
The Evolution of Local Governance: A New Democracy

John Nalbandian

Increasingly, I hear local government managers talk disparagingly and with frustration about the councilmembers they work for. I also observe elected officials thrusting managers into the policy limelight—either in response to council ineptness or through a conscious choice. These trends challenge the viability of democracy in a professionally administered local government—a form of government whose rationale is deeply embedded in a healthy respect for politics and in the belief that in some increasingly indistinct yet fundamental way there is a difference between politics and administration.

These observations lead me to the following conclusions:

1. Legislative bodies do not fully perform their legitimate role of allocating values because issues coming before them are more complex, conflictive, and ambiguous than ever before.
2. Managers play an increasingly *political* role in professional local government in response to the abdication or ineptness of political leadership by elected leaders.
3. Despite the need for political leadership and the ideal position the manager is in to fill this void, democracy suffers as legislative oversight is weakened.
4. While we cannot expect to see councils regaining the legislative oversight the Progressives idealized during the reform movement, we are seeing a *democratization of administration* that is legitimizing the political role of the administrator.

The Traditional Role of the Elected Official

According to democratic theory, the role of the elected official is to develop the authoritative value base in a community of diverse interests. This notion is built on the idea that the value preferences of all citizens have

equal weight. Additionally, it is held, when value choices have to be made, no one choice can be seen as *objectively* better for the community than another.

As an example, assume that following deliberation a city council has agreed to pursue the affirmative hiring of minorities in its police force. City staff make progress towards this goal until a revenue shortfall necessitates a hiring freeze and subsequent layoffs. A collective bargaining agreement calls for using seniority in deciding who to lay off. However, it is clear that enlisting the seniority criterion will undermine the earlier goal of increasing the number of minorities on the work force. What one chooses to do in this situation will depend in large measure on the priority placed on social equity as opposed to the individual rights of those police officers who would have enough seniority to protect them from layoff. In this example, no one can argue that there is an objective best choice to be made. The choice is between values, and the value preferences of all reflective citizens are equally valid. This is why the community legitimizes the right of citizen electors to make this choice following reflective debate.

The Challenge to the Traditional Role of the Elected Official

We expect the citizen elector to understand public policy issues before making decisions, but issues coming before councils are more ambiguous and complex than ever before. Some argue that an elector need not understand the rationale behind his or her vote in order to register a legitimate value choice. In other words, as an elector I do not need to know the full range of technical information about hiring and layoff in order to say I think the seniority rights of the police should be

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protected over the equity interests of minorities and women.

The difficulty with this approach comes in trying to develop a consistent policy direction over time. Stringing one value choice with another to build a community of values tests intellect as much as conviction. Citizens may be willing to accept some inconsistency in policy due to a recognized inability to predict fully the consequences of the decisions we make, but the inability of an elected official to understand and articulate the logic that led up to his or her choices should not be condoned.

There is no doubt that councils are facing issues that are difficult to understand, let alone decide. If there is any simple reason for this it has to do with the idea of third-party consequences. For example, exercising your personal choice, you ride your motorcycle without a helmet and then have a serious accident that exceeds your means to pay. The community that pays your bill is going to want a helmet law passed even though it infringes on the motorcycle rider's individual freedom. Clearly, with more information available to us and with more people realizing that government can effectively regulate third-party costs, the complexity of information and value dimensions coming before citizen electors is going to increase, not decrease.

The Council's Response to Challenges to Its Competence

It appears to me that elected officials respond to the challenges facing them in two ways. Some abdicate their role as arbiters of values and look for simplicity where it does not exist. They think in terms of black and white when only shades of color exist. They want to plant trees, for example, when the city is contemplating major redevelopment that will affect the nature of the downtown.

Others act as if additional information will resolve the issue. The request for more information poses a genuine paradox. On the one hand, information and understanding complex issues are necessary to develop consistent policies. On the other hand, the request for more information can mask a failure of conviction; we run the risk of transposing legitimate value choices into decisions based on technical minutiae. Requesting additional information when its marginal value is low demeans the role of the council as a body that coalesces and expresses citizen value preferences. Information and expertise may inform, permeate, and sometimes dictate value choices; but when information masks

choices, the council's work goes undone and the citizens remain unserved.

The Resolution

As I think about these problems, there emerge four ways to invigorate democracy in local government while still protecting efficiency in administrative operations, each with its own advantages and disadvantages.

The first option requires administrative officials to recognize that the citizen elector should not be expected to duplicate the expertise the professional was hired to deliver. There is an unwitting arrogance among professionals that undermines the citizen elector. The demand that the elected official understand issues in the same way as the professional and to the same degree cannot be fulfilled. In fact, if it were, the value of professionalism would be diminished.

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Now more than ever is the time for professional chief administrative officers to play their roles as translators of technique into values and values into technique. We should have realized long ago that the difference between politics and administration does not lie in the behavior of administrators and elected officials. The difference is found in the thinking and contexts that politicians and administrators create for themselves. The dichotomy is found in the logic they use to understand and make sense of their actions.

In some sense there exists the need to renew the commitment of professionals to serve elected officials. Few elected officials are going to come out and say, “Well, I can see this issue involves a choice between social equity and individual rights.” But the absence of an explicit expression of values does not imply the absence of value preferences. Instead, it means they must be inferred and the manager must articulate them in a way that will foster the kind of political debate the community and professional staff need.

But even with the best efforts of professionals to translate technical issues into policy debates, I would hedge my investment in this option. The general thrust of public issues is

simply becoming too complex, and reduction of complex issues to either/or "value" choices easily degenerates into debate over labels with high emotional content and little else (such as liberal/conservative or free enterprise/government regulation).

An unappealing second option would require some test of intellect for elected officials. This idea is so alien to the notion of the citizen as elector that we should dismiss it, but for analytical purposes it shall remain. Intellect and expertise are different. The elected official should never be expected to match the *expertise* of the professional planner, engineer, lawyer, or doctor. However, *intellect* speaks to the degree of complexity and ambiguity the mind can entertain before abandoning attention. Just understanding the complexity of an argument will assist an individual when he or she has to ask questions that will provide understandable and useful information.

I may be completely off base here, but I think that our initial option will not work without a link to option two and vice versa. We must have electors who can understand, and we must have professionals who can simplify information without distorting the value implications embedded in a public policy debate.

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The third and fourth options both involve the regeneration of politics, and, as a consequence, renewed respect for administration. The third option invigorates the structure of local government with the value of representativeness. The original council-manager form of government portrayed the council as an executive board as well as legislative body. The pure council-manager form, which highlights the executive board symbol through a weak mayor as well as at-large and nonpartisan elections, has given way more formally to structures encouraging politics. Citizens want professional management, but they also want a structure of government reflecting the value of representativeness. Ward elections are no longer uncommon, and the call for a stronger mayoral role—even in smaller cities with homogeneous populations—appears on the rise. A strong mayor symbolizes politics,

whether good or bad, and people like this. In many ways, the crisis in politics that I have been describing is reflected in the move to centralize political leadership. “When confused, centralize!” We seem to have adopted this rule of thumb in politics as well as in our organizations.

The fourth option is another we have already embarked on, and the best we can do is try to understand where it is taking us. This alternative sees the chief administrative officer, a professional, filling the policy void—strong mayor or not—left by inadequate council debate. The professional chief administrator is an attractive choice to do this because he or she possesses enough knowledge, skill, and ability to understand and manage technical experts while understanding the importance of political responsiveness. Clearly, some chief administrative officers are better at walking this line than others. But I think that managers are increasingly being asked to infer the values of councils and to take executive initiative in pursuit of those values.

If a strong legislature were to encourage the chief administrative officer to develop his or her role in this way, I would not be concerned. However, my sense is that what we are now seeing is a strong executive playing a political role *by default*. In a community of diverse interests, there must be a mechanism, structure, or forum where value debates can occur. If the council cannot fulfill that role, we should not be surprised to see the chief administrative officer getting involved in the politics of policymaking.

Although the chief administrator has assumed more political responsibilities, he or she does so without legitimacy. Even when the council endorses this role, if the council does not have the intellectual capacity to oversee the executive's actions, the executive does not have the legitimacy that the citizens have vested in their citizen electors.

The Democratization of Administration

If democracy cannot oversee administrative processes, it will become part of them. I think we have learned over the years that democratic theory is shaped by the practice of governing more than government is shaped by democracy. In this sense, I think mechanisms and practices that will legitimize the political role of the chief administrative officer are developing today and are going to play a stronger role in the politics and administration of municipalities tomorrow. Such practices include the use of boards, commissions,

hearings, advisory councils, neighborhood associations, and the like.

This kind of citizen participation differs from that mandated in the 1960s in two ways. First, the participation in the sixties stemmed from the desire to maximize social equity and representativeness. In so doing, conflict rather than harmony was reinforced as the measure of healthy policy making. To some extent this still exists, but added to the equity goal is the attempt to draw on the technical expertise of the community. Holding a stake in the outcome is frequently insufficient cause for nomination to citizen bodies, and conflict as a norm has given way to harmony.

Second, to some extent participation in the 1960s was concerned with allocational issues involving federal money that passed through to municipalities. In a sense, this money affected services not commonly associated with municipal government, and the discussions remained at the periphery of the core administrative decision-making processes in many municipalities. Now citizen participation has refocused on traditional services channeled through sophisticated neighborhood groups who understand the ins and outs of administrative processes such as budgeting, purchasing, and personnel management. Citizens have found that penetrating administrative processes provides them with more influence over government than does working through their electors. It would not surprise me if administrators listen to members of these groups as much as electors do because within these groups the value debate the community needs is being carried out.

Legitimizing the political role of the manager is fulfilled through these groups as much as it is through the council. The deliberations within and between these groups involve interest, intellect, and convictions the council may lack. As the manager begins to understand and respond to the expectations of these groups, he or she begins to gain the legitimacy once received from the council.

The manager can translate this legitimacy into policy initiatives, a role ideally reserved for the council. The council can understand political pressure, and the council always has the final say. Increasingly, as the council responds to the manager's policy initiatives, it will be passing judgment not on the complexities of the issues, but on the manager's interpretation and response to these community groups. This falls completely within its capacity and restores the council rightfully to its oversight role.

In conclusion, modern communities face

complex policy issues that challenge the time and intellect of elected officials. But communities are robbed of the political debate in council chambers that is necessary for providing the foundation for consistent policy choices. As a result, *professional administrators have begun to fill the political void in policy initiation and debate.* Citizen participation, understanding, and influence over core administrative processes represents an extension of the legitimizing process once reserved for the city council. As managers encourage this participation, listen to it, and derive policy direction from it, they legitimize their own enlarged role in the policy-making process. **PM**

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