

The influence of politician-administrator interactions on decision making in local government in Israel¹

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Abstract

The paper examines the influence of the interactions between politicians and senior administrators on decision making in “strong” and “weak” local authorities, based on the premise that the success or failure of local government is, among other factors, the product of the character of the decision making of its leadership – politicians, administrators, and the relations between them. These relations derive not only from conflict or cooperation, but also from the question of the power and influence each side wields over local decision-making. The main contribution of this study is that it shows decision-making in local government to be the outcome of these interactions and the degree of influence enjoyed by politicians or administrators.

Theoretical background

Municipal politics, which impacts on the functioning of local government, is an expression of the mode of cooperation or conflict among a number of central actors: between the head of the local government, the council and the senior administrators; within the cadre of administrators; within the elected politicians; and between politicians and administrators. There are four main possible situations within these interactions: (1) each party specializes in its own tasks and operates at a separate level; (2) the politicians control the relations with the administrators and interfere in their work; (3) the administration keeps its distance from the politicians and operates

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independently; (4) politicians and administrators cooperate with one another and share information and tasks (Mouritzen & Svara, 2002). The way that councilors see their role vis-à-vis that of the administrative cadre has the potential to lead to **conflict** in their everyday work. Such conflict can arise when there are contradictory objectives, when the different levels interfere in one another's fields of responsibility, and when there is little coordination between the various parties. Such conflict is also related to the administrators' opposition to the politicians' involvement in managerial issues and attempts by the latter to use their power in order to further their interests. For their part, it frustrates councilors when they cannot directly guide the department heads (Svara, 1999; 2003) and when they are in conflict with one another (Svara, 2003). Inter-departmental conflict, as the outcome of intra-organizational conflict, also influences local decision-making (Franek, 2005). In local authorities with high levels of cooperation and low levels of conflict, decisions are made based on mutual trust, through rational processes, in light of shared goals, and not as the result of forced compromise. In local authorities where the opposite is the case, one finds deadlock, polarity, confrontation and subversion (Svara, 1990).

Conflicts in decision-making in local government usually revolve around two main issues: (1) *Conflict over policy* – when political and administrative actors disagree over policy issues; and (2) *Political conflict* – which focuses on marginal issues (personal or party political) that may become primary objectives in their own right. In such instances, the administrators work in an atmosphere of tension because of their unstable relations with the councilors and their weakness in decision-making (Kaatz et al., 1999). When the administration is clearly subjugate, the politicians guide it based on policy or laws that they decide upon in the municipal council. By and large, however, politicians are interested in promoting short-term interests (delimited by

their length of office), while the administrators try to advance long-term solutions based on prior commitments (Mouritzen & Svava, 2002). Hiring a director general allows the mayor to devote more time to policy and to “waste” less time on administrative issues (French & Folz, 2004).

Studies have shown that in cities with a strong mayor there is greater mistrust and tension between the politicians and the administrative team. Politicians struggle to acquire the information necessary for making policy decisions and many of them feel that their work is unappreciated. In such circumstances, relations between the mayor and the council are characterized by tension and suspicion, and relations with the administrative team are lacking in trust (Svava, 1990). As with all decision makers, councilors are interested in exercising their discretion in meetings and in group meetings, and in trying to persuade others through argumentation in order to reach the right decision (Wright et al., 1990); they are much less interested in taking part in council meetings aimed only at ratifying decisions that have already been taken (Coulson, 2007). However, politicians have different priorities and values from those of the professional staff. For councilors, it is more important to devote attention to solutions to citizens’ complaints rather than dealing with long term policy. While the interactions between politicians and administrators improve when the former are more involved in decision-making regarding policy issues, it can be hard to commit councilors to such processes, as they prefer to focus on matters immediately at hand. For instance, councilors in Texas argued that, “we only make \$75 a week. We don’t have time for mission and vision”. Councilors from California said, “mission is something managers do” (Svava, 1999) A successful trial was carried out in Manchester, England (Leese, 2007). However, municipal administrators view the council as inefficient in defining policy and objectives (Mouritzen & Svava, 2002), and councilors

themselves agree that they are more involved in dealing with immediate problems (Svara, 1999b).

Politicians and administrators are simultaneously involved decision-making processes, such that it is impossible to clearly distinguish between them. Politicians are meant to lay down local policy and guidelines for its implementation, while senior administrators are supposed to translate the policy and oversee its realization. The administrative cadre bears on the decisions made by politicians through the issues it brings to the council, as well as through the opinions and information it provides. During the implementation stage its influence lies in its interpretation of policy instructions (which tend to be quite general). All these lead administrators to deal with policy making as well. Elected officials, meanwhile, try to ensure that the implementation of their decisions will be as close to their intentions as possible, and so they tend to intervene in the implementation stage and in the administrators' work (French & Folz, 2004; McCabe, et al., 2003; Mouritzen & Svara, 2002; Svara, 2003). **חסר כאן "בקבלת החלטות** **מדיניות"** Politicians have the authority to vote on financially important subjects, but also the responsibility for the functioning of the local government and meeting the public's needs. The politicians think that they should play only a very minor role in administrative tasks, focusing instead on strategic decision and policy making regarding the interrelations with other local authorities and the central government. Accordingly, some talk about *local policy*, which is set by politicians, and the administrators' *administrative policy* (Zeemering, 2006). In decisions related to the geographical region, it is the administrators who may sometimes set the tone of strategic decisions, and not the elected politicians (Visser, 2002).

Advanced democracy at the local level draws upon managerial techniques from the private sector in its public management system, the so-called "new public administration". This

can be seen in the political activities of setting targets, defining priorities, allocating resources and reinforcing politicians' supervision, alongside their detachment from the administrative system. Political leaders are expected to appoint professional managers, to refrain from ongoing involvement in everyday bureaucratic matters, and to strengthen the role of the local management in decision-making, and to abstain from promoting personal or sectoral interests (Haus & Sweeting, 2006). This is an approach shared by many mayors (Haus & Sweeting, 2006b). Reforms to local government have strengthened the bureaucratic system and weakened politicians' capacity for supervision (Svara, 1990). In a number of cities in Australia and the US, for instance, politicians are legally forbidden from having any direct contact with managers and workers other than through the Director General (Mouritzen & Svara, 2002). On the other hand, administrators' powers of discretion and their ability to influence policy decisions must be limited (see recommendations of the European Council No. R 80 in Rekosh, 2005). While the professional cadre has been strengthened, not enough has been done to empower the politicians, including their in-depth preparation for decision-making (Coulson, 2007; Lerner & Tetlock, 2003; Svara, 2003) and their learning all of the issues involved in their public position.

Relations between politicians and the administrative system can also be characterized by **cooperation**, as expressed through: (1) defining shared objectives and purpose-oriented behavior; (2) information sharing and joint evaluation; (3) coordinating activities. Cooperation is brought about by policy making on the part of the municipal leadership that supports long-term goals that are set by the council based on the broadest possible consensus, and which are shaped through proper work processes by the administrative team. Councilors thus represent strong leadership; they balance the city's needs and their own interests; they make clear decisions; they do not interfere in the administrators' work or in residents' complaints; and they value the functioning

of the municipal managers and the various departments. Accordingly, in this model, the relations between politicians and administrators are very good (Svara, 1999). An example of successful cooperation is provided by the city of Bristol (Stewart et al., 2004). Stoker (in Franek, 2005) presents the model of the “joint elite” of senior officials and councilors, whereby party leaders make the council take joint decisions based on the guidance of the administrators. It would seem that the most important decision in influencing the nature of the cooperation in local government is the decision taken at the beginning of a period of office regarding the integration of councilors and coalition parties, and later on, the integration of local activity in shaping policy and overall decision-making (Mouritzen & Svara, 2002).

Wollmann identifies two main models in the structure of European local government, which are primarily distinguished by the allocation of authorities between the elected council and the local administration. In the *monocratic model*, the council and its committees hold all of the power to make decisions and oversee the administrative system. Each committee has exclusive responsibility for decision-making in its field of jurisdiction, including for the administrators operating in the field. This is the basis of local government in England and Sweden (and other Scandinavian countries). In the *dualistic model*, supreme decision-making power lies with the local council, while at the same time a separate legal body (the head of the local authority) is elected by the council and given the responsibility to implement policy, make day-to-day decisions, and to guide and supervise the local administration (Wollmann, 2004; 2008).

Of particular note in a study carried out in local authorities in Estonia, Hungary and Latvia is the perception that the mayor has a great deal of influence over decision-making, while in Hungary senior administrators see themselves as having the most influence (Sootla & Grau, 2005). In another study of local government in Hungary, Latvia, Poland and Romania, the

administration is seen as having influence over decision-making processes (Gosselin, 2005). At the same time, local politicians in Poland tend to restrict their decision-making to advancing the narrow interests of their representatives and themselves, instead of developing and cooperating with the administrative system for the sake of the community. The local authorities lack transparency and a long-term view in policy making (Jefriemenko & Volska, 2005). Local councils in Germany have the power to initiate the removal of a mayor from office and can carry out local referenda, which plays an important role in the system of “checks and balances” between the council and the mayor (Wollmann, 2004). Regulations for local authorities and local administrators in Bulgaria provide for the mayor and the council to supervise one another. The local council can decide to overrule a mayoral activity, while the mayor can veto or delay a decision by the council (Delcheva, 2005).

Since the 1980s in Sweden, local government administrators have gained more power, and managers have been asked to deal with more strategic decisions. Politicians are only marginally involved in the administrative system and authorities have been distributed among the administrative cadre. Although elected officials tend not to have any formal authority, popular political management is still widespread, resulting in tension between (salaried) politicians and professional administrators on the one hand, and unpaid and frustrated elected representatives on the other. In practice, the professional administrative staff advise the decision makers on political priorities, and the senior administrators tend to be seen as guiding and training the politicians, leading them to the right decisions. Senior administrators act as “gatekeepers”, and have a great deal of influence over the political agenda to the extent of shaping actual policy. Nonetheless, the administrators berate the politicians’ involvement in professional matters. As a result, there is sometimes a lack of trust between the sides, and the politicians are seen as threatening the proper

management of the local government. In local authorities that have implemented MBO, the politicians have come to formulate objectives and evaluate their outcomes, and are less involved in marginal issues and in responding to voter pressure (Montin, 2005).

Analysis of critical findings regarding local authorities in Israel reveals that the professional administration is not independent and that its scope of activity is limited. Elected officials are deeply involved in ongoing decision-making, which harms the administrators' ability to carry out their work. The politicians' involvement in the administrators' work can be seen in the former's close supervision of the administrators, with the politicians taking responsibility for implementation in a way that undermines the administrative cadre. A flawed division of labor between the mayor, the Director General and the treasurer enables each of those three to interfere with the work of the other (which is exploited by politicians and interested parties). The mayor does not necessarily back up the administrators' decisions, for reasons to do with coalition politics, and this harms the proper management of the local authority. Management of the budget is based on "firefighting" and responding to immediate needs (State Comptroller's Report on Local Authorities, 2005). The politicians and the administrators are in friction, with each side thinking the other is invading his territory. The administrators see the politicians as interfering in professional decisions and as even liable to cancel them (including issues to do with close associates), while the politicians see the administrators as interfering in policy matters and as acting not entirely from professional motives (see: *Interrelations between Politicians and Senior Administrators in the Local Authorities*, 2008).

The Study

Main research questions: What is the influence of the interaction between politicians and administrators on the decision-making and functioning of local government? Are there differences in these relations between “strong” and “weak” local authorities?

The interrelations between politicians and administrators were examined based on Svara’s model of conflict and cooperation (Svara, 1990), looking at the impact of the administrators on decision makers and the degree of politicians’ interference in and cooperation with the administrative system.

Evaluating decisions: The theory does not provide a clear-cut answer in this regard. A good decision is defined as one that brings the maximum expected benefit (Anderson, 2002; Doyle & Thomason, 1999), a decision that is proven through its outcomes (Fuchs, 2008). These outcomes can only be examined in retrospect – did they really bring about the expected benefit, namely, the success or failure of the local government? It is hard to measure the level at which the local government’s administrative system and politicians function, and so research treats the city’s economic standing as reflecting the functioning of its administration (see McCabe et al., 2003). According to the Ministry of the Interior’s definition of success, a “strong” local authority is one that is managed with economic responsibility and stability, while a “weak” or failing local authority is one that has a long-term deficit and has been appointed an external auditor to oversee its operations.

Methodology

Research method

Qualitative research – field research that examined decision-making processes in strong and weak local authorities.

Research population and data collection

Following consultation with senior managers at the Israeli Ministry of the Interior, three “strong” local authorities were chosen (Local Government Administration Document, 25.12.2006), along with three “weak” ones – local authorities with an external auditor. All authorities are of roughly the same size and are in the center of the country. It should be noted that a weak municipality is not only weak because of how it is managed (for a further definition of a weak authority, see Turgovnik, 2005), but could also be so because of a gap between good financial management and bad overall management, or vice versa (see Efrati et al., 2004).

Table 1: General Data on Municipalities Studied

Strong Municipalities	Population	Socioeconomic rank	Weak Municipalities	Population	Socioeconomic rank
1. Netanya	201, 106	5	4. Bnei Barak	158,083	2
2. Nes Zionya	33,953	7	5. Or Yehuda	34,262	5
3. Shoham	18,353	8	6. Mevasseret Zion	25,470	8

Research tools

The study was conducted, for the most part, in the course of the 2008 municipal elections. Data were gathered from four complementary sources: 1. Interviews with mayors, elected officials and senior administrators in local government, and interviews with senior administrators in the

Ministry of the Interior. Total number of interviews: 106. 2. A semi-structured questionnaire that was completed by the participants at the close of each interview. 3. Observations of council meetings. 4. Primary material, including state comptroller and Ministry of the Interior reports on the performance of local government, protocols from deliberations in the Knesset's Internal Affairs Committee, and more.

Findings*

(*Exact quotations from interviewees remain with the author. The numbers in parentheses refer to the number of the local authority in Table 1)

Overall, one cannot point to a sense of conflict between councilors and administrators in any of the local authorities studied, though members of the opposition can sometimes feel some bitterness about being excluded by the administrators, who owe their allegiance to the mayor. In a number of municipalities, councilors approach department heads directly, though they may only receive a general answer or the minimum required by the administrator. In this study a number of patterns of relations between politicians and administrators were found: (1) a lack of dominance on the part of the administrators over the politicians; (2) dominance of the administrators over the politicians; (3) dominance of the politicians over the administrators; and (4) full cooperation between politicians and administrators.

1. A lack of dominance on the part of the administrators over the politicians: In the “weak” local authorities, the general feeling is that the administration is weak, and that this impacts on local decision-making. The staff work is not particularly notable; there is no forum in which managers can make decisions; the role of Director General does not exist or is not sufficiently

powerful; and, as a result, the politicians take over the general management of the municipality. The administrators implement policy and carry out policy decisions, while councilors “piggy-back” on the administrators, who in turn are not clear enough, do not lead, and are hesitant in making decisions (4, 5, 6). In particular, the administrators are seen as weak vis-à-vis the mayor, who tries to promote his own agenda without taking the administrators sufficiently into account. The feeling in these municipalities is that the administrators tend to be divided and occupied with their own internal power struggles, arguments and personal intrigues, and that they fail to present a unified position at council meetings. Managers also use councilors in order to advance decisions that will serve their interests versus other managers – the treasurer against the Director General, for instance (5). In recent years there has been a trend in Israel to strengthen the administrators’ role in decision-making, with the Ministry of the Interior bestowing broader responsibilities and authorities in decision-making on senior administrators. The administrators thus feel more important and that they are the predominant factor in decision-making. In this regard, the issue of the time the mayor has been in service compared to the Director General is raised. When there is a longstanding Director General, the administrators have greater say in decision-making, especially when the politicians lack knowledge and experience. In such cases, decisions are “tailor-made” by the administrators and brought to the council for formal approval, a process which is seen as purely “ceremonial”.

Mayors point out that they consult with the administrative cadre, but it would seem that the municipal bureaucracy has little impact on the politicians’ decisions. The administrators’ role is sometimes seen as helping to implement decisions and to offer general advice; not to formulate decisions, but to contribute to technical aspects and to implement them. Some of the decision-making is influenced by the abilities of gatekeepers: the absence of a legal advisor at

vital discussions, for instance (5) (see State Comptroller, Report on Local Authorities 2007). In “weak” municipalities, it would seem that the administrators do not necessarily try to make decisions, but rather strive (not always successfully) to prevent the politicians from making irregular decisions. The main difficulty for administrators lies with councilors making decisions that are seen as irrational about subjects that have already been discussed by the administrators, including budgetary matters. The administrators are sometimes seen as “yes men” and as providing automatic support to the mayor. The feeling is that administrative cadre sometimes works under time pressure, submitting documents to councilors just minutes before meetings, such that the politicians have to make immediate decisions after the administrators had been delayed in their preparation. Politicians also claimed that the administrators’ implementation of decisions was not always satisfactory or timely, if they implemented them at all (4, 5, 6).

Observations of council meetings give the impression that administrators barely attend them: only the Director General/Secretary, the treasurer, the legal advisor and the internal comptroller tend to be present. In one of the local authorities, the manager of the education department did not take part in a discussion of a school; the legal advisor was absent from a discussion that required his input; and the treasurer was present for only ten minutes. The Director General tends not to be involved in running the meetings, and he would not appear to be fully involved in the issues discussed, or there is notable cooperation between him and the political leadership (5). It would seem that the issues are not discussed ahead of time and preparation for the meetings is poor, including the material given to councilors. Time could be saved in such meetings were preliminary discussions held by the administrators (4, 5, 6).

2. Dominance of the administrators over the politicians: In this pattern, the administrators influence decision-making at every level. It is a pattern that is mostly characteristic of the

“strong” local authorities, where the politicians do not interfere in the administrators’ work. Councilors can ask for data, but cannot issue instructions to administrators (1, 2, 3). This represents a change from the past, when position holders and committee heads would interfere in the administrators’ work (1, 2), and would largely appear to be the result of Ministry of the Interior policy. The new Municipalities Law (clause 105) requires “gatekeepers” (Director General, treasure, legal advisor), whose job it is to ensure the integrity of the municipality’s decisions. None of the municipality’s important committees (tenders and land allocation, for instance) are manned by politicians, but rather by gatekeepers. In one of the local authorities (1), the Ministry of the Interior even rejected a political proposal (a prohibition on selling pork) because the legal advisor did not support it. One municipality does not even have position holders, and politicians may only approach the administrators via the Director General (2). In these local authorities (1, 2), politicians feel that they and the opposition are marginalized by the administrators, that “being a councilor is not a very meaningful position”, and that the council only approves decisions that have already been made by the mayor and the administrators. They also argue that legal advice has “taken over” decision-making processes.

In the (monthly) council meetings, the agenda, questions, and so on are determined by the mayor (2) or the senior administrators (1), while the preparations and the professional answers are meticulous, and are filtered by the relevant administrators. The Director General approves each issue and ensures its thorough preparation (including appendices) before it is brought to the city council. The material is sent to councilors at least 48 hours before the meeting. The feeling is that this brings professional considerations in decision-making to the fore and neutralizes the influence of councilors’ political pressures. Preliminary discussions in administrative committees of the issues to be decided upon seem to serve as a “filter” vis-à-vis political demands and also

make it easier to implement the decisions that are taken. However, councilors are left almost entirely in the dark about the process leading up to a decision being brought to the council. Councilors, who mostly have other jobs as well, can make their presence felt through motions for the agenda or questions, which are answered by administrators (1, 2, 3), who are sometimes seen as the mayor's "gophers", and as insignificant in comparison to his dominance (2). Therefore, although the councilors value and support the administrators, the opposition sometimes tends to attack them as part of their political opposition to the mayor (both in public and in council meetings) (2, 3). For their part, the mayors laud the administrators and give them their full backing (1, 2, 3).

The administrators carry out advanced staff work that conforms to ISO standards with a public service orientation and based on full cooperation. The managers are considered to be professional, dedicated, and good team workers, carrying out their tasks with transparency and mutual trust (1, 2, 3). It would seem that the councilors trust the administrators and agree that their decisions are made in a professional and businesslike manner, with a respect for the regulations and a view of the good of the city and the general public. One of the municipalities (2) is particularly strict about the integrity of its decision-making and ethical management, based on an ethical code that was adopted in 2007, and that demands integrity, mutual respect, professionalism and excellence, partnership, transparency, responsibility and commitment. In this municipality, the mayor holds a weekly meeting of departmental heads and other administrators at which operational decisions are made. This pattern can be seen as implying a high level of involvement and supervision on the part of the mayor (2), the Director General and managers of the implementation of decisions, including those made by the council (1, 2). Alternatively, the mayor may be viewed as dealing with external matters, dictating policy,

delegating authorities to the Director General and administrators, and as totally uninvolved in professional decisions. The perception is that administrators set policy; that they dictate and lead the political system in decision-making (including regarding the budget); that they are “totally” in control of decision-making, including decisions made by the mayor; and that, in practice, “the municipality is run by the city bureaucrats”. Councilors feel powerless and insignificant in the running of the municipality, despite being given an office, and sometimes even secretaries. Position holders are more involved and have greater influence, especially when they also serve as salaried stand-in or deputy mayors. A coalition majority, a dominant mayor and a strong and united administrative cadre restricts the influence of elected public officials to the council and limits their ability to speak out (1).

All senior administrators were present at and fully participated in council meetings that were observed for this study. They presented administrative issues, answered questions and explained themselves, supplemented the mayor’s comments when necessary, and enjoyed the attention and esteem of the councilors. Efforts were made to reach decisions on as broad a consensus as possible, taking into account competing views of councilors and professional considerations (1, 2, 3).

3. Dominance of the politicians over the administrators: This pattern was quite exceptionally apparent in Bnei Barak, which is a unique example of an ultra-Orthodox city where rabbis and their representatives enjoy a decisive influence over decision-making. The rabbis are involved in selecting the decision makers; they are involved in choosing the senior administrators; and they are involved in matters of education² and religion and in strategic decisions. Although the view

² There is a spiritual committee in the field of education that is comprised of respected rabbis who decide upon the syllabus. Over the years, the (elected) head of the education department has run staff meetings, has been involved in the day to day management of the department, and takes part in decision making (in the past he even had a hand in

today is that rabbis are not involved in municipal decision-making, except for in substantive issues, each elected politician is loyal to his rabbi, and in the past decisions would be made according to the rabbis' wishes with complete disregard for budgetary realities. Position holders in the municipality are known as "heads of department" with administrators serving beneath them. There have been instances of position holders de facto managing their department (for instance, education, welfare, engineering, planning and construction) and making important decisions by themselves. The **administrators** **מחזיקי התיקים (שחלקם בעלי ניסיון עירוני קודם), - ראה במקור** **(some of whom have experience from other municipalities)** are fully cognizant of the influence of the position holders, who interfere in decision-making, leaving the administrators at the bottom of the pecking order. The position holder sits in all administrative meetings along with the department manager and other managers, discussing plans, budgets, ongoing problems and so on. He gives tasks to the administrators, sets the priorities, and requests alternatives. He also helps the administrative decision makers to raise external funds and resources, making use of his connections with senior figures in the municipality and elsewhere (government ministries, Members of Knesset, and other political figures). The politicians and administrators have a shared interest: the administrators acknowledge the authority of the department heads and see them as helpful; the department heads, meanwhile, see their role as trying to build bridges between the administrators and rabbinical staff and the public. Politicians and administrators cooperate over decision-making in almost every field. Decisions are "cooked up" by the mayor and the political parties before council meetings, and issues that have not been "closed" in advance by the political cadre are removed from the agenda.

recruiting staff). However, the (unsalaried) rabbi holding this position is seen by the administrators as an extremely experienced man of great stature whose advice and help are to be sought.

Many of the managers are politically affiliated, and so they can hardly be defined as professional staff. However, the administrative cadre has been replaced in recent years, and today there is a greater emphasis on “cooking up” decisions. The administrators’ influence is dependent on the various managers and their power, and they try to act as “gatekeepers”, directing the politicians to make professional decisions. Rank and file politicians do not enjoy dominance over the professional staff; indeed, the opposite is true. Councilors tend not to be involved in deciding which issues are brought for discussion and are unfamiliar with professional and budgetary matters. Therefore, they listen to the administrators and usually accept their recommendations. The political cadre initiates decisions to do with education and religion, and the politicians have greater influence over policy decisions. The administrative cadre initiates decisions to do with development and infrastructure, where they have more influence. Nonetheless, the municipality has no Director General³ and is characterized by weak administrative work. The local authority has no management forum, its departments operate autonomously, there are no regular meetings of department heads, and there is no orderly preparation or coordination prior to decisions being brought to the council. The mayor and treasurer are de facto Director General, which imposes a heavy burden on the former, impacting on his ability not only to make decisions but also to carry them out. Implementing and following up on decisions are not part of the organizational culture.

4. Full cooperation between politicians and administrators: This pattern was notable in one municipality, that of Shoham. The administrators, whose work is systematic, coordinated, fully transparent, and adheres to ISO standards, are very influential in formulating decisions, and cooperate fully with councilors in doing so. The Director General has the trust of the mayor, and, together with senior managers, assists him in setting policy, defining targets, preparing work and

³ This is because no political agreement can be reached between the Hassidim and the Lithuanians.

budgetary programs, and in making strategic decisions. The treasurer has a restraining effect on decision-making and demonstrates responsibility towards public funds. The administrators prepare very thoroughly prior to making decisions, and the politicians are businesslike and take personal responsibility. The main features of the behavior of the administrative cadre regarding decision-making are: (1) work in keeping with the law; (2) strict timekeeping in convening and running meetings; (3) decisions are made in accordance with policy and are given a clause in the budget; (4) the municipality's main objectives are examined annually, and are measured quarterly; (5) there is full transparency – subjects are brought to council meetings that are not required by law; (6) not only are decisions taken appropriately, but they are also implemented.

The councilors are of high quality: they are educated, talented and experienced, with a background in local government and management, and are distinctly oriented toward service. As a result, the council operates professionally, in an orderly, businesslike and advanced manner, and is characterized by an economic mode of thought clean of political or sectoral motivations. This would appear to be because the town is relatively young with a fairly homogenous population. Council meetings have the feeling of a directors' meeting or a professional management meeting in an efficient and successful enterprise, and not one of local government politicians. Councilors contribute willingly to the discussions, and decisions are made in the context of full cooperation and mutual separation between the administrators and politicians.

Table 2: Summary of general data regarding the administrators (interviewees) in each authority.

(Average. See Table 3 for detailed data):

	Weak municipalities	Strong municipalities
Professional experience (in years)	14.78	18.33
Education (in relation to BA)	0.95	1.37
Length of time in municipality (in years)	7.4	8.67

The findings demonstrate a clear advantage among administrators in the strong municipalities.

Discussion and analysis of findings

Changes to local government in Israel in recent years have seen the transfer of much authority to the administrators, who are seen as “gatekeepers”. They have reinforced the bureaucracy and weakened the power of politicians, similarly to other places in the world (Svara, 1990; Montin, 2005). There is a clear correlation between the dominance of the administrative cadre and the form of decision-making in municipalities. The stronger the mayor and the more professional and experienced the administrators, the greater the administrators’ bearing on local decision-making. It is hard to say exactly what comes first: the election of a dominant mayor who appoints professional managers, or a professional staff that directs the elected leader to proper working procedures? This would seem to be a classic chicken-and-egg question. When it comes to the workings of the council, it would seem that a lack of knowledge and understanding among the politicians makes it harder for them to become deeply familiar with the subjects under discussion, to ask the administrators the right questions, to minimize decisions that derive from bureaucrats’ interests, and to improve the overall quality of the council’s decisions. It would also

seem that nearly all local politicians feel a sense of frustration from the effort they put into these voluntary positions given their limited influence over the decisions made, the lack of means required to carry out their roles (including access to information and administrative assistance), and the fact that they receive no compensation for sitting in council and committee meetings or even for other expenses, such as telephone, post, office services, and so on, as in other countries (Montin, 2005; Svara, 2003). Change would appear to be necessary, such as was instigated in Germany with the result that local decision-making improved (Wollmann, 2008).

Councilors in all of the municipalities feel that they merely rubber stamp decisions that have already been taken by the mayor. This too is similar to other countries around the world (Svara, 1990). In strong municipalities (1, 2), decisions are prepared in cooperation with the administrators, or are even initiated by them, as managers deploy their bureaucratic power in various ways in their efforts to impose their will on the elected politicians (Svara, 1990). In the small local authorities (3, 6) the politicians have more influence in decision-making processes. In one of them (6), the strong opposition and other politicians are able to instigate and influence decisions or hold up decisions with which they disagree (as in other countries: Kolisnichenko et al., 2005; Swianiewicz & Mielczarek, 2005). In one of the municipalities (3), the politicians are fully involved in the decision-making process from the outset.

The research findings show that the conduct of the council and politicians in the strong municipalities, including the mechanisms that regulate the activities of the council and its committees, is more professional, systematic, organized and meticulous than in the weak municipalities. The proper conduct of local the administrative system and its evaluation as professional, experienced, and as guiding its politicians (Svara, 1990) are much more notable in the strong local authorities than the weak ones. In answer to the question, “Who makes the

decisions in the city hall?” (Mouritzen & Svara, 2002), this study replies that in strong municipalities the administrators are more powerful in their interrelations with the politicians than in the weak municipalities. This has great bearing on how councilors make decisions and on how policy is implemented (Visser, 2002). This is not to say that the mayor does not guide and make decisions at all, but in the strong municipalities (1, 2, 3) it would seem that the administrators take the lead and influence the decision makers, including the mayor. In contrast, in the weak municipalities (4, 5, 6), the administrators are seen to be weaker. No correlation was found between the size of the local authority and the status and degree of influence of the administrators over decision-making, unlike findings from Bulgaria, for instance (Nicolescu & Gorcea, 2005).

In this study no clear conflicts between politicians and administrators were identified, as they were in another study of Israeli local authorities (Dahan, 2009), and so their interrelations cannot be plotted along an axis running from “cooperation” to “conflict”, as found in the literature (Svara, 1990). However, a number of different patterns of work between politicians and administrators can be identified: **(1)** A degree of *division between the administrators and the politicians*, whereby the administrators’ staff work is disorganized, tainted with internal conflicts and the staff are considered to be weak and less dominant. Nor are the politicians dominant, apart from certain mayors at certain periods of time, when they intervened and exercised their influence in accordance with their personality. The administrators’ status improved after the introduction of personal liability, such that the legal advisor and the treasurer became the “gatekeepers” of the decision-making process (5). **(2)** *Control of the administrators by the politicians*: politicians who are appointed by rabbis, position holders termed “heads of department”, interfere in decision-making and are involved in day-to-day management. Given

the lack of a Director General and orderly staff work (French & Folz, 2004; Mouritzen & Svara, 2002), the administrative cadre is seen as weak and struggles to implement decisions. The professional staff is understanding of the politicians' power and seeks assistance from the department heads (4). **(3) *Administrators who are seen as "weak" and influential politicians:*** a significant proportion of the politicians are professional and are able to influence the running of the local authority. However, the politicians represent different interests and sectors (Zeemering, 2006) and, driven by sectoral needs, try (through not always successfully) to put pressure on the administrative system, which itself operates in a disorganized manner and struggles to carry out the council's decisions "חסר כאן כדי לקדם צרכים סקטוריאליים" (6). **(4) *Neutralized politicians:*** a strong and dominant administrative cadre with significant power over the politicians, who are forbidden from intervening in professional matters. The politicians are given clear boundaries and may only approach the administrators via the Director General, as is the case in a number of municipalities in the US and Australia (Mouritzen & Svara, 2002). The aim of this is to isolate the administrative team from all political interference (Haus & Sweeting, 2006b; Svara, 1990). The mayor and the Director General strictly enforce the almost total detachment between politicians, managers and workers. Even committee chairpersons (there are no position holders) have only limited influence over the fields for which they are responsible. As a result, councilors feel insignificant and frustrated (Svara, 1990; 1999). Nonetheless, the councilors value and trust the administrators and accept their opinions (2). **(5) *Strong, professional and purposeful administrators*** who manage, lead, oversee ongoing activities, guide the politicians and prepare decisions for their formal ratification in council. They run an advanced bureaucracy, work in an easy-going atmosphere of cooperation and at a high level of professionalism, and adhere to the principles of proper management. They have influence over the mayor (who was once one of

them) and even make (strategic) decisions. Councilors feel insignificant and seek to restrict the administrators' authority in decision-making, similarly to the recommendations of the European Council (Rekosh, 2005) (1). **(6) Full cooperation between politicians and administrators:** the council is run in a way that resembles a management council, as is the case in about half of American local authorities, and that is close to the business model of a board of directors (Mouritzen & Svara, 2002; Svara, 1990). The politicians trust the administrators and value their work. They do not try to interfere in the administrators' day-to-day activities, though they are involved in decision-making. The administrators prepare strategic decisions thoroughly and bring them to the council in an orderly manner. The strong leadership of the councilors, and their good relations with the administrators, contribute to effective decision-making (Svara, 1999) (3).

Significant differences arise from the data collected from the senior managers who were interviewed. The managers in the strong municipalities have more professional experience and are better educated, which may have a positive impact on decision-making (Gosselin, 2005). The findings of this study point to a clear relationship between a strong administrative cadre and the quality of the decision-making process in strong local authorities, and to the opposite in "weak" ones, where in the former the politicians do not interfere in local management. There is also a clear connection between the skills of administrators, as expressed in decision-making processes in the council, and the quality of the decisions and the functioning of the local government (see Table 4).

Given these various findings, the interrelations between administrators and politicians in decision-making can be represented as follows: a professional and dominant administrative system and involved, active and contributive politicians (strong council) (3); a professional and dominant administrative system and a medium-strength to weak council (active, but led by the

administrators) (1); a professional and dominant administrative system and a weak council (2); a medium-strength to weak administrative system and dominant politicians (strong council) (6); a medium-strength to weak administrative system and a medium-strength to weak council (5); and finally, a weak administrative system and dominant position holding politicians, but a weak council (4).

In relation to the strength or weakness of the council, the politicians should not only be evaluated as “strong” or “weak”, but we should also take into account their membership in the council’s coalition or opposition (Ben-Ilai, 2005; Hecht, 2008) and the number of parties in the council (Gosselin, 2005). In all of the authorities (bar one) there was a very large number of parties, and when the coalition is weak it finds it hard to make decisions. The following situations were identified: a strong coalition and a small and vocal but usually responsible opposition (3); a broad coalition and a professional, experience and active opposition and raises almost as many motions for the agenda and questions as are permitted by law (1); a weak and divided opposition (2); a strong, lively, active and dominant opposition which sometimes tries to prevent the council from fulfilling its tasks (Hazan and Rezin, 2008) or even from meeting (6); a large but divided, particularly inactive and non-dominant opposition (5); and, a council without an opposition, whose members vote almost unanimously (4).

Summary and conclusions

The decisions taken by the local authority shape the future and welfare of its residents. The interrelations between the politicians and the administrators have a crucial impact on how these decisions are made and implemented. Dominance or weakness, ignoring or neutralizing one of the sides on the one hand, or cooperation and mutual trust on the other – these relations influence

the decision-making and the success or failure of the local authority. In reality, there are different variations of these interrelations that derive from different circumstances and are dependent on the characteristics of the place (size of the municipality, the type of population, operational habits, and so on), the mayor's policies, the power relations within the council and the strength of the opposition, the characteristics and the skills of the main actors, Ministry of the Interior policy, and so on. This study shows that when the administrators are seen as strong and as leading the decision-making process in the council and in the municipality in general in a professional fashion, then the local authority is run in a level-headed manner and will be considered "strong", and vice versa. When the administrators' bureaucracy runs efficiently, the politicians' involvement in policy making and their participation in strategic decision-making contribute to the proper management of the local government. Since the empowerment of the administrative cadre in recent years as part of central government policy, it is hard to point to conflicts between politicians and administrators. Rather, their interrelations are characterized by the neutralization of local politicians or their successful integration in decision-making.

Recommendations

Five main recommendations emerge from this study: 1. To strengthen the administrative cadre in local authorities and require it to lead an orderly decision-making process based on structured stages (from setting policy through to data collection, examining alternatives, involving the public, and so on). This will increase transparency and improve the politicians' involvement. 2. To require the administrators to brief councilors before making strategic decisions. 3. To train

councilors in order to improve their decision-making skills, and to treat them as board members, including having the responsibility of board members. 4. To enable councilors to ask for help from professional staff who are unconnected to the city hall as a way of preparing for council meetings and improving decision-making. 5. To do away with the view of the council as a rubber stamp; to involve councilors in decision-making and to hold preliminary discussions with them before they ratify decisions so that they can see the broader picture and feel part of the process.

Future research

Future research of politician-administrator interactions in local government should take upon itself the following challenges: 1. To examine the following hypothesis among a large number of local authorities: the stronger the administrators, the more professional the decision-making process among politicians will be. 2. To study the influence of politicians' involvement in day-to-day local authority management on decision-making in a large number of local authorities. 3. To examine the influence of power relations between the coalition and opposition in the council on decision-making and the running of the local authority.

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Interviews: n=106, including: senior figures from the Ministry of the Interior (former Directors General, the head of the Local Government Administration, the head of the inspection division, regional supervisors, regional officers, and others); former and present mayors (apart from Netanya), deputy mayors, councilors, Directors General, treasurers, legal advisors, internal

auditors and others (names of interviewees and quotations from the interviews are held by the author).

Observations at council meetings: 27 meetings at each local authority in the study.

Table 3: Summary of general data regarding (interviewed) administrators from each municipality:

	Municipalities with an external auditor (weak)			Strong municipalities		
	Or Yehuda	Bnei Barak	Mevasseret Zion	Nes Ziona	Netanya	Shoham
Professional experience (in years)	11.83	17.5	15	20	15	15
Education (in relation to BA)	0.78	0.83	1.25	1.43	0.63	1.4
Length of time in municipality (in years)	5.53	9.17	7.5	7.29	7.5	8

Table 4: Summary of evaluation of the decision-making process in various forums

		Strong municipalities	Weak municipalities
Forums	Council	7.68	5.81
	Management	2.55	1.91
	Managers	5.96	3.88