

# “Mayor” does not always mean the person *in charge*

*One mechanism of local government — why the same title carries very different powers depending on your city's form of government, and how to tell which one you have.*

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## BEFORE YOU BEGIN

### ***How This Guide Works***

This is part of **Incognati Civics**, applying the field-guide format to local government — city councils, counties, special districts, zoning, and local taxes. Unlike elections or federal law, local structure **varies by state and even by town**: the same title can carry different powers ten miles away. So each specimen names the pattern and the tell, then points you to the one authority that settles it — your own jurisdiction's charter and your state's code — rather than asserting a single national rule. Sources are cross-jurisdiction bodies and representative statutes, listed in full on the references page.

#### INCOGNATI CIVICS — LOCAL GOVERNMENT

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# Forms of Government: Who Actually Runs the City

## Nomen Non Potestas

Governing precedent / case Municipal charter (varies by city) Status Varies by city; recurring

| OBSERVED SPECIMEN                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | U.S. CITIES, BY CHARTER TYPE |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| <p><i>Ask residents who runs their city and most say “the mayor.” But American cities use several forms. In a <b>strong-mayor</b> system the elected mayor is the chief executive. In the <b>council-manager</b> form — the most common among mid-size cities — the day-to-day executive is a professional manager hired by the council, and the “mayor” is largely a council member who runs meetings and cuts ribbons. In a commission form, elected commissioners each run a department. Blaming or crediting “the mayor” for city operations can be aimed at someone with little executive power, or miss the manager who actually holds it.</i></p> |                              |

| THE HOOK                                                                                                                       | THE MECHANISM                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>The title ‘mayor’ is universal, so people assume the office means the same thing everywhere — a single chief executive.</p> | <p>A city's charter fixes its form: mayor-council (strong or weak), council-manager, or commission. Each puts executive authority in a different place, so the same title carries different powers.</p> |

**Field mark:** before praising or blaming “the mayor” for how the city is run, find your city's form of government — in a council-manager city the real executive is the unelected manager, and the charter says which form you have.

See the full references page for complete citations.

## References

every source checkable at the link provided; DOIs given where the source has one

CROSS-JURISDICTION AUTHORITY · ICMA

International City/County Management Association, “Forms of Local Government.”

<https://icma.org/forms-local-government>

*The professional body's overview of mayor-council, council-manager, and commission forms and where executive power sits in each.*

CROSS-JURISDICTION AUTHORITY · NLC

National League of Cities, “Cities 101 — Forms of Municipal Government.”

<https://www.nlc.org/resource/cities-101-forms-of-government/>

*Nonpartisan explainer on how city forms distribute authority; details set by each city's charter.*

## Reading ‘The Mayor’: A Gut Check

*four questions before you decide who is responsible for how your city is run*

- 1 Find the form**  
Mayor-council, council-manager, or commission — your charter names it.
  - 2 Locate the executive**  
In council-manager cities, the manager, not the mayor, runs operations.
  - 3 Read the mayor's powers**  
‘Weak mayor’ is a real category with limited authority.
  - 4 Aim accountability correctly**  
Credit or blame the office that actually holds the power.
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INCOGNATI CIVICS

### *The Series Continues*

This is Specimen No. 1 of the Local Government section within Incognati Civics — the section built around the fact that local structure varies, so every plate ends at your own charter. It joins Elections, Federal Laws, Official Data Reporting, and Institutional Communications within Civics. The Incognati Atlas catalogs the underlying patterns across all of it.

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