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- *A new form of county government – the county administrator form – has emerged in Illinois.*
- *The administrator form has become the preferred form in Illinois' urban counties.*
- *This form strengthens county administrative expertise and leadership, and promotes greater professionalization of county workforces.*
- *Counties with administrators have taken the lead in bringing county governments into a better position to cope with the complexity of the 21st century.*



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CENTER FOR GOVERNMENTAL STUDIES Northern Illinois University

issue: *The County Administrator Form: A Modern Approach To Illinois County Government*

by James M. Banovetz and Dawn S. Peters
NIU Center for Governmental Studies

Editor's Introduction: This is the second of a two part series on Illinois county governments. The first part emphasized the importance of such governments, described their organization, and focused on the changes that were, and were not, made in such governments during the 20th century. This second part in the series looks at the recent innovation which has had the most impact on the way county governments operate: the use of professional administrative officers to manage county government operations.

Unbeknown to the press, the public, or even most of Illinois' political leaders, a new form of county government – the *county administrator form* – has emerged in Illinois over the past quarter century. Even more significant, *the county administrator form gives every indication of being the state's best hope for enabling its counties to adapt to the demands of the 21st century.*

As the first *Policy Profile* in this two part series pointed out,¹ the structure of Illinois county government has changed little over the past 150 years. Most of the reforms that altered and modernized American government, and especially local government, during the 20th century had little or no impact on Illinois county governments. A summary of those reforms and their impact on Illinois counties is presented in **Table One** on the next page.

Yet, though relatively unmodified in the contemporary era, and despite concerns about their ability to adapt effectively to the demands of the 21st century, Illinois county governments continue to be a critically important part of the governmental scene. They are the primary general purpose unit of local government serving the state's rural areas; subdivisions of state government that provide a range of major services to communities throughout the state; an important provider of basic services that enable all other local governments to operate; and a primary source of new political leadership for the entire state.²

What is the county administrator form?

The county administrator form of government is a structural modification of county government designed primarily to improve government by consolidating critical administrative operations in a single office responsible to the county board. That office, in turn, is filled by a person – preferably with professional education and experience

in local government management – who is appointed by, and serves at the pleasure of, the county board. Although designed and used primarily by county governments utilizing the county board form, it can be adapted for use in other forms as well.

As portrayed in **Table Two** on page 3, county boards using the county administrator

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table one Impact of 20th Century Changes on Illinois County Governments

20th Century Reforms	Impact on Illinois County Governments
1. Legislative Representation <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. County board districts replace townships as the basis for representation b. One person–One Vote 	Accomplished.
2. Elimination of election as a means of choosing administrative officers	Implemented. Representation of rural areas in urban counties was significantly reduced, even though counties are the primary unit of rural local government.
3. Popular election of a chief executive officer to lead governmental unit.	The 1970 Constitution opened the door for a limited number of changes, but all counties still elect 4-8 administrative officers.
4. Centralization of administrative authority.	County governments now have this option. Only two have used it.
5. Increase professionalism and expertise in administrative leadership.	No statutory provisions have been made for such centralization. Each elected officeholder still administers a county function independent of the county board.
6. Non-partisan elections for local government offices	No statutory provisions have been passed to encourage the achievement of this goal. Cook County has made no effort in this regard. Most Illinois counties have made little or no progress toward this goal.
	All county officers are still elected on partisan ballots.

form of government typically make the county administrator responsible for:

- Directing the day-to-day functions of all county administrative departments under the jurisdiction of the county board.
- Preparing the county's annual budget for submission to the county board and, when approved, overseeing budget implementation for the whole county. This makes the administrator responsible for approving and submitting to the county board the budgets for all elected county officeholders and the county court system.
- Administering the county board's personnel management responsibilities.
- Advising the county board on questions of policy that come before it.
- Handling any other matters given to the administrator by the county board.

The county administrator has no direct responsibility for the daily management of the offices of the elected county officeholders, or for managing the circuit court offices housed in county government. However, the administrator's responsibility for the budget does necessitate that a good working relationship be maintained between the officers in charge of these county offices and the county administrator.

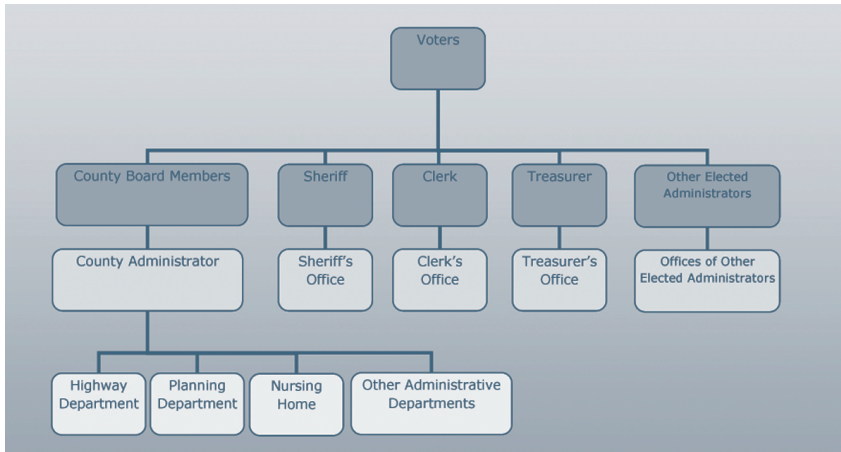
What led counties to use the county administrator form?

Like all other governments at the national, state, and local level, county governments experienced a vast increase in the size and complexity of their operations during the 20th century. As governments grew, the need for executive leadership, centralization of administrative authority, and specialized managerial expertise became increasingly evident.

Other governments altered their structures to meet these needs. The national government created the Executive Office of the President in 1937 to enhance the president's ability to manage the new programs created to end the depression. That office proved to be essential in 1942 when the national government geared up to fight the Second World War.

Gubernatorial powers and offices, including the office of Illinois' governor, were similarly expanded. City governments began strengthening their administrative capabilities as early as 1908 when the first managerial form of municipal government was organized. Starting in 1914, Illinois cities began using the managerial form of municipal government and, by the end of the century, it was the dominant form of municipal government used in Illinois' urban areas.

tabletwo Organization Under the County Administrator Form of Government



Notes: The named departments are examples; each county will have many more.
Key: — Line of authority and control

But most Illinois counties continued to operate through the 20th century with 19th century governmental structures that relied on county board committees for administrative leadership. With accountability for programs thus dispersed, little attention was paid to the need for improved management methods or the recruitment of managerial expertise.

It wasn't until the representation on county boards was altered to comply with one-person one-vote constitutional requirements, and the balance of leadership on the boards began to shift from rural to urban members, that county boards began to search for: (1) more efficient ways to manage county government, (2) ways to centralize administrative control over county board operations and achieve greater administrative accountability for program outcomes, (3) better control over the use of county funds, and (4) professional expertise to advise the board on the growing complexity of the policy issues being raised before the board.

With the success Illinois municipalities had in achieving these objectives through the use of the city (village) administrator form of government, it is hardly surprising that county leaders would be tempted to adopt similar administrative reforms. Thus, starting with Bureau and Lake counties in the late 1970's, Illinois counties began to pass ordinances adopting the form, but with adaptations to fit the special needs of county government.

How many Illinois counties now use the administrator form?

No central directory of counties using this form is maintained by the State of Illinois, but 24 counties that use the county board form of government are known to have used the county administrator form of government. These counties are listed in **Table Three**³ on the next page.

Nearly all of Illinois' largest urban counties now use this form. Of the 24 counties,

13 are located in metropolitan areas, eight others are located adjacent to metropolitan areas, and three – Bureau, Jo Daviess, and Livingston – are in strictly rural areas. Only one county, Livingston County, has used and then abandoned the county administrator form.

A 25th county, DuPage County, has a blended form, with a board chair elected by the voters and county board committees exercising managerial oversight over departmental operations.

In general, the Illinois counties experiencing the most rapid rates of growth and change are the ones most likely to use the county administrator form of government.

Does the county administrator form work in counties?

The answer to this question can best be expressed as follows:

- The number of counties using the county administrator form has slowly, but steadily increased over the past 25 years, and
- The county administrator form has become the preferred form of county government in areas where the demands and pressures on county government are the most severe.

To explore this question further, it is necessary to examine the way in which the presence of a county administrator affects:

- county policy making,
- county board operations,
- the work of county elected administrators,
- politics and partisanship in county operations, and
- the counties' dealings with their citizens.

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How does a county administrator affect policy-making?

County boards are typically very large, having 20-29 members. This means that their membership embodies people with wide-ranging policy interests, diverse views, and, thanks to the internet, much more information than previously was the case. Size, diversity, and information overload mean that board members find it more difficult to sort out policy issues, anticipate future consequences of possible alternative decisions, and reach the consensus needed to finalize policy decisions.

In such a cauldron of differing views and activity, the presence of a professional administrator is not only welcome, but often preferred. A competent administrator can help interpret the information available to the board, supplementing it with the views of experts in the field. The administrator is available to do background research on policy options, describe how other governments have handled similar problems, and suggest action alternatives. Many board members prefer to receive their background information from the administrator because they can then be assured that all board members have access to the same information. All of this assistance helps to make board members more comfortable in their legislative roles.

County administrators also help keep their boards focused on the boards' own agendas. They work with their boards in developing strategic plans for board operations that specify goals and objectives, and then help their boards keep moving toward those goals and objectives. By spending full-time on county business, the administrator gains a perspective which leads to a fresher and greater flow of information to the board about forthcoming problems and possible solutions.

tablethree Illinois Counties which Have Used the County Administrator Form

Boone	Knox	Peoria
Bureau	Lake	St. Claire
Champaign	Livingston	Sangamon
DeKalb	Logan	Stephenson
Grundy	Madison	Tazewell
Henry	McHenry	Whiteside
JoDavies	McLean	Winnebago
Kendall	Ogle	Woodford

By assuming responsibility for managing the county's affairs between board meetings, and doing background research on pending issues, the county administrator frees up board members to devote more time to policy and constituent issues. But the presence of an administrator can also weaken the roles played by board committee chairs.

Large boards also are more likely to have some members who are more interested in managing (or micro managing) county business. Most administrators let the board members handle those policy and administrative matters of the most interest to them, focusing their time instead on the volume of business and activity the board chooses either to delegate or leave to them.

One study of county administrators in Illinois found that the job of county administrators is very different from their city peers. In cities, customarily, administrators direct daily operations while council members wrestle with tough policy questions. In counties, the opposite is often true: county board members prefer to deal with traditional policy and management issues with which they are familiar while delegating newer and larger policy issues, such as finding solutions to county-

wide solid waste disposal problems, to the administrator.⁴

Do administrators overstep their role in policy-making?

County administrators are in a difficult and ever-changing position. Sometimes the board wants them to be policy facilitators, but other times the board looks to them for policy leadership. The smart administrator must understand this role duality and become adept at playing the role desired by the board on any given issue.

In Peoria County, for example, the county board wanted its administrator, Patrick Urich, to lead them through the process of resolving questions regarding the extension of a hazardous waste landfill near the city of Peoria, insuring that their work conformed with legislative requirements. Urich and his staff had to develop recommendations to present to the board which then acted as "judge and jury" to make the final determinations.

In complex issues such as solid waste disposal, health regulations, zoning problems, and compliance with laws governing human resources, the administrator can bring a sense of professionalism – of process and fairness – which helps to move such

problems from the political arena to the analytical arena.

A big part of the administrator's job is to build relationships – with the board members, with county elected officials, with county workers, and with community leaders. While the administrator can direct the performance of county workers, his relationships with board members, elected officials, and community leaders must be developed as partnerships in which the administrator's role is to suggest, describe, and encourage. By working with disparate groups in the community, and by seeking to focus board attention on the long term impacts and implications of the issues under consideration, the administrator can help the board broaden its own policy perspectives.

Most important, as a professional, county administrators must always remember that their role in the policy process is strictly and solely advisory. Professional government administrators must, as a matter of professional ethics, remain uninvolved in political party and electoral matters.

How do county administrators get along with elected officeholders?

Experience thus far indicates that elected county officeholders (e.g. sheriff, county clerk, circuit court clerk, treasurer) get along well with the board appointed county administrator. Indeed, relationships between the county board members and county elected officeholders are generally better in county administrator counties where the administrator provides a non-political, non-partisan buffer between the two sets of officials.

Potential friction is minimal since county administrators have no jurisdiction or authority over the work of the elected officeholders. But, because the elected

officeholders' budgets must be processed through the board's administrator on their way to the county board, there is also an incentive for the elected officeholders to maintain good working relationships with the county's administrator. Unresolved disputes over elected officeholders' budgets are usually resolved in public meetings; this also helps to reduce interpersonal friction.

The administrator provides the same benefit to the county board–county court system relationship.

How do county administrators deal with partisanship in the county?

County officials are elected on partisan tickets. For many elected officials, county elected office is seen as a stepping stone to higher level political offices. Thus partisanship and partisan pressures are inevitably a part of county government.

Yet, like its city counterpart, the county administrator form is built upon a non-partisan foundation. County administrators are bound by their professional code of ethics⁵ to avoid partisan affiliations and participation in partisan politics.

The presence of partisanship in county government has not impaired the work of Illinois county administrators. Because they are perceived by their board members as non-partisan, county administrators' input into policy deliberations is also perceived as non-partisan. This helps to reduce the impact of partisan considerations on policy issues. Indeed, county administrators perceive non-administrator counties as having more partisan conflict on policy issues than is the case in administrator counties.⁶

County administrators see their role as one responsible for “easing” points of partisan tension over policy by providing informa-

tion that will not be seen as partisan but that will enable deliberations to proceed more smoothly. Many administrators meet periodically, one on one with county leaders or in issue oriented meetings, to keep processes moving in ways that avoid partisan divisions on particular issues. As Austin Edmonson, County Administrator of Bureau County, noted, the county administrator's role “brings consensus building to its highest art form.”⁷

Does the county administrator form increase public awareness of county government?

Not necessarily. Public perception and knowledge results from the way in which elected officials as well as the county administrator handle their jobs – by their individual operating styles. By helping to avert partisan divisions on issues, county administrators might actually minimize the kinds of conflict that attract public attention.

While maintaining good public relations is generally considered a part of the professional administrator's job, scarce resources limit the amount of effort that can be made. Typically county governments of all forms lack the resources to develop public relations programs. However, the administrators in Lake and Peoria counties have established public relations offices with funds saved through more efficient operations in other departments.

Isn't it expensive to hire professional county administrators?

Professional talent is never cheap, but, in a real sense, a county “gets what it pays for.” A general rule of thumb is that “a good local government administrator, by making operations more efficient, will save the government three times his or her salary.”⁸

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From another perspective, when measured in annual cash flow or number of employees, county government is usually one of the largest businesses in the county. Should the county's affairs be managed with any less expertise and managerial talent than the county's businesses? Local government administrators normally make considerably less than their business or school district counterparts, but how much less should be expected if the county wants comparable administrative talent?

Based on the 2006 survey of city and county administrator salaries made by the Illinois City/County Management Association, to which 12 counties responded, county administrator salaries range from \$69,000 to \$193,284 per year.

How are county administrators recruited?

Most counties using the county administrator form conduct a regional or national search for a person with professional credentials and experience in local government management. Typically such persons will have a masters degree in public administration (MPA or its equivalent⁹) and five or more years of experience in local government management. Most such persons also sustain and improve their professional credentials by membership and active participation in such organizations as the International City/County Management Association and the Illinois City/County Management Association.

Other counties fill the position of county administrator locally by appointing either someone already employed by the county or a resident of the county with other appropriate experience. The percentage of Illinois county administrators hired locally is much higher than the number of Illinois city or village administrators.

How long will a county administrator stay on the job?

A county administrator's length of job tenure is primarily dependent on two factors. The first, and by far the most important, is the quality of the working relationship that develops between the administrator and county board members. If both the administrator and individual county board members work hard to build a good working relationship, long tenure is much more likely to result. The second is salary. Administrators making less money are more likely to leave for positions paying higher salaries.

County administrators usually serve a particular county for five to ten years or longer. The current Illinois county administrator with the longest tenure is Ray Bockman of DeKalb County who has held his current position since 1984. Jim Monday, until recently the county administrator in Madison County, served in that position for 21 years, from 1985 to 2006. The tenure of Ike Margolis, Lake County's first county administrator, spanned parts of three decades.

So why is the county administrator form the best hope for county government?

Table Four on the next page summarizes the answer to this question. The county administrator form of government has produced full achievement of one of the six goals of the 20th century Good Government reform movement which were set forth in Table One: the goal of centralizing administrative authority. A great deal of progress has been made on a second goal, that of increasing professionalism and expertise in administrative leadership, especially in counties employing professional local government administrators.

The county administrator form has produced partial achievement for three other reform goals. The last goal, relating to county board representation, is unrelated to the administrator form, but progress toward that goal has been accomplished by actions taken by the Illinois General Assembly.

The only other attempt to reform county government, the county executive form, has to date seen little success. That form has not brought reform to Cook County's government; it has been adopted in only one other county, Will County. Some counties have adopted a modified version of this form by providing for popular election of the county board chair. DuPage County has moved toward a reform model by centralizing administrative authority in the office of the board chair.

But the counties using the county administrator form have taken the lead in bringing county government operations out of the 19th century and into position to cope with the complexity of government in the 21st century.

tablefour Impact of County Administrators on The Achievement of Reform Goals In Illinois
County Governments

20th Century Reform Goals

1. Legislative Representation
 - a. County board districts replace townships as the basis for representation
 - b. One person–One Vote
2. Elimination of election as a means of choosing administrative officers
3. Popular election of a chief executive officer to lead governmental unit.
4. Centralization of administrative authority.
5. Increase professionalism and expertise in administrative leadership.
6. Non-partisan elections for local government offices

Administrator Form's Impact on Illinois County Governments

Goal accomplished. Administrator form has no impact.

Goal accomplished. Administrator form has no impact.

This goal has not been accomplished. The administrator form has no direct impact on this goal, *but the form does improve the working relationship between elected officeholders and the county board. Where used, it has also centralized governmental budgeting functions.*

With the exception of Cook and Will counties, no progress has been made in Illinois. *But the presence of a county administrator in a county does bring greater coherence, better information, more alternative solutions, and a wider range of input into county policy deliberations.*

No statutory provisions have been made for such centralization, *but the county administrator form has completely achieved this objective for administrative offices under the direct jurisdiction of the county board.*

Those counties which hire trained and experienced local government administrators to serve as county administrators have made significant progress toward this goal's achievement; some counties with administrators have fully achieved it.

All county officers are still elected on partisan ballots. *The county administrative form has reduced the impact of partisanship in county government operations.*

Footnotes

- 1 James M. Banovetz and Dawn S. Peters, "Illinois County Government: Overlooked, Underappreciated, Very Important," (Northern Illinois University Center for Governmental Studies: *Policy Profiles* 6:2, September, 2006. The publication can be found on the internet at www.cgsniu.org/publications/policy_v6n2.pdf
- 2 Banovetz and Peters, 2006.
- 3 This chart was based on information from the files of the Illinois City/County Management Association.
- 4 Roy Witherow, "Professional County Government in Illinois: A Case Study of the County Administrator," Capstone Paper, MPA Program, Division of Public Administration, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL, (1991).
- 5 This code is promulgated by the International City Management Association Code of Ethics. A copy of the code can be found on the internet at: www.icma.org
- 6 This view was unanimously expressed by a focus group of county administrators who met on May 18, 2006 at Northern Illinois University. The group participants were drawn from all over Illinois to evaluate the county administrator form of government as used in Illinois.
- 7 Austin Edmonson, Bureau County Administrator, in remarks made in the focus group session on county government referenced in end note # 6.
- 8 This is an informal rule of thumb frequently cited by professional local government administrators. Its accuracy can not be scientifically verified, but, at a minimum, it is a common expectation/observation in the profession.
- 9 The MPA (Master of Public Administration) is the government management equivalent of the better known MBA (Master of Business Administration) in the field of business.

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About the Authors

JAMES M. BANOVELTZ is Illinois's senior academician specializing in the study of local government. An honorary member of the International City/County Management Association and a fellow of the National Academy of Public Administration, he currently serves as a senior research scholar at NIU's Center for Governmental Studies.

DAWN S. PETERS is the Executive Secretary of the Illinois City/County Management Association and a senior research associate at NIU's Center for Governmental Studies.

The views expressed in this edition of *Policy Profiles* are those of the contributing authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Center for Governmental Studies or the officers and trustees of Northern Illinois University. For more information please contact jbanovetz@niu.edu.

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Director:
Robert E. Gleeson, Ph.D.

Editor:
James M. Banovetz, Ph.D.

For more information contact:
Center for Governmental Studies
815-753-1907
fax 815-753-2305
www.rdiniu.org

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Center for Governmental Studies
Northern Illinois University
DeKalb, Illinois 60115
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