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## ■ Academic Paper

# Perceptions of council member–department head interactions in local government

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In this article, we use data collected from municipal council members and department heads in Michigan municipalities with over 10 000 residents to determine how, and why, they view the quality of their interactions with one another. Building theories of small group dynamics and political control of bureaucracy, we test several hypotheses and conclude that council members and department heads hold divergent views of their interactions with one another and that their views are determined by government form and community characteristics. We conclude with simple steps that local government officials and administrators can take to improve their small group dynamics and governing performance. Copyright © 2016 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

## INTRODUCTION

The relationship between elected officials and government employees has long been of core interest to scholars of public administration. Woodrow Wilson's (1887) seminal essay philosophically engrained the complex relationship between political and administrative actors into the very foundation of the field. Others, including Frederickson (1980) and Svava (1990), built on Wilson's ideas using practical models explaining political control over the bureaucracy (Frederickson, Smith, Larimer, & Licari 2012). In this article, we apply theories of small group dynamics to the question of political control over

bureaucracy. Theories of small group dynamics, broadly, posit that the quality of group interactions in an organizational setting impact the overall performance of an organization (Golembiewski 1995; Gabris, Golembiewski, & Ihrke 2001; Gabris and Nelson 2013; Ford and Ihrke 2015). At its simplest, organizations exhibiting positive group dynamics obtain better outcomes than organizations with negative group dynamics. Specifically, we use data collected from council members and department heads serving in Michigan local governments to answer two research questions:

- 1) How do city council members and department heads view their interactions with one another? And
- 2) What are the structural determinants of council member and department head perceptions of council–department head interactions?

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Currently, there are 275 municipalities overseen by elected council members in the state of Michigan. The focus of this study is the one-third of Michigan municipalities with populations of over 10 000. We focus on larger municipalities because of the logical assumption that larger municipalities have greater needs and provide a wider array of services than smaller municipalities. Other studies of local government by Moon (2002), Heidbreder, Grasse, Ihrke, and Cherry (2011), and Nelson and Svara (2012) have similarly focused on this population of American municipalities. As mentioned, in this study, we explore the relationship between elected city council members and department heads. We begin with a basic question, what do council members and department heads do, respectively?

Under the classic politics–administration dichotomy, elected municipal council members set policies that articulate the goals of the organization and leave it up to the administrators to execute those goals (Goodnow 1900). However, as Svara (1990) famously noted, city council members are, in reality, involved in mission setting, policy design, general administration, and day-to-day management to a degree that is determined in part by the nature and structure of the local government. Nonetheless, municipal councils can broadly be understood as the body serving the legislative function of municipal government. As such, their work product includes the setting of policies that establish the rules of the municipality, that is, ordinances, and policies that set the rules governing the operations of the organization. Generically, their tasks can be described as governance.

City council members engage in the task of governance as small groups of people meeting at legally established intervals. The group dynamics on a city council, including the level of conflict, cooperation, openness, and trust, have been shown to be influenced by the structural characteristics of the government (Nelson & Nollenberger 2011), as well as the demographics of the board member themselves (Ihrke & Niederjohn 2005). In other words, the task of governance is shared among board members who bring with them a diversity of experience, goals, and constituencies. Although often elected in non-partisan elections, municipal council members are still political animals elected to represent the interests of their constituents. Hence, each council member has both an internal audience, that is, the rest of the council, and an external audience, that is, the voters. The competing audience pressures further complicate the governance process by forcing members to work with other members who may have a very different governing mandate.

Municipal council members also interact with the executive office of their local government. In a council–manager system, council members, in perhaps their most important task, hire the city manager. Once hired, it is up to the council to evaluate his or her performance and ultimately hold the manager accountable for the performance of their government (Svara 1987; 1999). In a mayor–council system in which the executive is elected, the executive faces the same competing audience challenge as the council members, likely further politicizing the relationship between the council and the executive. Such a system creates a higher conflict balance of power relationship as opposed to a cooperative shared governance relationship (Nelson & Nollenberger 2011). Regardless of government form, managing the relationship with the executive is a key governing task of a municipal council.

Municipal councils have a less direct relationship with the department heads that serve at the behest of the local government executive. While the council, executive, and managers working within government are all impacting the overall performance of local government and have a shared interest in its success, the level of interaction between the council and department heads is, by design, less than the level of interaction between the council and the executive or the executive and the department heads, respectively. Department heads serve the more traditional management function of overseeing employees working in local government. Under the traditional politics–administration dichotomy, department heads are firmly on the administrative side, assigning tasks to employees in order to meet the policy goals set by the council. Department heads report to the executive, and although they serve the public, are not the public’s accountability point in local government. Finally, department heads also interact with one another as peers with similar operational tasks by virtue of sitting in parallel positions within the bureaucracy.

As stated, we are interested in the ways in which department heads and council members view their interactions with one another. We suspect, given the differences in their respective tasks and audiences, that they have differing views on the quality and effectiveness of their interactions. But why does it matter if council members and department heads are on the same page as it pertains to their interactions? First, theories of political control of bureaucracy explain how both the political and administrative actors within local government share the task of running government (Svara 1994). Under Svara (1994), mission, policy, administration, and management of government are shared, to some degree, between the council and the administrators.

The public administration axiom, which politics decides and administration does, only works if both groups are on the same page. If not, the day-to-day execution of government will not reflect the goals of elected officials and, in turn, the voting public. Related, according to theories of small group dynamics, the effectiveness of an organization will be less than ideal if members of the organization do not have accurate views of one another (Gabris *et al.* 2001; Grasse, Heidebreder, & Ihrke 2014). Simply, a disconnect between two groups necessary to the effective functioning of government can be expected to have a negative impact on overall government performance.

## HYPOTHESES

In this section, we present and explain the rationale for five hypotheses grounded in theories of political control of bureaucracy and small group dynamics.

*Hypothesis 1: Council members have different views of the council member–department head relationship than department heads.*

As discussed, council members and department heads differ in their core functions and contributions to the governance of their municipalities. Ideally, under a healthy group dynamic, both groups would be expected to take a similar view of their relationship. However, we suspect that the indirect relationship between the two groups, along with the existence of the intermediary government executive, makes it unlikely that they share common perceptions of their relationship.

*Hypothesis 2: Council members and department heads in council–manager forms of government have comparatively more positive views of the council member–department head relationship.*

Svara (1999) and Nelson and Nollenberger (2011) found that council–manager government forms resulted in overall lower levels of conflict between board members and between board members and the executive. We suspect that the effect of government form on conflict carries over into the council member–department head relationship.

*Hypothesis 3: Council members and department heads serving municipalities with more challenging demographics have comparatively more negative views of the council member–department head relationship.*

Peterson (1976), Johnson and Ihrke (2004), Ihrke and Niederjohn (2005), Ford and Ihrke (2015), and others demonstrated that the group dynamics

on governing boards are impacted by the demographics of the population served by the local government. Generally, when populations have higher needs, as evidenced by higher rates of poverty, urbanity, and others, the governing task is more complicated, creating more opportunities for conflict (Peterson 1981). We suspect the negative impact of higher need populations on governing dynamics carries over into the council–member department head relationship. We suspect this relationship to be particularly acute for department heads, given their close proximity to the populations being served by government (Lipsky, 2010).

*Hypothesis 4: Longer serving council members and department heads have a comparably more positive view of the council member–department head relationship.*

Logically, the longer one serves in a local government, the more time they have to develop relationships with their colleagues and subordinates. Previous research on Wisconsin town boards conducted by Johnson and Ihrke (2004) found that tenure was a negative predictor of conflict. We similarly expect longer serving board members and department heads to exhibit comparably more positive perceptions of their interactions with one another.

*Hypothesis 5: Council members and department heads serving municipalities receiving higher levels of state financial support have comparably higher perceptions of the quality of their interactions.*

Shared revenue consists of the redistribution of state tax revenues to municipal governments. We suspect that council member and department heads serving governments receiving comparably more shared revenue have higher perceptions of their quality their interactions. Why? Presumably, the availability of resources allows both parties to better execute their shared governance task, resulting in positive perceptions of one another.

## DATA AND METHODS

The data used to test our hypotheses come from a 2006 survey of 1430 public officials representing 92 Michigan municipalities with more than 10 000 citizens. The survey, which targeted council members and department heads, as well as mayors and city managers, had a response rate of 31.1%. In addition, data were obtained from at least one city council member in 90% of the targeted municipalities. While the survey data are somewhat dated, this study's focus on group dynamics and political

control of bureaucracy gives us confidence that the results are not substantively impacted by the year in which the data was collected; there is no reason to believe that the state of Michigan municipalities have drastically changed in ways that would be expected to impact their governing dynamics. All survey data were matched with various municipal demographic and structural characteristics obtained from the United States Census and Citizens Research Council of Michigan. The survey questions themselves were heavily informed by previous municipal surveys in Wisconsin conducted by Johnson and Ihrke (2004) and Ihrke and Niederjohn (2005).

Summary statistics for the independent variables used in our analysis, disaggregated by group, are displayed in Table 1. Length of service and age are both individual variables measured by our survey instrument. Percentage of White people, obtained from the United States census bureau, measures the percentage of residents within a municipality whom identify as white. Persons per square mile, also census data, is a measure of density that indicates both the size and urbanity of a municipality. Population over 65%, per capita income, occupied housing, and poverty rate (all obtained from the census) are measures of the relative governance challenge, as indicated by the demographics of the municipality's population, facing council members and department heads. Shared revenue, obtained from the Citizens Research Council of Michigan, indicates the amount of state financial support given to the municipal government in the 2005 fiscal year. Not listed in Table 1 is a dichotomous variable indicating if the council member or department head is serving a council-manager form of government. One hundred and thirteen of the 160 council members in our sample, about 71%, are serving a council-manager government. About 72% of the

surveyed department heads, 165 out of 230, work for council-manager governments.

Summary statistics for the focal variables, all of which measure the quality of interactions between council members and municipal staff, are displayed in Table 2. Both council members and department heads were asked to state their level of agreement on a five-point Likert scale with six different statements, where 1 = complete disagreement and 5 = complete agreement. Statement 1 is a generic measurement of the extent to which communication between city council and municipal staff is perceived as effective. Statement 2 measures the extent to which city council members are perceived to be micromanaging administrative units. Statement 3 measures the extent to which administrators are perceived to be faithfully carrying out the policies passed by the council. Statement 4 measures perceptions of teamwork between the council and administration. Statement 5 is an indicator of the extent to which administrative staff is seen as feeling comfortable interacting with the council. Statement 6 measures the perceived extent to which the council is seen as making realistic demands on the staff. All six statements are based on previous research on conflict in municipal government (Johnson & Ihrke 2004; Ihrke & Niederjohn 2005). Lastly, we created an additive index variable based on responses to statements 1–6, where Statement 2, as the only negative statement, is reverse coded. The interaction additive index has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.78 and 0.79 for council members and department heads, respectively.

We test hypothesis 1, which states that department heads and council member have different perceptions of their interactions, using a series of two-sample comparison of means tests. The results, displayed in Table 3, mostly support the hypothesis. Council members are more likely than department

Table 1 Summary statistics for independent variables

	N		Mean		Standard deviation	
	Council	Dept. heads	Council	Dept. heads	Council	Dept. heads
Length of service	156	225	7.33	9.87	6.19	7.96
Age	160	224	51.86	50.00	11.06	7.53
Percentage of White people	160	230	83.46	83.50	16.26	16.67
Persons per square mile	160	230	3359.24	3267.61	1684.85	1685.88
Population over 65	160	230	5678.68	5671.17	8740.32	7763.73
Per capita income	160	230	23 275.04	22 418.33	9044.80	7501.99
Shared revenue	160	230	6 241 652	5 622 769	2.25e+07	1.89e+07
Percentage of occupied housing	160	230	94.75	94.77	2.21	2.39
Poverty rate	160	230	0.10	0.11	0.07	0.08



Table 2 Summary statistics for focal variables

	N		Mean		Standard deviation	
	Council	Dept. heads	Council	Dept. heads	Council	Dept. heads
Statement 1: Communications between the city council and administrative units/administrators is frequent and effective.	157	220	3.49	3.06	1.27	1.25
Statement 2: City council members frequently meddle in the operation of administrative departments.	156	221	2.84	3.05	1.11	1.00
Statement 3: When the council makes decisions, administrators faithfully carry out the policy according to council intentions.	156	221	3.67	3.96	1.03	0.77
Statement 4: On balance, the council views its relationship with administrators as a team.	157	220	3.67	3.32	1.02	1.14
Statement 5: Staff feels comfortable interacting with the council.	155	220	3.56	3.23	0.99	1.13
Statement 6: The council makes realistic demands on staff.	156	220	3.74	3.25	0.79	0.94
Interaction index variable	152	219	21.24	19.75	4.31	4.43

Table 3 Difference of means tests for council member–department head interactions

	Council member means	Department head means	T
Statement 1: Communications between the city council and administrative units/administrators is frequent and effective.	3.49	3.06	3.97***
Statement 2: City council members frequently meddle in the operation of administrative departments.	2.84	3.05	−1.63
Statement 3: When the council makes decisions, administrators faithfully carry out the policy according to council intentions.	3.67	3.96	−3.20**
Statement 4: On balance, the council views its relationship with administrators as a team.	3.67	3.32	3.08**
Statement 5: Staff feels comfortable interacting with the council.	3.56	3.23	2.92**
Statement 6: The council makes realistic demands on staff.	3.74	3.25	5.31***
Interaction index variable	21.24	19.75	3.20**

\* $p < 0.05$ ;\*\* $p < 0.01$ ;\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

heads to view communications between council members and administrators as effective, to view the council and administrators as a team, believe that staff feel comfortable interacting with the council, and believe the council makes realistic demands on staff. Council members also have statistically higher values on the previously described additive index variable. Department heads are more likely than city council members to agree that administrators faithfully carry out policies consistent with the intentions of municipal councils. There is no statistical difference between the level of agreement and Statement 2, which measures perceptions of micromanaging by the municipal council. Overall, council members tend to agree more than department heads with statements that

speak highly of the council, while department heads have comparatively higher levels of agreement with the statement that speaks more highly of municipal managers.

We test the remaining three hypotheses using two ordinary least squares regression models, where the interaction index is the dependent variable. To prevent the possibility of common source bias, all independent variables included in the analysis are either individual respondent demographic variables or municipal characteristic variables (Favero & Bullock 2015). Regression diagnostics revealed no evidence of collinearity or heteroskedasticity. The regression results are displayed in Table 4. As can be seen, Model 1 predicts the interaction index for the sample of council members, while Model 2 predicts

Table 4 Ordinary least squares regression results

Variables	(Model 1)	(Model 2)
	Council members	Department heads
Length of service	-0.0140 (0.0579)	0.0744 (0.0403)
Age	0.0403 (0.0320)	-0.0181 (0.0418)
Percentage of White people	0.0401 (0.0291)	-0.00809 (0.0243)
Persons per square mile	-0.000488* (0.000222)	-0.000511** (0.000191)
Population over 65	-0.000112 (0.000101)	-0.000229** (8.39e-05)
Per capita income	-9.70e-06 (4.97e-05)	9.50e-05 (5.26e-05)
Shared revenue	2.77e-08 (3.94e-08)	7.97e-08* (3.48e-08)
Percentage of occupied housing	0.0765 (0.236)	0.413* (0.178)
Poverty rate	-0.875 (8.020)	5.099 (4.971)
Council-manager	2.145** (0.737)	0.761 (0.680)
Constant	9.602 (21.73)	-19.32 (15.81)
Observations	149	213
R-squared	0.204	0.135

\* $p < 0.05$ ;\*\* $p < 0.01$ ;\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

the interaction index for the sample of department heads.

Hypothesis 2 states that the council-manager form of government is linked to more positive views of the council member-department head relationship. The hypothesis is supported by Model 1 but not Model 2, meaning that council members serving in council-manager governments have a more positive perception of the council member-department head relationship, while department heads do not. The results for the sample of council members are also substantively significant; council members serving in council-manager forms of government have an interaction index score that is 2.145 points higher on a scale ranging from 11 to 30.

Hypothesis 3 states that council members and departments serving municipalities with more challenging demographics have comparably more negative views of the council member-department head relationship. Both regression models indicate limited support for this hypothesis. First, urbanity and size, as measured by census data indicating persons per square mile within a municipality, have a statistically significant negative relationship with the interaction index variable in both models.

Meaning, both council members and department heads serving municipalities with higher densities have comparably more negative perceptions of council member-department head interactions. However, the size of the relationship is substantively small; in both models, a change of one standard deviation in the independent variable changes the dependent variable by less than one point. In addition, Model 2 reveals a negative relationship between the population over the age of 65 years and the interaction index and a positive relationship between the percentage of occupied housing and the interaction index. While the relationship between an aged population and the interaction index is substantively small, the relationship between occupied housing and the interaction index is substantively significant, with a 2.42 percentage point increase in occupied housing corresponding with a one-point increase in the interaction index. Interestingly, neither poverty nor per capita income are significantly related to the dependent variable in either model.

Hypothesis 4 states that longer serving council members and department heads have a more positive view of their relationship with one another. In neither model do we find any support for hypothesis 4. Finally, hypothesis 5 states that higher levels of state financial support, measured by the amount of shared revenue sent to the municipality, are linked with higher scores on the interaction index. While there is no significant relationship in Model 1, Model 2 does indicate that department heads receiving more shared revenue do have a more positive view of council member-department head interactions. However, the relationship is substantively small.

## DISCUSSION

In this article, we set out to answer two research questions, the first being: How do city council members and department heads view their interactions with one another? Our data from Michigan municipal council members and department heads reveal that the two groups have divergent view of the qualities of their interactions with one another. In the context of the small group dynamics literature, this divergence of views is problematic; if two groups crucial to effective governance do not have an accurate portrayal of each other, the local government is likely not operating as effectively as possible (Gabris & Nelson 2013; Grissom 2010, 2014). However, the divergence of views is not surprising given the lack of regular interactions between council

members and department heads. In addition, the ways in which council members and department heads differ in their opinions of their interactions are logical. Council members more readily agree with statements that speak highly of the performance of the council, while department heads more readily agree with the statement that speaks more highly of municipal administrators. This finding speaks to a bias in favor of the group with which respondents identify and work.

The answer to our second research question 'What are the structural determinants of council member and department head perceptions of council–department head interactions?' similarly speaks to the divide between council members and department heads. First, in the Michigan case, the group dynamic benefit of council–manager form only applies to the perception of council members. Those serving in this form of government have substantially more positive views of their interactions with municipal administration. However, the fact that the positive influence of the council–manager form does not carry over into the perceptions of department heads adds a layer of complexity to the relationship between government form and its effects on the group dynamics of local government (Ihrke & Niederjohn 2005; Nelson & Nollenberger 2011). Future research focused on how local government form affects department head performance could shed more light onto the possible implications of this finding.

Generally, we find that the municipal characteristics likely to impact the actual day-to-day tasks of department heads are most influential in explaining their perceptions of interactions with the council. Resources, defined as both shared revenue and the percentage of occupied housing, which is an indicator of a healthier tax-base, is the key determinant of department head impressions of council–administration interactions. While council members are no doubt impacted by the availability of resources, their day-to-day is more impacted by their interactions with the government executive, something that is controlled by government form. The lack of substantive findings regarding the impact of poverty and per capital income on perceptions of department head–council member interactions is surprising. The absence of a strong relationship between governing characteristics and the interaction index suggests that resource availability is more important in defining interaction perceptions than the extent of the governance challenge.

There are, of course, important weaknesses in our findings. First and foremost, the presented

regression models explain a small percentage of the total variation in the interaction index, 20.4% and 13.5%, respectively. Although visual inspection shows that the residuals are not correlated with the error term, there are clearly additional factors at play in defining this crucial relationship. In particular, we suspect that the nature of the relationship between the executive and both department heads and council members impacts the interactions between council members and department heads. Future research that incorporates this key factor is a logical topic of future research. In addition, our study focuses only on one state, research on local government interactions in other states, particularly those with very different political and structural characteristics, would speak to the generalizability of our findings. Finally, studies directly linking the interaction between these two groups with hard measures of government performance would speak to the importance of promoting small group dynamics in local government.

Broadly, we conclude that department heads and municipal council members have divergent views of the quality of their interactions with each other and that their perceptions are influenced by characteristics of their government and community. Thus begs the question, what can these two groups do to ensure that they are on the same page? One simple step is joint strategic planning sessions that incorporate the importance of the council member–department head relationship. A simple diagnostic tool that asks each group to rate their interaction and then discusses where they are different and why would force both groups to have a common view of their interactions. Given the effects of positive group dynamics identified by Grissom (2014) and Ford and Ihrke (2015), such a step should be expected to lead to real gains in public performance.

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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