

NOTE FROM THE PRESIDENT

From its inception, the National Civic League has focused on the importance of municipal government reform to the quality of our political life. Long-time readers of this journal will need no review of NCL's role in developing and updating model city charters. As the charter revision project (<http://nclweb.org/npp/charter/process.html>) moves forward, we are again devoting an edition of the *National Civic Review* to issues of local government structure and performance. The articles collected here examine everything from charters themselves to the role and position of the mayor, the city council, and the chief administrative officer in various forms of local government.

As the presentations at last year's National Conference on Governance made clear, information technology is having a profound effect on the practice of politics in this country. At every stage of the process, from raising money and disseminating information to enhancing transparency, improving service delivery, and encouraging participation, this technology is not only accelerating the pace of political activity but perhaps even changing its nature. Taken together, these multifaceted changes are a particularly telling example of how politics and political actors influence and are influenced by ongoing developments in society as a whole.

The flip side of this engagement in the swirl of events is government structure, which is why constructs such as a municipal charter are so important. By establishing roles and responsibilities, a charter helps ensure stability in the governance of a community. Without trying to sketch a theory of politics here, it is useful to think of political practices (such as voting and law-making) as being embedded in networks—institutions and institutional relations—that are in turn governed by norms and values. Municipal charters are part of the codification of institutional relations and lend order and stability to the political system.

That said, a charter itself must be adapted to changing circumstances, which is why the model city charter is again being revised. There is a litany (by now familiar) of problems and pressures with which communities continue to grapple. Issues of economic development, land use, sprawl, housing, schools, health care, and crime are but some of the most obvious. Except for a narrow class of essentially technical questions (which, despite this status, have significant real-world implications), a charter by itself cannot solve these political problems. A poorly designed charter can make political issues more intractable; a well-designed charter can mitigate certain problems while enhancing the prospects for progress in others. But most of all, just as a government budget is a political document that indicates policy priorities, a charter is a blueprint for the kind of political practice a city regards as desirable.

At the local level, the political arena is being reshaped by numerous developments, not the least of which is the increasing use of information technology. These changes are shifting existing patterns of authority and divisions of responsibility among the principal officials in both council-manager and mayor-council forms of government. In a number of cities, council members are playing a more activist role vis-à-vis the city manager, and mayors are consolidating their authority. At the same time, new avenues are opening for citizen participation in governance processes. In response to these developments, an increasing number of cities are deliberating over whether and how to make basic changes in their governance structures.

To help make the process of deliberation clear, the articles printed here offer insightful analysis of styles of mayoral leadership, the changing role of the city council, and the characteristics of the chief administrative officer. A number of the articles are closely integrated with each other. James H. Svava introduces a framework for assessing the city council by the type of role it performs and analyzes the trend toward greater council activism. Craig M. Wheeland's piece refines earlier work by Svava in distinguishing among mayoral types and qualities of mayoral leadership. Wheeland developed his set of types using the forty most populous cities in the United States. In her work, Kimberly L. Nelson identifies the characteristics of the chief administrative officers in the twenty-six most populous cities having a mayor-council form of government and examines the roles they play. Finally, Lawrence F. Keller gives a historical view of municipal charters and underscores their continuing importance to public life.

This issue is rounded out by complementary work that looks at the emergence of regional governance in the metropolitan Chicago area and by articles that examine the state of the civic renewal movement as well as look ahead to some of the divisions that may affect civil society in the years to come. The importance of devising regional solutions for regional problems has been evident for some time, but developing effective means for doing so has notably lagged this realization. In addition to the advances noted by David K. Hamilton in his article, there are some other promising efforts under way. The salience of regional governance and cross-sectoral collaboration continues to increase, and the *National Civic Review* will be part of the ongoing dialogue in this area.

The growth of the civic renewal movement also offers encouraging signs for the development of more comprehensive and citizen-based governance processes. Carmen Sirianni and Lewis A. Friedland review progress to date and issue a call for a "national civic congress" to reinforce these efforts and to ensure the movement's continuing momentum.

In their article, Ted Halstead and Michael Lind remind us of some of the challenges civil society faces in this century, ranging from persistent racial problems to exacerbation of generational tensions and the possible emergence of genetically engineered divisions.

A century ago, this country experienced a wave of progressive energy that led to substantive reform in government and governance. As the National Civic League again revises its model city charter, there are indications that another progressive wave is building.

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