

The dynamics of depoliticisation in urban governance: introducing a directly elected mayor

David Sweeting and Robin Hambleton

Paper accepted for publication in *Urban Studies*, December 2018

8,860 words, including title, text, abstract, references, and tables

Dr David Sweeting
Senior Lecturer in Urban Studies
Centre for Urban and Public Policy Research
School for Policy Studies
University of Bristol
8 Priory Road
Clifton
Bristol, UK
BS8 1TZ
David.sweeting@bristol.ac.uk

Robin Hambleton
Emeritus Professor of City Leadership
Centre for Sustainable Planning and Environments
Faculty of Environment and Technology
University of the West of England, Bristol
Frenchay Campus
Coldharbour Lane
Bristol, UK
BS16 1QY
Robin.hambleton@uwe.ac.uk

The dynamics of depoliticisation in urban governance: introducing a directly elected mayor

Abstract

Within the context of debates regarding depoliticisation, this article considers how the introduction of a directly elected mayor system of governance impacts on urban politics. Directly elected mayors are now a fundamental feature of many political systems. They have been widely introduced as a reform to improve processes of local democracy and the effectiveness of governing practices to offer a more potent form of city leadership. This article focuses on developments in England, by presenting the case of Bristol, a city epitomising many aspects of modern neo-liberalised urban development. Bristol adopted a mayoral system in 2012 and the article presents empirical data from before and after this reform pertaining to two frameworks to understand city leadership. We conclude that the move to mayoral governance, in Bristol in the 2012-16 period, eroded the influence of party politics and led to the adoption of elements of a leadership style associated with a depoliticisation of urban politics in the city. Nevertheless, the analysis suggests that the mayoral model also provides significant space for the expansion of political agency on the part of the city leader, not least because power becomes concentrated in the mayoral position.

Introduction

In this article we seek to enhance understanding of the nature of the directly elected mayor model of city leadership, and assess the impact of introducing such a model on the governance of a city. In doing so we contribute to the debate about reforming and strengthening place-based leadership (Barber, 2013; Gash and Sims, 2012; Hambleton, 2015). Furthermore, we aim to connect this discussion to recent, and arguably more fundamental, debates concerning depoliticisation. The central research question addressed here is: How does the introduction of a directly elected mayor affect the (de)politicisation of urban governance?

Directly elected mayors have been introduced into England relatively recently. The first was the Mayor of London (Travers, 2004), who took office when the Greater London Authority was created in 2000. The Labour Government of the day pushed for their introduction across local government as part of their 'modernising' agenda. The old 'committee system' was characterised as being slow, giving too much power to party groups 'behind closed doors' (DETR, 1998: 18), thus shielding decision-makers from public scrutiny. It was also criticised for lacking visible leadership and clearly identifiable leaders. Reforms to abolish the committee system were included in the Local Government Act 2000 and were based on separating executive councillors from ordinary 'backbench' councillors. New models of decision-making in local government, that were purported to be more efficient, transparent, and accountable, included options for directly elected mayors. Yet many in local government, especially local councillors, resisted their introduction, and their spread was slow (Fenwick and Elcock, 2014). Nevertheless, directly elected mayors have remained on the agenda for successive central UK governments since then. The Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government, elected in 2010, attempted to trigger the adoption of directly elected mayors in large cities by passing the Localism Act 2011. It required referendums in ten of the largest of the England's local authorities, on the basis that the mayoral model supported 'democratically

accountable strong leadership' (DCLG, 2011: 6). In the event, Bristol was the only city to adopt a mayor this way (Hambleton and Sweeting, 2014).

In other countries, such as the US, directly elected mayors are a well-established part of the political system (Svara, 2017). In several Eastern European countries, their presence can be linked to (post-communist) democratisation (Gendzwill, and Swianiewicz, 2017). In England, however, perhaps in part as a result of their relative scarcity, directly elected mayors continue to divide opinion in relation to their impacts on the local democratic process. They are promoted by central government as powerful political figures that can democratise and invigorate local politics, whereas locally, they are often seen as disempowering political parties and councillors who support the same democratic process. It is in this context that we aim to develop some fresh insights on these reforms, as implemented in England, by considering them in relation to the concept of depoliticisation. To what extent and in what ways does the introduction of a directly elected mayor model of governance depoliticise the urban politics of a city?

This article examines the radical changes in governance that have taken place in Bristol, UK, and offers a broadly resonant contribution for the following reasons. First, directly elected mayors are often advocated as a way of enhancing the effectiveness of city leadership. The number of countries and cities that have introduced directly elected mayors has increased markedly in the last thirty years or so. (Sweeting, 2017; Stren and Friendly, 2018). The first six 'metro mayors' were elected in England in May 2017 (Centre for Cities, 2017), with another elected in May 2018 for the Sheffield City Region Combined Authority. Second, the literature relating to the post-political city has been criticised for being 'dominated by theoretical assertion, lacking in empirical research' (Beveridge and Koch 2017: 37). This article makes a contribution to filling this gap by providing an empirical account of governance change. Third, Bristol is emblematic of the modern, international entrepreneurial city. For example, Bristol is often cited as the only large UK city outside London with an above average GDP (see e.g. GVA, 2014: 4), and can lay claim to being the UK's 'smartest city' (Woods *et al*, 2017).

Bristol is one of the Rockefeller Foundation 100 'Resilient Cities', was European Green Capital in 2015, hosted the international summit of the Global Parliament of Mayors in October 2018, and has established a reputation for innovation and creativity.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we introduce the analysis by referring to debates about 'depoliticisation' and connect this literature to the introduction of directly elected mayors. Second, we discuss our approach to assessing city leadership, and operationalise 'facilitative' and 'task-based' models for understanding place-based leadership. Following a rationale for our research methods, we then offer an analysis of city leadership change in Bristol in the 2012-2016 period. A final section sets out our main conclusions, which we link to debates about depoliticisation, the post-political city, and the scope for local political agency.

Depoliticisation, the city, and directly elected mayors

The broad, nuanced, and radical literature on depoliticisation and the post-political city has grown out of debates around 'post democracy' (Crouch, 2004) and the 'post-political' (Mouffe, 2005) and has several strands. In one perspective, depoliticisation is defined as 'the denial of political contingency and the transfer of functions away from elected politicians' (Flinders and Wood 2014: 135). Some obvious institutional examples include the creation of expert committees in various sectors that take decisions that might otherwise be made by elected politicians (Flinders and Buller, 2006). Other more subtle, and perhaps more insidious strategies appear to distance state actors from contentious aspects of governing, by moving decision-making to other arenas that 'paradoxically enhance political control' (Burnham, 2014: 189). In the urban politics seam of this literature (e.g. Swyngedouw 2017; Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014) the post-political city is one where the imperatives of neo-liberal global capitalism oblige cities to be creative, entrepreneurial, and above all competitive in the global market. Keynesian-style notions of public welfare and

redistribution are discarded as pro-growth policies come to dominate (Macleod, 2011). Similarly, old style, class-based adversarial politics is marginalised in favour of a pragmatic style of symbolic governance entailing ‘technologies of governing that fuse around consensus, agreement, and technocratic management’ (Swyngedouw, 2007: 58). The visible institutions of democracy still exist, but there is a sense that they become enfeebled merely acting as façade that conceals from public view important actors and processes and the actual exercise of political power.

At first sight it might seem odd to link directly elected mayors to depoliticisation. In many countries in Eastern Europe, directly elected mayors were introduced, following the collapse of communism, as a key part of an effort to strengthen democracy (Gendzwill and Swianiewicz, 2017). After all, the essence of the model is that it prioritises political leadership (Mouritzen and Svava, 2002). In Germany, a key part of the debate around their introduction has centred on the belief that they can strengthen accountability by giving citizens the choice of a politically significant figure (Wollmann, 2004). The creation of the Greater London Authority in 2000, which included a directly elected mayor, was presented as an arrangement that would, by introducing a powerful figurehead, strengthen the democratic governance of the capital (Travers, 2004). The development of leadership capacity through direct election has been a theme in Germany (Eckersley and Timm-Arnold, 2014) and Australia (Sansom, 2014). Supporters of the model believe, then, that directly elected mayors can reinvigorate local politics. Citizens choose directly the political leader, perhaps one who might not have emerged through traditional party processes (Copus, 2006). Drawing on a personal mandate and a secure term of office, a directly elected, and highly visible, mayor can, so the argument goes, develop a more outward-looking approach and take ‘tough’, long-term decisions for the benefit of the city as a whole that politicians elected in other ways might find more difficult (Gash and Sims, 2012).

In the UK, the mayoral model is seen as controversial, at least in local government (Bochel and Bochel, 2010), and has met with resistance (Latham, 2017). Notwithstanding the concerns expressed

by many local government politicians central government has taken the view that the creation of a powerful leadership figures in city politics would be beneficial. For example, in the Plain English Guide to the Localism Act 2011, it was argued that: 'the mayor would be able to focus on long-term strategic decisions - such as bringing together different agencies to make public services work better, and attracting jobs and investment to the city.' (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2011: 6). Mayors are considered doers and deal-makers, with the visibility and legitimacy to energise urban politics inside and outside city hall (Sweeting, 2017). In short, as the epitome of representative democracy, they can exercise considerable political agency.

Yet there are enough indications in the debates around mayors, as viewed through the lens of depoliticisation, to suggest that their introduction can be interpreted as part of a trajectory towards the 'post-political city'. The most obvious signal is that a link is often made between mayors, economic growth and business friendliness – a sure sign of an effort to prioritise a particular set of economic imperatives that set expectations for mayoral governance. Despite there being no convincing empirical evidence that cities with directly elected mayors fare economically any better than those without (Tomaney *et al*, undated), the claim is often made that they can. For example, the UK Government claimed 'Directly elected mayors across the country, including in the North, will be well placed to make their areas attractive places for businesses to locate' (HM Government 2016: 19).

Another sign of depoliticisation is the notion that mayors can and should use 'soft', not 'hard', power (Sims, 2011). Rather than endow leaders with tax-raising or law-making powers – which might blight the landscape for prospective inward investors - these sorts of powers are restricted. Instead mayors are urged to use their position to cajole, negotiate, and persuade a variety of other actors to sign up to a vision, to agree to be part of a consensus, in an inclusive political process which contains various actors from the public sector, civil society and the private sector. Mayors therefore lead by 'facilitating' in governance, not directing (Greasley and Stoker, 2008; Svava, 2009). This style sits

alongside the prospect of a slicker and smoother set of decision-making arrangements, away from the messier, more cumbersome and confrontational arrangements involving parties and councillors (Copus, 2006). Also, mayoral governance prioritises the involvement of professional politicians over ordinary citizens (Latham, 2017). As Fenwick and Elcock note, mayoral systems 'offered the opportunity to cut through the lengthy processes of local democratic institutions by providing streamlined high-profile leadership' (2014: 581).

Moreover, the depoliticisation of local government in the UK is well-established. Various reforms in the period since the 1980s have limited discretion in local politics (Stewart, 2014). English local government is becoming 'super-centralised' (Hambleton, 2017), with ever more limited scope for local action. There have also long been concerns over 'managerialism' in urban governance - the importance of unelected 'gatekeepers' in the urban setting who were important in channelling urban resources, and enabling some choices, while constraining others for urban residents (Pahl, 1970). Pahl's prescient analysis focused on actor from within, and, crucially beyond, the public sector, and was 'well ahead of its time' (Forrest and Wissink 2016: 4). While the city of the 1970s is very different from the city of today, there remain enduring questions around the ways in which the broader array of actors coalesce and intersect to shape city governance.

In the 1990s, as local government became local governance, similar concerns emerged around the creation of a 'new magistracy' (Stewart, 1996) of unelected actors. Latterly, debates around network governance indicate contemporary interest in the ways in which an array of actors within, around, and beyond the traditional public sector are autonomous, and contribute to public governance (Sorensen, 2016). For this article, the point of interest in these debates is the ways in which non-elected actors may become more influential when a mayoral system of governance is introduced. Our suggestion is that if non-elected figures become more influential this would point to a depoliticisation of urban governance.

Researching urban political leadership

There is a considerable body of literature on local political leadership in England, especially since the passing of the Local Government Act 2000, which required the formation of legally recognised executives in local government (see e.g. Copus 2004 Copus, 2006; Fenwick and Elcock, 2014; Leach and Copus, 2004; Lowndes and Leach, 2004; Sweeting, 2017). The frameworks of Leach and Wilson (2002) and Greasley and Stoker (2008) take into account these reforms, are specific enough to guide the empirical research that we undertook. Both perspectives draw on the American urban political science literature for inspiration: Kotter and Lawrence (1974) in the case of Leach and Wilson; and Svava (1994; 2003) for Greasley and Stoker. The Greasley and Stoker (2008) model describes aspects of a facilitative leadership style, and we refer to it as the *facilitative* model. The Leach and Wilson (2002) model sets out local political leadership tasks, and we refer to it as the *task-based* model. Both are helpful contributions for understanding city leadership. The main characteristics of each framework are presented in **table 1**.

The facilitative model emerged from a consideration of the leadership exercised by directly elected mayors in council-manager cities in the US. These mayors, lacking executive powers and direct control over resources, promote ‘coordination and communication... strengthen teamwork on the council ... [and] build networks beyond the government’ in their exercise of leadership (Svava 2017: 107). Facilitative leadership centres on the ability of the individual leader to exercise influence in collaborative relationships (Svava, 2009). In the UK context, given the fragmented nature of urban governance and the expectations placed on leaders to be active in governance networks, it can be applied to local political leadership in the UK as well, and Greasley and Stoker (2008) argued that English directly elected mayors are more likely to be able to adopt a facilitative leadership style than those selected by councillors in the traditional fashion.

We have distilled the core and essence of the facilitative approach from three contributions of Svava (1994; 2003; 2009) and Greasley and Stoker (2008). Our perspective sees leadership of this sort entailing four inter-related and overlapping features: profile and decision-making, low partisanship, agreement-seeking, and working in partnership and exercising influence. A facilitative leader in the urban setting works in partnership with other local actors and interests. Rather than seeking to dominate and control, they seek to support and empower. Facilitative leaders engage with and include citizens, civic leaders, other politicians, community groups, and local institutions in decision-making; they seek agreement and construct a broadly supported set of goals, plan of action, or vision; and using their visibility and maintaining an accessible style, and keeping party labels and party politics in the background, they can work around, between, and beyond the formal boundaries and divides of urban politics in order to exercise influence over other actors.

Alternatively, the task-based model was developed more specifically for analysing local political leadership in the UK context. Embedded in it are more traditional and long-standing notions of municipal leadership that emphasise party and leading a municipal bureaucracy. The model centres on the four functions of: maintaining the cohesion of the administration, developing strategic policy direction, representing the authority in the external world, and ensuring task accomplishment. Leach and Wilson (2002) argued that the emphasis on different leadership tasks is likely to change with different leadership forms, with directly elected mayors being less interested in maintaining administrative cohesion than traditional local authority leaders, but more interested in external relationships and networking.

Table 1: Two perspectives on local political leadership in the UK

Facilitative model	Task-based model
<p>Profile and decision-making</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High profile • Makes quick decisions • Accessible <p>Low partisanship</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Party identity kept in background • Party politics low profile <p>Agreement seeking</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeks agreement between diverse set of actors • Broadly supported agenda <p>Working in partnership and exercising influence</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to work with interests within and beyond city hall • Supportive of other actors • Attempts to influence decision making of other actors, including business interests 	<p>Maintaining the cohesion of the administration</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preserving support of party or parties • Forming productive relations with officers <p>Developing strategic policy direction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responding to central government initiatives • Setting priorities for the local authority <p>Representing the authority in the external world</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintaining a positive media profile • Safeguarding the interests of the authority in governance networks <p>Ensuring task accomplishment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delivering election commitments • Overseeing implementation

Clearly, the facilitative model is more in line with the thrust of depoliticised governance, outlined earlier, than the task-based model. While the task-based model is based in party-based municipal governing, the facilitative model emphasises the sort of streamlined and consensual decision-making style that attempts to align with a broad range of interests, one that downplays adversarial politics. We argue that using these models as heuristic devices, it is possible to detect a trend towards post-political governing. Following the introduction of the mayoral system within a given city, we might expect that leadership will align more with the facilitative model.

Research methods

The empirical research on which this article is based rests on a case study of leadership change in the city of Bristol. We use this as critical case (Yin, 2003) that enables us to track perceptions of leadership before and after the introduction of a mayor. As with other city case studies (e.g. Ponzini and Rossi, 2010), we are able to relate findings to much broader trends

The project from which this article has emerged has included citizen surveys, surveys of governance actors, focus groups, workshops, and interviews. In this article, we focus on the surveys of governance actors, and the interviews and focus groups we conducted with them. While we focus on the practice of urban political leadership as exercised by directly elected mayors, we do not assume that these figures are the only civic leaders in cities. Rather, we argue that urban civic leadership is dispersed (Hambleton, 2015). In order to capture the diversity of interests in urban governance, and also to get some purchase on the different perspectives that different sorts of actors hold, we divide governance into three realms of civic leadership, broadly covering elected actors, non-elected state actors, and actors from outside the state (Hambleton and Sweeting, 2014). Hence, we are moving beyond the purely political world of elected councillors, and into the space of urban managers of Pahl (1970) and other arenas in the city. Such a sectoral approach rests on the significance of different sorts of position actors occupy, and the different sorts of roles, expertise, and legitimacy that they have.

The *political leadership* realm contains people elected by the citizenry and includes directly elected mayors, elected local councillors, and Members of Parliament. The *public managerial* realm contains public servants appointed by local authorities, central government and other public organisations to plan and manage public services. The *non-state leaders* realm contains a diverse range of community activists, business leaders, social entrepreneurs, trade union leaders, voluntary sector leaders, religious leaders so on. Such a classification is broad brush, and represents a simplification of a more

complex reality; the three realms will vary by locality and shift over time; they overlap and could be further subdivided, and individuals can occupy more than one realm. What the classification does do, however, is provide a helpful way of framing discussion about civic leadership within the context of a multi-actor system of governance that is based on contributions from leaders across the urban spectrum, and we divide our survey results accordingly.

We surveyed actors from the three realms of civic leadership before and after the introduction of the mayoral system, in September 2012 and over two years later, twenty three months after the introduction of the system, in December 2014, allowing enough time for perceptions of the new system to form. Where possible our survey was sent to the same people, though some of the original respondents had moved on by the time of the second survey, and were replaced with similar respondents. The survey was sent using a web-based system to: all 70 councillors on Bristol City Council (the political leadership realm); 35 Bristol City Council officers, and 35 other public sector managers (the public managerial realm); and 35 people each from on the one hand Bristol's business sector, and on the other 35 from across the 'third sector' of voluntary and community sector representatives (the non-state leaders' realm). It received response rates of 59% to the first survey, and 49% to the second¹.

The questions in the survey were designed to test aspects of the two frameworks for understanding urban political leadership presented above – the task-based model and the facilitative model. Each statement was ranked on a five-point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The questions were adjusted according to whether the survey was sent before or after the introduction of the mayoral system, with 'directly elected mayor' replacing 'leader' in the latter survey. The data was subject to testing, and we report statistical significance as anything at the 5% confidence level or better, and divide our results according to realms of leadership in order to assess the different perspectives on the impact that of this change.

¹ The responses by realm were: political realm 61% (2012), 46% (2014); public managerial realm 50% (2012), 50% (2014); non-state leaders realm 59% (2012); 49% (2014).

There are, as with any survey, issues around how respondents interpret questions, and how familiar respondents are with the issues presented to them. There are also wider considerations that are difficult to allow for with a survey instrument. In 2012, as well as changing the form of leadership, from leader and cabinet to directly elected mayor, the mayoral election brought about a change in personnel. George Ferguson, Bristol's first directly elected mayor, was independent, and replaced the previous Liberal Democrat council leader, and this independence has coloured the results, as discussed below. Also the change in leadership arrangements coincided with the onset of austerity urbanism in the UK (Meegan, Kennett, Jones and Croft, 2014). Central government has, in recent years, imposed massive public spending cuts on local authorities, and Mayor Ferguson, as well as the current mayor, Marvin Rees, have been forced to deliver drastic cuts in services that are not of their own making. We don't claim that our survey is sensitive enough to be able to throw light on the impact of all these variables. We do, however, believe that the survey results provide reliable enough data to enable insights to be drawn in relation to understanding leadership change. In order to give a richer feel for the nature of the governance change, we also draw on qualitative data collected from interviews and focus groups, also conducted before and after the move to mayoral governance. These took place with different actors in Bristol across the three realms outlined above.

Analysing leadership change in Bristol

In this section, after briefly introducing the city of Bristol and placing it in broader context, and describing the events that led to the adoption of a mayoral system there, we present the results from our surveys relating to the facilitative and task-based models of leadership respectively, shown in **Tables 2** and **3**, supported by quotations from our interviews and focus groups.

In the UK, national political parties are heavily involved in local government, with well over 90% of UK local councillors belonging to a political party (Razin, 2013), and the country is amongst those

with the most nationalised local political systems in Europe. Though the significance of national parties at the local level may not be as strong in some other countries (Copus *et al*, 2016), they are a major feature of the standard operating practices of most councils, and our case of Bristol is typical in that respect. Bristol is a city in the south west of England governed by a unitary local authority, Bristol City Council, and containing about 442,000 inhabitants, with 70 councillors from Labour, Liberal-Democrat, Conservative, and Green parties. The Localism Act 2011 required the twelve largest cities in England to hold referendums on whether or not to adopt a directly elected mayor (Fenwick and Elcock 2014). In the event, ten referendums were held in May 2012 as two cities - Liverpool and Salford - opted for mayoral governance under existing legislation. In all ten referendums local citizens rejected the mayoral form of governance – except in Bristol. Bristol citizens voted for the directly elected mayor model of governance by a margin of around 5,100 votes. From a turnout of 24%, 53% people voted in favour of a mayor, while 47% voted against. That Bristol bucked the national trend is something of a surprise, but not hugely so. The leadership of the city had long been regarded as unstable – there were five different leaders of the council in the period from 2000, some of them in office more than once. The energetic ‘yes’ campaigners highlighted this instability, along with the perceived poor performance of the council, attributed in part to the history of poor relationships between political parties at the council.

The 2012 Bristol mayoral election, much to the frustration of all the local political parties, was won by an independent candidate, George Ferguson. Ferguson, a well-known architect, was able to use his reputation for regeneration in the city to his advantage. During Ferguson’s time in office, he introduced several policies with his own stamp, such as reducing the speed limit in the city to 20mph, rolling out plans for controlling residential on-street parking, and advanced plans for an indoor arena. He also set up a ‘rainbow’ cabinet of senior councillors, with four parties represented on it.

The survey findings show a broad division between on the one hand those in the political realm, and on the other those in the public managerial and non-state leaders realm. In nearly all cases for the political realm, there are drops in levels of agreement between the surveys on the aspects of the two leadership models, a picture reversed in the responses of the other realms. Given that respondents will necessarily answer in relation to their experiences in their realms, we regard this as evidence of depoliticisation, as the political realm becomes less influential, and the others become more so, especially in relation to the public managerial realm, as governing becomes more a process involving management. We return to this discussion below, after presenting the results from the analysis of the two leadership models.

Facilitative leadership model

We now assess the performance of civic leadership in Bristol against the features of the facilitative leadership model using the results from **table 2**. There is widespread agreement that, in relation to **profile and decision-making** the mayor brought about a remarkable lift in the level of visibility of city leadership, with survey results showing levels of agreement well above 90% for this variable, with each realm showing considerable increases in relation to previous results. This is one of the few variables in the survey where there is broad agreement between realms. In contrast, for speed of decision-making, those in the public managerial and non-state leaders' realms, were more likely to think that the new arrangements of city and council leadership were able to make quicker decisions. One business representative commented:

Having an elected mayor, things move faster, not always in the right direction perhaps, but any decision is better than nothing. (Business Representative).

They also were more likely to think that mayoral governance underpinned a more accessible style of governing. Those in the political realm were more critical however:

‘You can’t just walk in and see him’ according to one councillor.

Perhaps some of the most striking results concern the role of parties. There is agreement across the three realms that parties had a considerably lesser role in decision-making after the introduction of a mayor than before. This is no surprise, especially as Bristol citizens elected an independent politician as mayor. On his first day in office Ferguson renamed the ‘Council House’, the headquarters of municipal government in the city, ‘City Hall’, in an attempt to symbolise a change in tone of governance. He clearly saw himself as representing Bristol, unencumbered by party loyalties. Though those in the political realm tended not to agree, in the survey, with this view, there were large increases in the managerial and non-state leaders’ realms about the mayor keeping party politics in the background. Indeed, the Mayor formed a cross-party ‘rainbow cabinet’, the first for a major city in Britain, to provide advice to the Mayor. This ‘rainbow cabinet’ (with all parties represented), pointed to a desire, on the part of the Mayor, to move to a consensual, in effect, apolitical or cross-party form of decision-making. One elected member who sat in the cabinet revealingly commented:

It works well. Members of cabinet have changed their behaviour. It is very collegial. You get personal relationships across parties. We are all focusing on what’s good for Bristol, not party politics. (Cabinet Member).

Similar stark contrasts in the survey results relate to the ways in which the different realms of leadership viewed the impact of mayoral governance on **agreement seeking**. Few in the political realm considered that there was a broadly supported vision under mayoral governance, with fewer

still believing that mayoral leadership facilitated agreement between different interests. One long serving councillor offered this criticism of the mayoral model:

Seventy elected councillors can stand up and say [to the mayor] “You’ve got it wrong” and legally he or she can turn round and say “I hear what you say but the law says I make the decisions”. And so one person can overturn the will of an elected council. That is not democracy. (Councillor).

The survey responses of the other realms however, indicate a different perspective, with strong upward trends in both having a broadly supported vision, and being good at brokering agreements. Nevertheless, in relation to **working in partnership and exercising influence** there is less evidence of change. The political realm still displays much more negative perceptions of mayoral governance than the other two realms. However, for having good relations with partners, there was not much change in the non-state leaders realm, or the public managers realm. This might be partly explained by those who supported the mayor in driving change, perhaps in the face of opposition. One business representative said:

We wanted someone who would not worry about what people thought of him and would love the city enough to do things that might not be popular. (Business Representative).

Part of the case for introducing mayoral governance into the city had focused on the inability of the council to act in the face of opposition, or to ‘unblock the logjam’, as one non-state leader commented. From this point of view, too much consensus seeking and partnership working might hinder the achievement of particular goals. The mayor commented:

Being elected by the whole electorate creates a huge difference to my authority to do things. It also gives me the courage to make changes that otherwise, would be very difficult to make. (Mayor).

In a similar vein, a councillor commented:

Local government has a natural ability to delay decision-making... it is almost designed to slow things down. What the mayoral model says is "Let's cut all this out. Let's make things happen". (Councillor)

Here, though, there is also evidence suggesting that public managers feel that the mayoral model has expanded their authority and independence. One commented:

The degree of clarity about values and priorities makes it easier to understand where to invest the team's time and efforts... there is more freedom within the agenda that's been set. (Council Officer).

Another stated:

From some points of view, it has been a very freeing and liberating experience. (Council Officer).

For **exercising influence over other actors**, the discrepancies between the views of those in the political realm and the other realms are again apparent, with the political realm largely viewing the new arrangements as leading to a less influential city council leadership. In contrast, both other realms perceive the mayoral system as making central government more amenable to council influence, and tellingly, all realms see business interests being more open to persuasion from council

leadership, perhaps a result of the mayor having business interests in the city from his many years leading an influential architectural practice. Also, one business representative described the council as being 'more open to business' than the previous regime.

Overall, evidence to support an increased style of facilitative leadership is clearly evident from across sectors in relation to profile and decision-making, and low partisanship. The remaining elements of this model are disputed, with the political realm out of line with other realms, perhaps as the mayor was less inclined to seek the agreement of or to influence councillors. Our evidence lends support to the findings presented by Greasley and Stoker (2008) that in Bristol mayoral governance has strengthened facilitative leadership, but our analysis suggests that this general finding should be nuanced by recognising the importance of perspective and aspect of leadership analysed.

Table 2: Views on the facilitative model, by realm (% agree)

		Political realm			Public managerial realm			Non state leaders realm		
		2012	2014	% change	2012	2014	% change	2012	2014	% change
Profile and decision-making										
The leader of the council/mayor has a high public profile		41.9	93.8	***+51.9	25.8	100.0	***+74.2	29.5	97.2	***+67.7
The leadership of the council is capable of making quick decisions		55.8%	40.6%	-15.2	3.2%	52.9%	***+49.7	13.6%	58.3%	***+44.7
The leadership of the council is accessible		58.1	34.4	*-23.7	32.3	70.6	***+38.3	36.4	54.3	+17.9
Low partisanship										
The leadership of the council keeps party politics in the background		9.3%	15.6%	+6.4	3.2%	58.8%	***+55.6	11.4%	63.9%	***+52.5
Political parties dominate decision-making		61.9%	9.4%	** -52.5	83.9%	12.1%	** -71.8	86.0%	17.6%	** -68.4
Agreement seeking										
The leadership of the council has set a vision for the city that is broadly supported		60.5	18.8	** -41.7	29.0	50.0	*+21.0	13.6	44.4	***+30.8
The leader/mayor is good at brokering agreement between different interests		53.5	9.7	** -43.8	38.7	60.6	*+21.9	16.7	57.6	***+40.9
Working in partnership and exercising influence										
The council has good relations with partners		67.4	43.3	** -24.1	67.7	72.7	+4.0	45.2	54.5	+9.3
The leader/mayor is good at supporting others to achieve their goals		37.2	10.0	** -27.2	19.4	54.6	***+35.2	19.0	51.5	***+32.5
The current leadership of the council can influence the decision making of:	Central government	28.6	9.7	*-18.9	13.3	43.8	***+30.5	14.6	42.4	***+27.8
	Other local public service providers	39.5	26.7	-12.8	33.3	69.7	***+36.4	43.9	57.6	+13.7
	Business interests	25.9	41.9	+16.0	13.3	54.5	***+41.2	19.5	39.4	+19.9

*Pearson chi-square results: Significant at 5% level (light grey);** significant at 1% level (dark grey).

Task-based leadership model

We now turn to analysis of the task-based model and consider the results set out in **table 3**. With respect to **maintaining the cohesion of the administration**, as an independent elected on a platform critical of ‘party politics’, it is of little surprise that few councillors in the survey considered the mayor ensured the political parties maintained productive relations with each other. There was recognition that as an independent, it was easier for Ferguson to situate himself outside ‘the council’ and present himself as leader of the place. Many non-executive councillors felt that the mayor was uninterested in councillor involvement, viewing the established processes of committees and councillor consultation as cumbersome and stifling. In contrast, actors in the public managerial realm saw mayoral governance improving relations with senior officers, with rises in positive responses in this respect, and in those relating to the new regime’s development of **strategic policy direction**. One commented:

There is a clearer line of sight re decision-making, and more clarity about where we are going. (Council Officer).

For **external representation**, there was widespread agreement in the surveys that the mayor was visible in a way that the previous leader had not been. Council officers were especially effusive and mentioned greater access to central government. This was supported by a Whitehall civil servant, who commented:

My impression is that Bristol has had more access as a result of having a mayor. I think the existence of the role – and the way the current mayor has gone about it – has made a difference to the way Bristol is viewed. (Civil Servant).

This in turn was considered to have had consequences for the way that Bristol is perceived externally. The same civil servant stated:

It has given the officers a longer-term perspective, and they seem to be a lot more prepared to be innovative. In the past – probably over five years ago – my impression was that Bristol punched beneath its weight. Now it is doing interesting, radical things, and in some areas is a national leader. My impression is that this innovation has thrived because there is a longer term vision and more continuity in leadership. (Civil Servant).

For **ensuring task accomplishment**, there was a collapse in support from the political realm in the survey. An example of the way that councillors seem to have been disempowered in the running of the council comes in a damning report of council processes relating to financial reporting in the period covered by this project (Bundred, 2017). The report describes how councillors were not properly kept abreast of the worsening financial position of the council, and were effectively kept in the dark by officers. This led Bundred to ‘recommend that relevant officers be reminded of their responsibilities to backbench and Opposition Members’ (2017: 47). While this reduction in councillor involvement in important decision-making is not entirely attributable to mayoral governance - organisational culture has clearly played a part - this is a clear indication of the changing balance of power between members and officers.

In sum, and with some exceptions, those in the political realm, who tended to feel that the former Cabinet plus Council model was an effective task based system, are critical of the mayoral model, not least because they feel they have been excluded from decision-making. Conversely, other realms are more likely to offer positive responses on the mayoral model of leadership, particularly those in the public managerial realm. These findings also go some way to support Leach and Wilson’s (2002) contention that executive governance is likely to prioritise external representation.

Table 3: Views on the task-based model, by realm (% agree)

	Political realm			Public managerial realm			Non-state leaders realm		
	2012	2014	% change	2012	2014	% change	2012	2014	% change
Maintaining the cohesion of the administration									
The leader/mayor is effective in maintaining relations between parties on the council	48.8	9.4	** -39.4	25.8	33.3	+7.5	14.3	39.4	* +25.1
The leader/mayor is effective in cultivating good relations with senior officers	69.8	48.4	-21.4	45.2	78.8	** +33.6	21.4	48.5	* +27.1
Developing strategic policy direction									
The leadership of the council has a vision for the city	67.4	56.3	-11.1	50.0	76.5	** +26.5	32.6	75.0	** +42.4
The leadership of the council is effective in responding to the agendas of national government	46.3	32.3	-14.0	40.0	69.7	* +19.7	22.0	51.5	** +29.5
The council executive is effective in setting policy direction	58.1	37.5	-20.6	51.6	63.6	+12.0	26.2	50.0	* +23.8
Representing the authority in the external world									
The leadership of the council is effective in maintaining a positive image of the council in the media	39.0	30.0	-9.0	23.3	54.5	* +31.2	24.4	45.5	+21.1
The leadership of the council is effective in representing the council in negotiations and decision-making arenas in the city	56.1	19.4	** -36.7	26.7	63.6	** +36.9	31.7	42.4	+10.7
The leadership of the council is effective in representing the council in national and international arenas	51.2	45.2	-6.0	23.3	75.8	** +52.5	17.1	60.6	** +43.5
Ensuring task accomplishment									
The leadership of the council is effective in ensuring the delivery of their election commitments	46.5	18.8	* -27.7	38.7	44.1	+5.4	11.4	52.8	** +41.4
The council executive is effective in ensuring the delivery of council policy	48.8	15.6	** -33.2	35.5	57.6	+22.1	20.9	29.4	+8.5

*Pearson chi-square results: Significant at 5% level (light grey); ** significant at 1% level (dark grey).*

Conclusions

Our first conclusion is that the introduction of the mayoral model in Bristol in 2012 led to the adoption of a more facilitative style of place-based leadership in comparison to the previous, relatively traditional, party political way of operating. This is evident in the survey responses relating to facilitative leadership and especially those from the public managerial and non-state leaders' realms of leadership, and from qualitative evidence. We contend, therefore, that depoliticisation was apparent in the reform of urban governance in Bristol in the 2012-16 period because, despite the appearance of a more powerful, political figure on the urban political landscape, a more 'consensual mode of governance' (Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014: 5) was introduced.

Yet this consensual mode of governance was not as 'consensual' as might at first appear, and was not perceived as such across the realms of civic leadership in the city. Clearly, the shift to mayoral governance weakened the role of elected councillors in the governance of the city. The move to, what some describe as 'collaborative governance' (Torfing and Ansell 2017) represented an alternative to the traditional task based party political way of governing localities of the last century or so. Put bluntly, this case study research shows that elected councillors in Bristol were made largely impotent in relation to executive decision-making in the 2012-16 period. Even councillors in the cabinet were only allowed to advise the elected mayor, and the mayor was, depending on the issue at hand, more than ready to ignore their advice.

But our research findings are more nuanced than this first, relatively simple conclusion implies. On the one hand, getting things done in the face of councillor resistance appears, to many, to be a positive feature of the mayoral system. The lessening of the role of councillors – effectively their depoliticisation - is a clear consequence of the way the mayoral model was implemented by Mayor Ferguson. As mentioned earlier this process of depoliticisation was given momentum by the fact

that Ferguson was an independent politician. He was actively opposed to the traditional ways in which political power in the city was exercised and he made no secret of his desire to reduce the influence of political party groups in urban decision-making. It is not just that Mayor Ferguson was an independent politician; additionally his personal leadership veered towards the 'top-down' style.

In contrast to the dilution in influence of the political realm we can note the relative growth in power of the public managerial realm. Our research shows that, in the 2012-16 period, council officers were given greater room for manoeuvre under mayoral guidance, empowering them to act in a more autonomous way than previously. This shift of power to appointed officers is consistent with the notion of 'urban managerialism', as described by Pahl (1970). The 'politics' did not disappear, rather, in line with the depoliticisation thesis, the political process continued to take place but in arenas one step removed from the involvement of many elected politicians.

Beveridge and Koch urge the consideration of the 'spectrum of agency' (2017: 36) in the post political city. We argue that political agency is still very much possible in a context of depoliticisation, and it is clear that the directly elected mayor of any big city has substantial political agency. Elected mayors are political leaders, and Mayor Ferguson took forward a range of policy initiatives. In 2016 Bristol citizens elected a new mayor, Marvin Rees, a Labour Party candidate, with a different style. The analysis presented here suggests that the individual who is directly elected as the mayor of a city has enormous scope, admittedly depending on their formal legislative powers, and the broader political and economic context, to shape the public policy agenda for their city. The mayoral model makes a difference to the dynamics of depoliticisation, but so too does the individual elected to lead the city. It is not necessarily the case that the directly elected model of urban governance, on its own, automatically leads to a depoliticisation of urban governance. Rather, the evidence from the Bristol case study suggests that the mayoral model changes the power dynamics of urban politics in a city and enables different possibilities for governance, and the way power balances shift within

these new arrangements depends, additionally, on the style of leadership exercised by the person elected as mayor within their institutional context.

References

Barber B (2013) *If mayors ruled the world. Dysfunctional nations, rising cities*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press

Beveridge R and Koch P (2017) The post-political trap? Reflections on politics, agency, and the city. *Urban Studies*, 54:1, 31-43

Bochel H and Bochel C (2010) Local political leadership and the modernization of local government. *Local Government Studies* 36:6, 723-737

Bundred S (2017) Report to Bristol City Council: Review of 2016/17 Forecast Budget Deficit. Available at:

<https://www.bristol.gov.uk/documents/20182/0/Independent+Review+of+the+Budget+Deficit/052003fc-0a59-48e3-9bba-17a391e07eed>. Downloaded 30/5/17.

Burnham, P. (2014) Depoliticisation: economic crisis and political management. *Policy & Politics*, 42:2, 189-206

Centre for Cities (2017) Everything you need to know about metro-mayors: an FAQ.

<http://www.centreforcities.org/publication/everything-need-know-metro-mayors/> Downloaded 28/5/17.

Copus C (2004) *Party politics and local government*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Copus C (2006) *Leading the localities*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Copus C., Sweeting, D. and Oliver, T. (2016) 'Political parties in county government', in Bertrana, X., Egner, B., and Heinelt, H. (eds) *Policy making at the second tier in local government in Europe*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Crouch, C. (2004) *Post-democracy*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) (2011) *A plain English Guide to the Localism Act*. London: DCLG

Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) (1998), *Modern local government. In touch with the people*. Cm 3897, London: HMSO.

Eckersley, P and Timm-Arnold, P (2014) Directly-elected mayors and the austerity agenda: lessons from the German experience, *Public Money & Management*, 34:5, 347-354

Elcock H (2008) Elected mayors: lesson drawing from four countries. *Public Administration* 86: 795–811.

Fenwick J and Elcock H (2014) Elected Mayors: Leading Locally? *Local Government Studies* 40:4, 581-599.

Flinders, M. & Buller, J. (2006) Depoliticisation: Principles, Tactics and Tools, *British Politics*, 1:3, 293–318

Flinders M and Wood M (2014) Depoliticisation, governance, and the state. *Policy & Politics*, 42:2, 135-149.

Forrest R and Wissink B (2016) Whose City Now? Urban Managerialism Reconsidered (Again). *Sociological Review*, 65:2 155–167.

Gash T and Sims S (eds.) (2012) *What can elected mayors do for our cities?* London: Institute for Government

Gendzwill, A and Swianiewicz, P (2017) Breeding grounds for local independents, bonus for incumbents: directly elected mayors in Poland, in Sweeting, D. (ed.) (2017) *Directly elected mayors in urban governance. Impact and practice*. Bristol: Policy Press, 179-99

Greasley S and Stoker G (2008) Mayors and urban governance: developing a facilitative leadership style. *Public Administration Review* July/August: 722-30

GVA (2014) *Driving future growth: core cities and the knowledge economy*. London: GVA.
<http://www.gva.co.uk/research/Drivingfuturegrowth:corecitiesandtheknowledgeeconomy-Spring2014/>, downloaded 13/3/18.

Hambleton R (2015) *Leading the Inclusive City. Place-based innovation for a bounded planet*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Hambleton R (2017) The super-centralisation of the English state – Why we need to move beyond the devolution deception. *Local Economy* 32:1, 3-13

Hambleton R and Sweeting D (2014) Innovation in urban political leadership: Reflections on the introduction of a directly elected mayor in Bristol, UK. *Public Money and Management*, 34, September, 315-22.

HM Government (2016) Northern Powerhouse Strategy. HM Treasury: London. Downloaded 29/5/18, from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/northern-powerhouse-strategy>

Kotter J and Lawrence P (1974) *Mayors in action: five approaches to urban governance*. New York: John Wiley

Latham P (2017) *Who stole the town hall? The end of local government as we know it*. Bristol: Policy Press

Leach S and Copus C (2004) Scrutiny and the political party group in UK local government: New models of behaviour. *Public Administration* 82:2, 331-54.

Leach S and Wilson D (2002) 'Rethinking local political leadership'. *Public Administration*, 80:4, 665-689

Lowndes V and Leach S (2004) Understanding local political leadership: constitutions, contexts and capabilities, *Local Government Studies*, 30:4, 557-75.

Macleod G. (2011) Urban Politics Reconsidered: Growth Machine to Post-Democratic City? *Urban Studies* 48:12, 2629–2660

- Meegan R, Kennett P, Jones J, and Croft J (2014) 'Global economic crisis, austerity and neoliberal urban governance in England', *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 7: 137–153
- Mouffe, C. (2005) *On the Political*. London: Routledge.
- Mouritzen P and Svava J (2002) *Leadership at the Apex*. Pittsburgh. University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Pahl R (1970) *Whose City? And further essays on urban society*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Ponzini D and Rossi U (2010) Becoming a Creative City: The Entrepreneurial Mayor, Network Politics and the Promise of an Urban Renaissance, *Urban Studies*, 47:5, 1037–1057
- Razin, E (2013) 'Councillors and their parties', in Egner, B., Klok, P, and Sweeting, D (eds) *Local councillors in Europe*. Springer: Weisbaden.
- Sansom G (2014) Debate: Rumblyings Down-under—stronger mayors for Australia and New Zealand?, *Public Money & Management*, 34:5, 311-313
- Sims, S. (2011) *Making the most of mayors*. London: Institute for Government
- Sorensen E (2016) Democratic network governance, in Ansell C and Torfing J (eds.) *Handbook on theories of governance*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 419-427
- Stewart J (1996) Reforming the new magistracy, in Pratchett L and Wilson D (eds.) *Local Democracy and Local Government*. London: Macmillan, 170-87
- Stewart J (2014) An era of continuing change: Reflections on local government in England 1974-2014. *Local Government Studies*, 40:6, 835-850
- Stren R and Friendly A (2018) Big city mayors: Still avatars of local politics? *Cities*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2018.02.014>, downloaded 18/9/18
- Svava J H (ed.) (1994) *Facilitative Leadership in Local Government*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass
- Svava J H (2003) Effective mayoral leadership in council-manager cities: reassessing the facilitative model, *National Civic Review* 92:2, 157-72

Svara J H (ed.) (2009) *The Facilitative Leader in City Hall*. Boca Raton FL: Taylor and Francis Group

Svara J (2017) 'The two worlds of elected mayors in the United States: What type of mayor should cities choose?' 103-120 in Sweeting D (ed.) (2017) *Directly elected mayors in urban governance. Impact and practice*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Sweeting, D. (ed.) (2017) *Directly elected mayors in urban governance. Impact and practice*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Swyngedouw E (2007) 'The post political city', 58-78 in BAVO (eds.), *Urban Politics Now. Re-Imagining Democracy in the Neoliberal City*. NAI Publishers: Rotterdam

Swyngedouw E. (2017) Unlocking the mind trap: politicising urban theory and practice. *Urban Studies*, 54:1, 55-61

Torring J. and Ansell C. (2017) 'Strengthening political leadership and policy innovation through the expansion of collaborative forms of governance', *Public Management Review*, 19:1, 37-54.

Tomaney, J Pike, A O'Brien, P and Jenkins M (undated) Metro-mayors: claims and evidence. Unpublished paper.

Travers T (2004) *The Politics of London. Governing and Ungovernable City*. Basingstoke: Palgrave

Wilson, J. and Swyngedouw E. (2014) 'Seeds of dystopia: post-politics and the return of the political' 1-13 in Wilson J and Swyngedouw E (eds.) *The Post-Political and Its Discontents. Spaces of depoliticisation, spectres of radical politics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press

Wollmann, H. (2004), Urban Leadership in German Local Politics: The Rise, Role and Performance of the Directly Elected (Chief Executive) Mayor. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 28: 150-165.

Woods, E., Rodriguez Labastida, R., Citron R., Chow, T., Leuschner, P. (2017) *UK Smart Cities Index 2017*. Commissioned by Huawei from Navigant Consulting, Inc.,

http://e.huawei.com/uk/special_topic/solution/smart_cities_index_2017, Downloaded 12/3/18

Yin R (2003) *Case study research. Design and methods*. 3rd edition. London: Sage.