

Debate: Researching directly elected mayors—key questions to address

Robin Hambleton

Centre for Sustainable Planning and Environments, University of the West of England, Bristol, UK and Director of Urban Answers

Introduction

The UK debate about whether or not the country should introduce directly mayors is over 40 years old. In 1976, Bryan Keith-Lucas argued:

For too long our local authorities have been tied to archaic institutions, instead of working out for themselves how best to run their communities' affairs. If a city council thought that its business would be better run if it had an elected 'strong mayor' on the New York pattern, instead of the conventional Father Christmas figure of an English mayor, it should be able to go ahead (Keith-Lucas, 1976, p. 341).

His wise advice fell, pretty much, on deaf ears. While the directly elected mayor model of governance attracted the interest of a small academic circle, it was over 20 years before the idea of introducing directly mayors appealed to a UK prime minister.

In a startling move, and within a year of being elected, Tony Blair set out his vision for the future of local government in a booklet entitled *Leading the Way: A New Vision for Local Government* (1998). In it he made the case for directly elected mayors and argued, in essence, that local government needed recognized leaders so that people, and outside organizations, knew who was politically responsible for running the council.

Legislation soon followed. The Greater London Authority Act 1999 created the position of Mayor of London, the UK's first directly elected political executive. The Local Government Act 2000 required all major local authorities in England to introduce a separation of powers between the executive and the council. This legislation offered councils various choices, including the option of introducing a directly elected mayor and cabinet.

The directly elected mayor model is commonplace across the world, and there is abundant international evidence showing that a variety of mayoral models of local governance can work well (Sweeting, 2017). However, in 2000, the idea was unfamiliar to local councillors in England, and the response from local government to the new opportunity was less than enthusiastic. As noted by Fenwick and Johnston, setting London aside for a moment, the 'great experiment' with elected mayors resulted in only 15 mayors, out of a potential

total of 343 councils in England, being introduced (Fenwick and Johnston, 2019).

Does this mean that the directly mayor concept is a busted flush in the UK? Or has the mayoral model never been given a fair chance? Three factors should be considered in addressing these questions and they could, perhaps, provide the basis for a future research agenda on the role and impact of directly elected mayors in the UK.

The constitutional position of mayoral local authorities

If directly elected mayors are to exercise strong and transformative local leadership, as their supporters advocate, they need substantial hard powers. The Greater London Authority provides an internationally respected example of strong mayoral governance. The Mayor of London has wide-ranging powers and an annual budget of £18 billion. Unfortunately, all other mayors in England, including the combined authority mayors, have truly trivial independent fiscal and legal power.

With the exception of Greater London, elected local authorities in England can no longer be regarded as independent democratic institutions answerable to the citizens who elect them. On the contrary, in the period since 2010, we have witnessed an astonishing centralization of power in Whitehall (Lowndes and Gardner, 2016). George Osborne, when Conservative Chancellor, claimed that he wanted to promote devolution of power when, in fact, the reverse was the case. The introduction of 'devolution deals' and, later, the creation of combined authority mayors, represents a super-centralization of the English state—a development that I have described elsewhere as a 'devolution deception' (Hambleton, 2017). Thus, the new combined local authorities have, effectively, no tax raising powers, trifling budgets in relation to the scale of the challenges they face and no constitutional protection from an overbearing central state.

It follows that future research on the leadership of local governance in England should examine, in detail, how much legal and fiscal autonomy local leadership figures, whether they are directly elected mayors or not, actually have. Comparison with other countries, where local authorities have firm constitutional protection and substantial fiscal power, would be illuminating.

Assessing the performance of mayoral models of governance

There is a dearth of evaluation research on the actual impact of different mayoral models of governance. Given the relative absence of solid evidence—one way or the other—on directly elected mayors, future research should focus on whether a given mayoral model makes a difference and, if it does, for whom?

There are various ways of carrying out such research. One approach is to conduct in-depth evaluation of a particular mayoral model over a period of time. Examples of this approach include the Bristol Civic Leadership Project

(Sweeting and Hambleton, 2019) and the ongoing study of mayoral governance in Liverpool (Headlam and Hepburn, 2017). Another is to compare and contrast the experiences of different mayoral authorities.

It would be helpful if future research could ascertain the views of different interests, inside and outside the state, on the virtues or otherwise of the various directly elected mayor models. Questions that could be asked include:

- What criteria should be used to assess the performance of these mayoral models?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the different approaches?
- How do different communities and actors feel about the success, or otherwise, of the mayoral approach in their area?

The leadership skills of the individuals elected as mayors

It is important to recognize that redesigning the institutions of governance cannot, in and of itself, ensure that good civic leadership will result. Thus, the individuals elected to mayoral office in any area, in any country, will range along a continuum from wise to foolish. Fenwick and Johnston are, then, right to argue that:

...government concern with structural and institutional change has tended to minimize the role of human agency in local leadership (Fenwick and Johnson, 2019).

This poses challenges for leadership researchers interested in local governance, but they are not insurmountable. We need more research, ideally detailed empirical studies, of the actual performance of particular mayors in particular cities, city regions and contexts.

At one end of the spectrum researchers can draw inspiration from high quality 'fly-on-the-wall' journalism. For example, Buzz Bissinger provides a remarkable record of the leadership style and performance of Ed Rendell when he was Mayor of Philadelphia from 1992 to 2000 (Bissinger, 1997). In more academic vein, there is a well-established literature on the impact of various leadership styles, in both the public and the private sectors, and it might be that urban scholars could contribute to this literature.

For example, research could examine the strengths and weaknesses of authoritarian versus facilitative mayoral leadership styles in different cities and contexts. A recent analysis of mayoral leadership in Bristol takes a step in this direction. It suggests that a facilitative approach to local leadership, as exercised by Marvin Rees, Mayor of Bristol since 2016, has the potential to break new ground in approaches to public problem solving (Hambleton, 2019).

In summary, the debate about directly elected mayors in the UK is far from over. In pessimistic vein, opinions in some circles appear to be polarized 'for' and 'against'. In more optimistic vein, it may be that future empirical research

can move the public policy debate forward by documenting the actual impact of particular models of mayoral governance in particular localities.

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