local option taxation authority under their charters, they are still constrained by state limits imposed on revenue and expenditure levels.

Many Colorado cities have home rule authority but "labor under a signature state law, known as the Taxpayers Bill of Rights, that imposes very restrictive limits on (their) fiscal authority." As Frug and Barron further note, "the grant of home rule, in short, is always more limited than its name suggests." The courts have also played a significant role in determining the extent of home rule power. One expert commentator has noted that the courts "have interpreted narrowly the scope of power granted to local units." Courts have remained enamored of Dillon’s Rule, which asserts that cities are creatures of their states and have only the powers granted to them by their states, following "into the 21st century the 19th century world view of an Iowa judge". Their deference to this narrow construction of local powers is perhaps best exemplified in the Idaho Supreme Court’s refusal to even acknowledge the
1976 legislative passage of residual home rule power for Idaho cities. They have remained "tone-deaf" to this change and have instead continued to cite fealty to Judge Dillon."13

Not all of the state courts have been tied to Dillon’s Rule, however. In neighboring Utah, the Supreme Court has rejected Dillon’s Rule as being "antithetical to effective and efficient local and state government. If at one time it served a valid purpose, it does so no longer ... Dillon’s Rule of strict construction is not to be used."14 In Colorado, the state constitution tells the courts to interpret home rule power liberally.15
Forms of City Government

In the same way that states in the West are likely to have been shaped by the Progressive Reform Era structures (see sidebar, page 64) like the initiative and referendum, the same structures used in city government also impact Urban West cities. The chart below displays the form of city government used in each of the 10 Urban West focus cities.

### City Government Structures, 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Type of Government</th>
<th>Council Members</th>
<th>Mayor</th>
<th>Note</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boise, ID</td>
<td>Mayor</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td>6 at large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6 Council Members + Mayor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eugene, OR</td>
<td>Council-Manager</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td>8 Wards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8 Council Members + Mayor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modesto, CA</td>
<td>Council-Manager</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td>6 Districts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6 Council Members + Mayor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pueblo, CO</td>
<td>Council-Manager</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td>4 Districts + 3 at large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7 Council Members</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reno, NV</td>
<td>Council-Manager</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td>5 Wards + 1 at large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6 Council Members + Mayor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salem, OR</td>
<td>Council-Manager</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td>8 Wards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8 Council Members + Mayor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salt Lake City, UT</td>
<td>Mayor</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td>7 Districts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7 Council Members + Mayor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spokane, WA</td>
<td>Mayor</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td>2 from each of the 3 Districts 1 at large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7 Council Members + Mayor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tacoma, WA</td>
<td>Council-Manager</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td>5 Districts; 3 at large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8 Council Members + Mayor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tempe, AZ</td>
<td>Council-Manager</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td>6 at large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6 Council Members + Mayor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Mayor-Council form

The strong mayor form of government was the first Progressive reform. Being frustrated with the corruption of ward politics and the power ward politicians played in weakening executive authority, reformers opted for a strong mayor. They centralized most administrative functions in the office, thus giving the mayor major powers to act on behalf of the entire city. The mayor is directly elected by the voters and selects the department heads subject to city council confirmation. While the particular powers and responsibilities of a strong mayor will vary based on state law, strong mayors typically hire and fire department heads, prepare and administer the budget, and have veto power over city council legislation (which may be overridden by the council). While the strong mayor form of city government is prevalent in the nation’s largest cities, it is not limited to big cities. It is common among our smallest cities. The strong mayor form of city government does not preclude hiring a city administrator to handle the day-to-day administrative duties of the city; however, the appointment and budget powers still reside with the mayor’s office. In this model of city government, the voters can hold the mayor directly responsible for running the city. Of our 10 focus cities, only Boise, Spokane, and Salt Lake City have a mayor-council structure.

Separation of powers and checks and balances are key features of a mayor-council form of government, or, at least in theory. In many cities, it appears that the mayor often dominates policymaking with the council left to respond to mayoral initiatives, except on special issues in which several council members have some particular interest or expertise.

In Salt Lake City, there is more of a balance of power than in most cities. Based upon informal agreements reached years ago, funding for the offices of mayor and council are equal—approximately $2 million each in FY 2010. Council members talk about their legislative agenda, even though they admit that they could be more proactive. They employ professional staffers who assist them in analyzing city budget proposals and sending out weekly email updates and quarterly newsletters. But there are limitations—council members are part time, working with a full-time mayor. Despite staff support, one council member said they still had their short-sighted moments.
The council-manager form almost perfectly embodied the Progressive principles of insulating administration from politics, focusing on an efficient form of government. The council sets the policy and the manager implements it. Non-partisanship was valued over partisan politics in the spirit of the classic quote, “There is no Democrat or Republican way to build the streets.” The city was viewed less as a government and more as a municipal corporation that should be run like a business. The civil service system was based on the notion that competition and rigorous tests would result in placing the best and brightest in city government, not the political hacks of the old spoils system. The direct democracy tools (initiative, referendum, and recall) were targeted at malapportioned legislatures whose rural legislators were often at war with city officials. Each of these features had a continuing impact on cities in the Urban West. The vast majority of medium-sized cities employ a council-manager form, have non-partisan elections, use civil service systems, and have been affected by citizen-backed initiatives.

In 1908, Staunton, Virginia, was the first city to adopt the council-manager system, shortly after the city commission form of government was unveiled in Galveston, Texas in 1900. In the wake of a devastating hurricane, Galveston business leaders pushed for a commission form with elected city officials serving in both legislative and administrative capacities. Commissioners (or department heads) were responsible for the major functions of city government (police commissioner, fire commissioner, etc.) and also served as city policymakers. By 1922, about 500 cities had adopted the commission form of government. Salt Lake City is the only Urban West city that adopted the commission form during this period and then later dropped it for the mayor-council form in the 1980s. The commission form had its critics, especially within the leadership of the National Municipal League (NML). NML thought that the commission form tended to encourage elected officials to focus mainly on their own departments rather than to look at general city interests, and that there was little room for real professional administrative expertise.

By the mid-20th century, the council-manager form became the most widely adopted form of government in the country. It was and is especially popular in the South and in the West. In the council-manager structure, a full-time professional administrator known as the city manager is hired by the city council and serves at its pleasure. Department heads are selected by the city council.
manager and confirmed by the city council. Historically, the mayor in this form is "the first among equals." The mayor is a member of the council, presides over council meetings, and carries out several symbolic executive functions, but has no veto authority. The city manager is typically the chief administrative officer of the city. While the figure opposite indicates that the voters directly elect only the council, in reality many council-manager cities now directly elect the mayor as well.  

Pueblo is a council-manager city and one of only a few cities in America that does not have a mayor. The president of the council serves in the place of a mayor. In the 2009 Pueblo city election voters were asked in a ballot proposition whether or not a mayor-council form should replace the council-manager form of government. Billboards supporting the current system declared in bold print to "Vote No on the Mayor." The most interesting person seen wearing a "Vote No on the Mayor" button was Council President Vera Ortega, who in most every other city would be called the mayor.

In the council-manager form, the mayor may be selected by a variety of methods: direct election, selection from the council, or automatically selected as the highest vote getter. In any case, typically the mayor’s position in the council-manager form of government is largely symbolic. But the power and influence of the mayor is often dependent on leadership style. The ability of a mayor to develop majority support from the council is almost directly related to a mayor’s ability to persuade rather than to any formal power advantage.

In the ideal, city managers are separated from the political and policy decisions made by the elected officials. This principle mirrors the "politics-administration dichotomy" advocated by Woodrow Wilson and other early
public administration scholars at the beginning of the 20th century. The politics-administration dichotomy was meant to refer all policy decisions to elected officials and to allow administrators to focus on the science of administration. Originally, the International City Management Association (ICMA) code of ethics specifically prohibited city managers from being involved in policymaking, requiring them to defer to city council members.

In recent years, the ICMA has revised its ethics statement to recognize the leadership role of the city manager. City managers are often involved in advising on difficult policy decisions and become embroiled in the political decisions made by their cities. Professor James Svara has argued "city managers cannot be 'passive' and need to have an active role in policy formation to be effective in their work as professional managers employed by city councils." Svara has expanded the traditional politics-administration dichotomy into a larger dimension, which includes mission, policy, administration, and management arenas. In Svara's mission arena, the council is seen as dominant, deciding on fundamental issues such as imposing a new tax or making a major annexation decision. The manager's role is largely confined to advising and suggesting the consequences of various scenarios. In the policy arena, the manager plays a more critical role, for example, in formulating the budget, a major city policy document. Council members often spend most of their time reacting to the policy initiatives set forth by the manager in the budget. In the administration area, the manager has general oversight responsibilities of city departments, but the council can be involved to some extent in interaction with the staff when they directly receive citizen complaints about departmental practices. In the management area, the council evaluates the manager, but most internal operations are the province of the manager.
Manager and council relationships are dynamic and ever-changing within cities and certainly among cities. Personally assertive managers may be encouraged by a more passive council to be more aggressive on a broad range of policy issues. On the other hand, an assertive mayor or council member(s) can play a strong policy role as well as invade administrative and management areas.

Other scholars have pointed to the variety of levels of political involvement evident among practicing city managers. Sally Coleman Selden, et al. suggest that city managers can be arrayed in a typology that separates them by the degree of autonomy (from their city councils) and the extent of their involvement in policy.21

As the figure at right illustrates, 70 percent of city managers were classified as being both highly involved in policy and highly autonomous from their city councils.22 In other words, the ideal of the city manager removed from politics is not typically realized in the council-manager form of government. The inevitability of this involvement in policy and the tension it creates with the council may explain why the average tenure of city managers is only five years in each assignment. However, it is not the only explanation for the low average. Other factors include leaving for a better job, illness, and retirement. It is also important to point out that five years is the average and that many successful managers stay in one city for a long tenure.

In the final analysis, these complex sets of relationships between appointed and elected officials raise the basic question political scientist Alan Saltzstein has formulated so clearly: “How can we reconcile an appointed official as a policymaker with our democratic traditions, particularly when that official is selected for his skills and knowledge in managing rather than policymaking?”23

Because of the question raised by Professor Saltzstein and concerns about the connection of the manager to the public, the office of mayor has evolved in many manager cities into a position of considerable power. The amassing of additional power has moved incrementally in Modesto, where voters recently approved an amendment to their charter that gives the mayor
additional budgetary and administrative oversight powers that the mayor shares with the manager.

Few cities of any size have a pure form of government. As mayor and manager forms have evolved, their differences have blurred and their similarities have become more apparent. Professor George Frederickson and others have called these “adapted cities.” They are council-manager cities that have a relatively strong, directly elected mayor, and strong mayor-council cities that have very strong city administrators. In the former system, the mayor is taking on more administrative responsibilities and in the latter system the mayor is delegating more authority to a city administrator.

Only one of our Urban West focus cities has changed its form of city government from council-manager to strong mayor in the 20 years since the publication of the Urban West. In 1999, Spokane voters elected to change to the strong mayor form of government after 40 years of the council-manager system. The voters considered a change back to the council-manager form of government in 2003, but the measure failed.

• Impacts on Decision-making and Policy

The American experience with municipal structures is far more varied and complex than a one- or two-page discussion in a standard textbook. Most focus on the two major forms of city government—mayor-council and council-manager—as if cities have pure forms of government. In reality, each form has taken on major characteristics of the other. Mayor-council cities are seeking more expertise and professionalism through adopting the manager model and hiring chief administrative officers. Council-manager cities are increasingly emphasizing the greater accountability and personal connection features of the mayor-council form by providing for the direct election of their mayors and, in more and more cities, expanding mayoral powers.

The mayor-council form is based on a separation of powers principle. Conflict is more common in mayor-council and cooperation is more typical in council-manager cities. Svara tells us that mayors in council-manager cities “operate in conditions that are more favorable to developing a constructive leadership style.” “The city manager form is based on the unity principle with all authority assigned to the city council that appoints a professional city manager.”

How do these structural arrangements affect policy? In other words, are there significant policy differences among cities with different forms of
government? Which spends more? Which is more accountable? The answers to these questions are not as clear as some supporters of one form or the other might think. Morgan and Pelissero found that the form of government does not affect spending patterns. Clark similarly found that structures did not influence spending on urban renewal or expenditures in general. Other researchers have found some differences. Council-manager cities tend to not be as aggressive in economic development programs as mayor-council cities. However, of our 10 cities, Pueblo, with a city manager, appears to have been the most aggressive during the period of our work on western cities. If that is true, it can likely be attributed more to the unique challenges of the city rather than the form of government.

Structure does matter in the decision-making process. Winners and losers in policy fights may be determined by whether the mayor has a vote on the council or whether the mayor has veto authority. Who reports to the mayor is another important consideration. How much administrative authority does the mayor share with other independently elected administrative officials or officials who answer directly to the city council? Power centers on certain issues can develop around other elected executive officials, such as the elected city attorney in Reno or Pueblo’s long-time city attorney who was on contract with the council for 38 years. He contended that he was more accountable to Pueblo’s residents than the six city managers and 50 council
members he worked with in those 38 years. Some cities have independently elected boards and commissions who are responsible for a major function of city government—water, libraries, etc. All of this fragmentation helps disperse power but may also make efficient government less attainable.

Electoral Systems for City Council

As the table on page 68 demonstrates, the number of city council seats varies by city. In our 10 focus cities, city councils range from six to eight seats. Mayors are typically part of the council and have a vote on the council in manager cities. It further demonstrates that our cities differ in the method of electing those council members. Some use at-large elections. Others depart from the traditional reform model and have their council members run in districts or use a hybrid of the two methods. In at-large elections, all the voters of the city vote on every seat up for election. In a district election, only voters from that geographical district vote on a particular candidate. Progressive reformers liked the at-large voting model because they believed it would make candidates more likely to respond to the needs of the city as a whole. Again, they were reacting to the old ward system of big city machines where party bosses and elected officials were more interested in serving the needs of their supporters than the city itself.

In Salt Lake City, council members maintain close ties with their districts. A city council staff liaison helps organize meetings and facilitates communication with district constituents. In response to the criticism that their system breeds more of a parochial approach, one council member stated that their system is not much different from an at-large system where many of the council members live in a concentrated area of the city.

Another Salt Lake City council member pointed out that he was elected in a low turnout district election with fewer than 2,500 voters, hardly a large cross section of the city. District elections often pivot around neighborhood issues that do not necessarily represent majority concerns in the city. It is tough to represent the needs of the entire city when you are really representing only 2,500 voters in a city of more than 180,000 people. This council member’s election was secured in his district because he had had only one opponent in a spring primary election. If he had more than one opponent, the top two candidates would have competed in the fall general election. Turnout in the general city election is not much higher than in a primary election.
At-large systems, such as Boise's, do not guarantee geographic dispersion. That lack of geographic representation resonates with Boiseans who throughout recent history have seen council members often come from the city's North End and southeastern areas; few have ever come from the rapidly growing western precincts.

Some point out the fact that the costs and effort of running citywide elections makes it virtually impossible for many to run successfully for such offices. Candidates can walk their district with a few thousand registered voters but do not have the resources to advertise to 250,000 residents. They also have argued that at-large voting models disadvantage minority candidates and that cities with at-large representation systems tend to elect fewer minority candidates.

The City of Modesto had at-large elections for its city council members until advocates for Latino voters challenged that representational structure in a court case under California’s Voting Rights Act, alleging that Latino neighborhoods were neglected and only two Latinos had been elected to the council in the city's history. The case made its way to the U.S. Supreme Court, but the Court refused to hear it, thus affirming the Appellate Court judgment that at-large elections were unfair to Latino voters. In November 2008, Modesto voters approved a measure changing their city charter to district elections.

The first election under the new scheme in Modesto produced a surprising result. The white Republican candidate won in Modesto’s new southwestern district dominated by Democratic Latinos. However, the Republican was a long-term resident of the area as opposed to his Latino opponent who was new to the area. Turnout was low—only 12 percent. Two major arguments for districting—encouraging greater voter turnout and producing a more racially and ethnically diverse council—were not satisfied in this first election in 2009.

Other cities have combined the two representational systems to allow for both district and at-large council seats. Presumably, this allows voters to select representatives reflective of their district’s particular interests as well as representatives who are responsive to the needs of the city as a whole.
of the 10 Urban West focus cities use this hybrid method of electing city council members. In Pueblo, the rationale is that the voters may vote for their district council member and over a four-year election cycle also vote in all three of the at-large elections that represent a majority of the council.

- **Policy and Administrative Impacts**

Some studies have found that district elections produce a more diverse council with greater conflict than at-large systems. Council members are
more responsive to voters and neighborhood-based concerns. In district elections there is less opportunity for passing the buck. Voters can more easily know who represents them, especially on controversial neighborhood issues.

Regardless of the systems, questions about representation persist. Who should the council represent? The question illustrates both the strengths and weaknesses of the district system. Council members appear to be more responsive to district interest groups that may reflect majority sentiment in their districts rather than broader citywide interests. District systems seem to make each council member focus more on his or her district and not on the interests of the entire city. It may be more representative from a neighborhood perspective but not from a communitywide perspective.

It is hard to make generalizations about western cities of any size. The great diversity in forms of government might surprise observers who assume that because most cities have either a mayor-council or council-manager form that pretty much tells the whole story. Designating a city as a city manager city or a mayor-council city does not necessarily tell you very much. The mayor in Modesto is much more powerful than the president of the council in Pueblo, even though they are both in a position to hold the title of “mayor.” Mayors in some cities are directly elected while others are only “first among equals” and appointed by their fellow council members. The city attorney in Reno, as an elected official, at least formally should carry more clout than the appointed city attorneys in most of our cities. The city council in Salt Lake City stands out as having far more resources than most cities in the West. In other words, understanding the relative power of the various officials in any given city requires understanding the unique twists on mayor-council and council-manager structures in that city.

Various electoral systems have consequences. District elections apparently produce different kinds of candidates than at-large elections. Whether it results in different policies is another matter, perhaps tipping to more specific geographically issue-focused decision-making. If present trends continue, more and more cities will be adopting district election schemes.