A Small Town Squire? Measuring Professionalism in City Councils

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Abstract

City councils are the main legislative body at the municipal level, yet our understanding of how the institutional capacity of these bodies affects city government is lacking. In this paper, we examine whether legislative professionalism, a popular concept in research on state politics, provides valuable insight into the capacity of city councils. After establishing the theoretical justification for measuring legislative professionalism at the municipal level, we utilize both administrative and original data to create a measure of professionalism for nearly every incorporated city in California over a more than ten-year time span. We assess the measure's validity and analyze the key predictors of professionalism at the municipal level. Finally, we test whether political and policy outcomes identified at the state level are similarly related to municipal professionalism. We find that municipal professionalism operates in many ways just like state professionalism, and is related to important concepts like competitive elections, incumbent turnover, productivity, and city spending. These findings suggest that legislative professionalism is a valuable tool at the municipal level, and deserves more attention from the local politics literature.

Keywords: municipal government, political institutions, professionalism

1 Introduction

Across the United States, city residents decide what they want their local government to look like, leading to debates over the size and power of each city's city council. In Union City, California, the question of councilmember salaries became contentious. An ordinance to raise councilmember salaries by 30% led to pushback from some residents, who questioned whether councilmembers needed more pay. As one resident put it, "I thought that you were in this position because you're helping our communities, and that should come from your heart, not lining your pockets." From the councilmembers' perspective, the issue was not about increased pay, but rather about increased access. As one councilmember put it, "By not increasing the salary after 16 years, we are making it so only the well-to-do can participate in city government, we should not let that stand" (Matemba-Mutasa 2024). About 20 miles north, in Oakland, California, a reform shifting the balance of power between the mayor and city council became similarly controversial. The proposal would both give the mayor the power to veto legislation passed by the city council and give the city council an independent legislative and budget analysis office. The proposal split the council, with some arguing the reforms would clarify the mayor's and city council's roles while others argued the proposal was merely a power grab by the mayor (Orenstein 2026). The debate over which resources should be made available to local government and how robust those resources should be is one that plays out across the United States in cities both large and small.

These debates play out differently in each city, and as a result, cities are able to bring different levels of resources to bear on the thorny political questions facing their governments. For example, while Sacramento and Long Beach have roughly similar populations, Sacramento councilmembers make approximately double what their colleagues in Long Beach make. These differences exist due to demographic, institutional, and political factors that shape the size and makeup of local government. As the debate over how to allocate resources continues, under-

standing the impact of these decisions is critical. Does paying councilmembers more improve access for lower-income residents? Do larger staffs allow city councils to pursue better legislation that improves the economic conditions of the city? Does providing more resources to city councilmembers attract higher quality candidates?

These dynamics have received significant attention at the state level, especially since the 1960s. Prior to then, state legislatures were considered to be in crisis. Numerous professional organizations called for strengthening state legislatures, while national newspapers referred to them as slow, inefficient, and anachronistic (Rocca, Krebs, and McArthur 2023). As calls for reform grew, states began to pass legislation increasing the resources available to their legislatures. Research following these changes focused on determining the political and economic effects of increasingly professional legislative bodies.

Despite the significant attention to state legislative professionalism, there has been comparatively little work on similar questions at the municipal level. While the need for municipal competence and some amount of capacity is clear, our understanding of how professionalism as a concept translates down to the local level is lacking. Few comprehensive analyses of local capacity exist, and it is not clear whether concepts developed at the national and state levels would apply at the municipal level. In larger cities, mayors have significant power over the council, while in smaller cities city managers are often viewed as the driving policy force. Both the lack of clarity over the impact of city council capacity and the continued interest in building local government capacity point to a need for additional research.

This paper takes a step towards this goal by introducing a new measure of local legislative professionalism. This measure, based on the Squire index developed at the state level, measures the capacity of city councils through three components: staff, salary, and meeting frequency. To evaluate the measure, we use original data to create the first continuous measure of professionalism in city councils. We identify the professionalism of nearly every city in California across more than a decade. We then evaluate the measure by testing several key theories regarding the

predictors of professionalism and its effects on political and economic outcomes.

We find that our measure of professionalism offers both face and construct validity. Furthermore, we demonstrate that our measure of professionalism in many ways mirrors professionalism measures at other levels of government, showing similar relationships to population and income. Finally, professionalism is linked to similar key political and economic outcomes that match findings at the state level, offering further confidence in our measure.

These findings point to the importance of studying city councils as legislative bodies, as they share at least some of the properties present in legislatures at other levels of government. Furthermore, this paper provides guidance for how to measure one of the most important concepts in the state politics literature, professionalism. While city councils have long been ignored or sidelined in the study of US institutions, this paper finds that city councils can act in ways that are startlingly similar to state legislative bodies.

2 Legislative Professionalism at the State and Local Level

Legislative professionalism, particularly at the state level, has been an important topic for both practitioners and researchers throughout the 1900s (Squire 2006). Following pressure in the 1960s for state legislatures to increase their capacity to address complex issues, a number of states strengthened their legislatures. One of the most important of these movements occurred in California, where the passage of Proposition 1A in 1966 amended the state constitution to allow the legislature to meet in annual general sessions (*2011 Initiative Analysis:The Citizen Legislature Act,*). Though this was an important moment in the professionalization movement, California was not the first state to professionalize and this did not signal the end of professionalization in California or elsewhere. Instead, the movement has been largely defined by incremental change in nearly every state across the country (Rocca, Krebs, and McArthur 2023).

An interest in measuring professionalism began largely in response to the increasing professionalism occurring at the state level, leading to a proliferation of measures aimed at capturing the changing capacities of state legislatures. While the precise measurements differed from scholar to scholar, most agreed that the term was intended to measure the capacity of the legislature to make expert policy rather than the competency or experience of any individual legislator. Early work looked to categorize legislatures into discrete categories (i.e. low, medium, and high professionalism); however these measures were often criticized for attempting to measure a continuous concept (legislative capacity) with a categorical measure (Mooney 1994). Alternatively, other measures of professionalism used a single variable such as total expenditures per member or legislative salary (Brace 1991; Weber, Tucker, and Brace 1991). However, these measures suffered from oversimplifying a multidimensional concept into a single variable (Mooney 1994). Instead, scholars began generating indexes of multiple variables to capture the concept. While these measures differed at the margins, they typically included some measure of session length and some measure of staff support (Rocca, Krebs, and McArthur 2023). Finally, while there is some debate over its appropriateness as a measure of professionalism, many modern professionalism indexes use legislator compensation as the third component[1] (Squire 2007; Rosenthal 1996).

While debate continues over the ideal index for measuring professionalism, the Squire index has become the most commonly used measure (Squire 1992, 2007, 2024). The Squire index uses the same three basic variables - legislator pay, legislative support staff, and days in session - however Squire's innovation is that the measure compares those three variables in the states to the US Congress. This makes the measure easily interpretable as well as easier to use in longitudinal studies (Mooney 1994).

Increased legislative professionalism has been linked with a variety of electoral and policy

[1] In Appendix D, we analyze whether our results change when professionalism is measured without salary as a component, and find all our main takeaways hold.

outcomes at the state level. Perhaps the strongest and most consistent effect professionalism has is on the incumbency advantage. Legislators in more professional legislatures can carry out additional constituency service, hire staff to publicize their achievements, and dedicate more time to winning reelection. While incumbents have more resources at their disposal to win reelection, they are also likely to face more challengers in more professional legislatures. More professional legislatures offer numerous benefits to potential candidates, including higher pay, more prestige, and more power compared to less professional legislatures. When incumbents run for reelection, challengers tend to be lower quality; however when seats are open, prior research suggests that increased professionalism leads to more, higher quality candidates (Ferraz and Finan 2009; Rocca, Krebs, and McArthur 2023).

While increased professionalism has been found to affect the political environment, it has also been found to affect policy outcomes. Past research has argued that less professional legislatures are less susceptible to interest group influence, and therefore less likely to be encouraged to spend more. Because legislators in less professional legislatures hold outside jobs, they are typically wealthier and less single-mindedly focused on reelection. This leads to legislators who are more conservative, less reliant on interest group support for reelection, and less likely to attempt to bring pork to their district through spending bills (Owings and Borck 2000; Malhotra 2008; Fiorina 1994). Another focus of research on the policy effects of legislative professionalism is productivity. More professional legislatures are thought to be more capable of crafting more complex bills, have the resources to propose more bills overall, and have the time in session to pass more bills overall (Rosenthal and Forth 1978; Hedlund and Freeman 1981; Hoffman and Lyons 2015). However, more recent work has found that legislative efficiency is negatively associated with professionalism. As the resources available to each individual legislator and their incentives to pursue individual legislation increase, the percentage of introduced bills that are passed decreases (Squire 1998; Hicks and Smith 2009; Callaghan and Karch 2021; Hoffman and Lyons 2015).

3 City Councils as Legislatures

City councils have received significant attention in local politics research, though in a very different context from past research on state legislatures. Research focusing on city councils often comes from a long research tradition focusing on how, initially at least, city reform packages from the reform era shaped city governance and outputs. During the first half of the 20th century, many cities moved to make their city governments more administrative and less political. While this movement encouraged a wide variety of reforms, the typical reform package frequently included the adoption of at-large rather than district elections, non-partisan elections, and a city manager rather than a strong and separate mayor at the head of the administrative arm of the city government. These reformers wanted to de-politicize city government, making it more professional, streamlined, and focused on the health of the city as a whole rather than the particularistic needs of a single area[2]. Much of the research at the municipal level when it comes to institutional change has focused on whether reform cities differ from non-reform cities on various outcomes. This work has generally either focused on whether reformed cities spent less, spent less in certain areas, or responded to fiscal crises with less aggressive development policy (Lineberry and Fowler 1967; Liebert 1974; Lyons 1977; Sharp 1991)[3]. Other work has focused on municipal institutions more generally and how they shape various outcomes. For example, research on council size and its effects on spending has found contrasting outcomes, with some finding higher rates of spending and others finding null effects (Baqir 2002; MacDonald 2008). Others have examined how institutions shape political outcomes, finding that constituency size can affect the incumbency advantage and that district elections can alter levels of descriptive representation (Lascher 2005; Abott and Magazinnik 2020). This project fits

[2]While these were the stated aims, most historians now accept that the reform movement was as much about claiming political power for white collar and middle class voters as it was about efficiency (Bridges 1997; Bridges and Kronick 1999).

[3]See Morgan and Pelissero 1980 for work challenging the significant effects of the research mentioned above.

well within this literature, though rather than investigating a categorical institution we focus on a broader measure that likely draws on multiple institutional choices.

Interestingly, the reform movement used similar language to the professionalization movement at the state legislature level in the later half of the twentieth century. However, the underlying meaning of the term was somewhat different. For the reform movement, professionalizing city government typically meant taking power and resources away from the city council. City councils were perceived to serve the parochial interests of each councilmember's district rather than the city as a whole. The reform tradition built capacity in city government at the administrative or bureaucratic level rather than at the legislative or council level, frequently sacrificing the capacity of the latter for the former. In many ways then, the professionalization of city government pursued by the reformers led to diminished professionalism for the city council. While some of the past literature can therefore be thought of as studying the indirect effects of the diminished capacity of city councils, the literature has rarely directly addressed it. This question has become more important as the past several decades have seen a slow shift back towards more empowered or politically oriented city councils. Increased use of district elections (especially in California following the California Votings Rights Act) and more directly elected mayors have made the landscape more varied when it comes to where government capacity lies (Abott and Magazinnik 2020). Whether a city council is an empowered political actor or a more administrative overseer of an appointed official, understanding whether their own internal capacity affects outcomes is an important question.

In this project, we investigate the council side of this tradeoff, examining how differences in the professionalism of city councils affect a variety of outcomes, many of which have been of interest to researchers working on the effects of reform institutions. In doing so, we add a new dimension to traditional research on local institutions, providing a new and continuous measure for understanding how local institutions shape outcomes.

4 Professionalism in Municipal Government

Though the study of legislative professionalism is ubiquitous at the state level, there has been little to no investigation of professionalism at the local level. At least part of this lack of past research is due to the complex institutional environment that city governments inhabit. While some cities, such as New York City, have a council that would look familiar to any state legislative scholar, most cities in the United States have smaller, weaker, and less distinct city councils. Similarly, many cities have a mayor that also serves as a councilmember as well as a city manager who is in charge of the administration of city government. Despite the fact that city councils are the primary body responsible for making policy at the local level, both mayors and city managers have received significantly more attention (Nelson, Gabris, and Davis 2011; Zhang 2014; Nelson and Nollenberger 2011).

Despite the general lack of prior research on this issue, there is some work suggesting both that professionalism in city councils is increasing and that it may be an important aspect of a council's policy-making prowess. Research focusing exclusively on councilmember salaries (one of the three key components of the Squire index) found an average increase in councilmember salaries of close to $10,000 between 1982 and 1992 (Haas 1995). Considering the average overall salary of the cities included in the study was $24,841, this was a significant increase. Furthermore, 23 of the 54 cities in the study reported higher salaries than that of their respective state legislatures, a sign that these institutions are often more professionalized than we might think.

Work by the Urban Institute points to the potential importance of professionalism at the municipal level. Using general revenue as a proxy for capacity, they find that higher capacity municipalities are awarded more federal grants (Hermans and Rajninger 2024). While general revenue is a rough measure of capacity, their work finds a similar relationship when using the number of full-time staff at the county level.

Beyond the above analyses, there are only two studies that attempt to measure professionalism at the sub-state level. The first draws on a survey of elected officials from local school boards to assess levels of professionalism at the school district level (Grissom and Harrington 2013). While the authors focus on the same three dimensions of professionalism - salary, time allocated, and staff resources - they also examine whether professional training level serves as an additional dimension of professionalism. Finally, they look at predictors of professionalism, finding some support for theories linking greater resource bases to more professional legislatures. Alternatively, they find little evidence that racial heterogeneity leads to increased professionalism (Mooney 1995).

The second study utilizes the ICMA's Municipal Form of Government Survey to create a measure of professionalism that uses dichotomous versions of salary, time in session, and legislative staff (Cooper and Rimes 2023). These three dichotomous variables are then used to construct a measure of professionalism with four categorical levels. Examining the correlates of their professionalism measure, they find that population, the percent of white residents, and a mayor council system are positively correlated with more professional councils, while household income is negatively correlated.

Though important first steps toward measuring legislative professionalism at the local level, these studies leave important questions unanswered. Haas's early work measuring councilmember salary demonstrated that there is strong evidence of a trend towards more professionalism, but examined too few cities and used too limited a measure of professionalism to give us insight into the broader concept of professionalism at the local level. Grissom and Harrington's work on professionalism in school boards demonstrated that a continuous measure of professionalism could be used at the sub-state level, but was limited to studying legislative bodies with a particularly narrow legislative remit. Cooper and Rimes's work provides the most holistic and direct examination of city council professionalism; however the categorical nature of the index leads to too coarse a measure for comparing most cities. Indeed, more than 80% of the cities in

their sample fall in the middle two categories, and over 50% fall into a single category.

Our paper addresses the limitations of prior work on municipal professionalism in several ways. First, we theoretically connect legislative professionalism at the municipal level to the state level. While previous work has implicitly connected the municipal and the state level concepts of professionalism, we demonstrate that the two can be measured using nearly identical approaches. Second, we apply the method to nearly every city in California, creating the first continuous measure of professionalism at the municipal level to cover such a large cohort of cities. Finally, we test whether relationships between professionalism and political and policy factors that exist at the state level are portable to the local level. In doing so, we provide a dataset that can be of wide use to scholars studying municipal governments, and demonstrate that the concept of professionalism should play an important role in how we study municipal policy-making and capacity.

5 Theory and Hypotheses

There are numerous ways that city councils and state legislatures meaningfully differ. City governments frequently use city managers that carry out much of the administrative activity of the city, shifting capacity away from the city council. Often, the mayor sits as a member of the council, fusing executive and legislative activities in ways that are difficult to quantify. City councils are frequently, and always in California, nonpartisan, leading to questions about the electoral incentives a councilmember may consider when choosing to run for office or choosing how to govern while in office. While some of these differences likely affect the importance of a professional city council, or the potential downstream effects of a more or less professional city council, we don't believe they pose a serious challenge when it comes to whether we can measure city council professionalism, or more broadly city council capacity, using similar components to those used at the state level. While these differences may mean that city council

capacity is unimportant or unrelated to political or policy outcomes, those differences do not challenge the claim that, broadly speaking, increased salary, increased staff, and increased time in meetings are components of a city council's capacity to tackle more, serious, and more complex topics and issues. Whether these differences do weaken the relationship between professionalism and political or policy outcomes is ultimately an empirical question, and one we test below.

We argue that municipal legislative professionalism can be measured in much the same way as state legislative professionalism. This is based on two main assumptions. First, we assume that, even beyond the largest cities, city councils make consequential decisions, whether as political policymakers or more administrative custodians. Research on the largest cities provides clear evidence that city politics in many ways mimics state and national politics, most notably in terms of representation and party effects on local policy outcomes (Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014; De Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw 2016). While most studies on these topics focus on bigger cities (typically using a 20,000 or 100,000 population cutoff), there is suggestive evidence that some amount of policy-making occurs in smaller cities as well. Research on spatial representation and on school district election timing's effect on interest group influence both point to policy competition at the hyper local level (Anzia 2012; Hankinson and Magazinnik 2023; Colner 2026). While some of the smallest cities may have city councils that don't act in ways that mirror state legislatures, it is not at all clear whether there is a size under which this occurs or if this is a unique, city by city question.

If nearly all cities have city councils that carry out important policy-making for their cities, then the resources available to them should have an important effect on their ability to carry out good policy. The two least contested aspects of typical measures of professionalism, support staff and session length, both have clear corollaries at the municipal level. Given the additional administrative tasks city councils are often given compared to state legislatures, staff support for city councils is crucial to providing councilmembers the capacity to carry out their duties.

City councils often tackle tasks that would be left to other offices at the state level. For example, assessing contracting bids for construction projects or approving applications for handicapped parking permits are items that are common on a city council meeting agenda but would likely be a separate department's concern at the state level (*MRSC - Understanding the Consent Agenda in Local Government Meetings* 2025). Increasing the number of staff available to councilmembers therefore is a key component of a councilmember's capacity to tackle a wide and substantive range of issues.

The second common component of legislative capacity, session length, also has a clear corollary at the municipal level. While city councils do not have sessions in the same way that state legislatures do, the number of days that they are officially meeting as an institution plays a similar role. In California, cities operate under strict sunshine laws that require formal meetings for nearly every decision made by the city council[4] (*Understanding California's Brown Act* 2023). This means that the number of meetings held can serve as a direct measure of the amount of time provided to councilmembers to carry out their policy-making duties. City municipal codes often specify a meeting frequency, however city councils often meet more frequently than prescribed due to the role meetings play in passing policy (*2025 California Code* 2025). Counting the number of days in meeting therefore serves a similar role to identifying session length at the state level.

The third common component of legislative professionalism measures is salary, though its inclusion causes some debate. While staff support and session length are legislature-level measures of capacity, salary is considered more of a measure of legislator capacity. Because it is highly connected to careerism in legislatures and is seen to play an important role in who runs for office, it is typically included as a third component. At the municipal level, the inclusion of salary plays a less contentious role. Given that most cities in the United States do not pay

[4]Though the law allows for some closed sessions for limited matters, these meetings still have agendas, and are included in our data collection.

councilmembers full-time salaries, salary support can be considered a measure of the number of hours or amount of effort expected out of councilmembers. Given that councilmembers in cities without full-time salaries must be independently wealthy or work a second job, we can treat salary as a measure of the proportion of time councilmembers are expected to work on council business. This conception of salary places it on much closer theoretical grounds to the time in session component. For larger cities with full-time salaries, salary continues to play an important role in encouraging careerism and higher quality candidates. Using the single measure across these two types of cities combines multiple theoretical justifications for the use of salary as a component of capacity, however those justifications all point to similar effects.

> **Hypothesis 1:** The three traditional components of legislative professionalism at the state level - staff support, session length, and salary - all have clear corollaries at the municipal level that can be used to create a legislative professionalism index for city councils.

Our second assumption is that city council positions offer some amount of benefit to those who hold the position, but that those positions take some amount of cost to win and hold. Foundational literature on the value of public office presents the question of whether to run for office as a strategic decision based on political opportunity. At its most basic, potential candidates will run for office if the value of winning office, conditioned on the likelihood of winning, is worth the costs of running. The literature on strategic entry, political ambition, and the incumbency advantage rarely focuses on municipal elections, though interestingly, Black's seminal piece on the topic focuses on city councilmembers in California (Black 1972; Schlesinger 1966). Though conditional candidate emergence is understudied, evidence points to similar dynamics at the local level to those at higher levels of government (Colner 2023; Carroll and Sanbonmatsu 2012). The more limited benefits of municipal elected offices are balanced out by the lower costs of running and the potentially higher likelihood of winning.

If candidate entry is a strategic decision based on local political factors, then increased legislative professionalism has clear implications for those strategic decisions. A city council with more legislative professionalism offers numerous benefits to potential office seekers. More capacity means councils can pursue more meaningful policy goals, councilmembers receive more pay, and council positions are likely more prestigious. These benefits change the calculation for potential candidates on whether to enter the race, leading to our second hypothesis:

> **Hypothesis 2:** As municipal legislative professionalism increases, more candidates will run for the position.

One aspect of the increased value of public office in more professional legislatures is the increased access to resources that can be used by incumbents to win reelection (Cox and Katz 1996). The incumbency advantage at the local level is also a well-established feature of the low information, low turnout environment of municipal elections (Trounstine 2013). Together, we expect that as the resources available to incumbents increase in more professionalized councils, the incumbency advantage for those incumbents will increase, leading to less turnover. While the number of candidates overall may increase, those candidates will be of lower quality, as higher quality candidates will strategically wait until the incumbent has stepped down. This leads to our third hypothesis:

> **Hypothesis 3:** As municipal legislative professionalism increases, the level of incumbent turnover will decrease.

Beyond the political effects of increased legislative professionalism, we expect there to be policy effects as well. Specifically, the presence of interest groups at the municipal level and the increased incentives for incumbents to win reelection both lead to similar policy effects when combined with increased professionalism. While councilmembers may have less influence over spending patterns compared to state legislators, city councils do still pursue policy goals, determine municipal tax policy, and expend city resources. Furthermore, as a policy-making body,

the council is constrained in the ability to propose and pass policy by the resources it has at its disposal. As professionalism increases, city councils will have more time and ability to propose and pursue more policy items, and be more capable of handling administrative issues at a faster pace[5]. This leads to our two policy hypotheses:

> **Hypothesis 4:** As municipal legislative professionalism increases, city spending per capita will increase.
>
> **Hypothesis 5:** As municipal legislative professionalism increases, city councils will pursue larger agendas and propose more policy than less professional councils.

6 Data and Measurement

This assessment of municipal professionalism in California draws on three main datasets to generate a measure of professionalism that mirrors the Squire index. The first of these datasets is the California State Controller's Government Compensation in California website. The State Controller's Office collects government compensation data as part of its financial transaction reports for local governments. This data is then posted online for all cities, counties, and special districts, while superior courts, community college districts, and others can provide similar information on a voluntary basis (*GCC,*). For each government employee in California, their employer name (the city they work for), their department or subdivision, their position, whether they're an elected official, and various aspects of their salary and benefits are reported. This data is available stretching back to 2009. Department names and position titles shift year to year in the dataset, likely as a result of manual entry by city administrators.

[5]While we can detect whether there is a relationship between professionalism and our two outcomes, we cannot identify the causal direction. More spending per capita and larger agendas may also lead to more professionalism.

First, we extract the total wages reported for elected councilmembers from the dataset to serve as the salary dimension of the professionalism measure. Total wages include regular salary, overtime pay, per diem pay, car allowances, and other payments considered part of a councilmember's overall income. Because of slight differences councilmember to councilmember (some cities pay the mayor a higher salary, which may be a position rotated among councilmembers), we use the average wage per councilmember as the final measure of salary. The Government Compensation database only began tracking whether an employee was an elected official in 2013. Because position names changed year to year, the set of elected officials from 2013 to 2022 was used to find the same positions in 2009 to 2012. While state law provides guardrails for what can be offered as a councilmember salary for general law cities, these restrictions only affect the amount salaries can be raised by in a single year and the process through which those salaries are raised. While this limits the ability of cities to set salaries as they see fit, there is still variation among similarly sized cities.

Second, we count for each city the number of government officials serving as part of the legislative apparatus of the council who are not councilmembers. To identify employees who fit this description, we take several steps. First, employees are counted as legislative staff if they are marked as serving in a department that is specifically identified as serving the city council. This could include a department named Legislative Affairs or City Council, but not a department named Elected Officials or Government Administration. We believe that this component and its operationalization are well-suited to both bigger cities with large departments as well as smaller cities. In cities with city manager, we intentionally chose to exclude them from the count. City managers were often implemented during the reform era as part of an attempt to remove power from city councils, not empower them with more professional staff. City managers have in the past been studied as separate policy actors within city government, and should not be treated as a member of a city council's staff (Zhang and Feiock 2010).

To identify departments with a legislative remit, we hand code a little under 15,000 depart-

ment names based on their city and their title to identify those departments that serve the city council. Similarly, if an official in another department has a job title indicating they operate in some legislative capacity (i.e., they have some version of the word "legislative" in their job title), they are also marked as legislative staff [6].

The second dataset we use to measure professionalism is an original dataset of city council meeting records downloaded from each California city's website[7]. While every city has a prescribed number of times the city council should meet, this number often does not reflect the reality. This can be due to additional meetings such as budget workshops or long periods off during the summer months or the winter holidays. Rather than counting the number of meetings prescribed, we instead engaged in a vast data collection effort to collect city council meeting records from every incorporated city in California. Over several years and with the help of multiple research assistants, we accessed each city government website, identified the meeting records archive, and downloaded each meeting event. The meeting records, named by the date they occurred, provide a true record of every day that a given city had its full city council in meeting, the closest parallel to in session. The time span covered by these records is highly

[6]Because the role is the deciding factor, we include legislative analysts and other explicitly legislative positions housed in other departments in our count. The exception is in cities where there is a mayor that does not serve on the city council. In those cities, these legislative roles would be considered part of the mayor's capacity rather than the councils.

[7]We choose to build a new dataset rather than use an existing dataset of meeting records, such as LocalView, for several reasons (Barari and Simko 2023). First, we wanted to include as close to every city in California as is possible to cover the full universe of cities in a state. Second, the capacity to record videos of city council meetings and upload them to YouTube is likely itself correlated with professionalism, which would bias the sample towards more professional councils. Third, LocalView only includes public meetings, as close meetings do not get recorded. Closed meetings do, however, get agendas and often meeting minutes, meaning that our dataset offers a more complete picture of every meeting held by the city council.

variable by city. While some cities maintain records stretching back to the early 1900s, others only maintain records stretching back to 2020.

The third dataset is a dataset of agenda items from 47 California cities. These 47 cities use a legislative management system known as Legistar to track meetings, councilmembers, and agenda items. While some larger cities like San Francisco use the system, smaller cities do as well, such as Fort Bragg, CA. These items are made publicly accessible and easily downloadable, typically through an API. Items tackled by the entire city council are kept in the dataset, while items passed by city bodies such as a planning commission are discarded[8]. For each city, the number of items was counted by year for the years made available on Legistar. This count of items is used as a measure of productivity or legislative output[9].

With councilmember salary, the number of legislative staff, and the number of days in session, we generate a measure of professionalism based on the Squire index. While there are still numerous approaches to measuring professionalism, the Squire index has become the most commonly used. This provides important benefits, as it allows for more direct comparisons to the findings based on the Squire index at the state level. Additionally, it allows for a comparison of professionalism across state and local government. Following prior practice, we index the measure to the US Congress; however we do not average across legislative cycles. This is because cities have more variable electoral cycles, and measuring each year separately provides the most consistent comparison. We compare each of the three dimensions of the index to the national level dimension, weight each dimension equally, then combine them into a single metric. As with the state Squire index, a score of 1 indicates a city council with a professionalism equal to that of the US Congress.

[8]Additional information about Legistar and the dataset can be found in Appendix A, pages 2-3.

[9]While this includes items that did not pass, these represent a very small minority of items on the agenda. Typically, items make the agenda only if they are likely to pass. Failed items are not removed because only a subset of the 47 cities makes the vote outcomes available.

7 Validation

Starting with the face validity of the measure, we assess the five cities with the highest legislative professionalism score against the five cities with the lowest scores. Table 1 shows the ten cities, their populations, and their professionalism scores. Scores are based on the data from 2021, and show that Los Angeles, San Diego, San Jose, San Francisco, and Oakland are the cities with the highest legislative professionalism scores. In contrast, the cities with the lowest scores are Bradbury, Tehama, Dos Palos, Ferndale, and Loyalton. Starting with the least professional cities, we see cities we would largely expect to have lower legislative capacity. With the exception of Dos Palos, the least professional cities are among the bottom 15 cities when it comes to population. These small cities tend to have very limited governments. For example, Bradbury, California, describes itself on its government website as "a small residential/equestrian-oriented community of approximately 1,000...It has a small full-time staff and contracts for many of the services provided to its residents" (*City of Bradbury, CA* 2025).

Moving to the most professional cities, we also see the exact cities we would expect to see. All five cities are among the ten most populous cities in California, with four of them in the top five. Interestingly, even among the top five most professional cities, only four are above 0.5 on the scale, meaning that even cities like Oakland have significantly less capacity than the US Congress. The one exception is Los Angeles, which appears to have a legislature more professional than Congress. While this may seem an unlikely result, it largely matches the facts on the ground in Los Angeles. The high salaries of Los Angeles city officials have long been a point of contention. Councilmembers in Los Angeles earn a salary of about $207,000 a year, a wage that outstrips the earnings of all members of the US Congress save the Speaker of the House (Andrzejewski,). Additionally, while New York City and Chicago, the first and third biggest cities in the country, have 50 and 51 councilmembers on their respective councils, Los Angeles only has 15. This means that the staff per councilmember, one of the three dimensions of professional-

ism, is very high. Los Angeles councilmembers are incredibly well paid, control a large staff, and have enormous influence over a city that, on its own, would have the 20th largest economy in the world. Los Angeles's status as the most professional sub-national legislature in the country is well earned.

Table 1: Municipal Professionalism: Highest- vs. Lowest-Scoring California Cities

City	Population	Prof. Score
Most Professional		
Los Angeles city	3,853,323	1.532
San Diego city	1,371,832	0.685
San Jose city	991,144	0.684
San Francisco city	849,475	0.588
Oakland city	430,100	0.489
Least Professional		
Loyalton city	737	0.027
Ferndale city	1,376	0.027
Dos Palos city	5,835	0.026
Tehama city	427	0.025
Bradbury city	914	0.019

Notes: Shows legislative professionalism scores and population for the 5 cities with the highest and lowest professionalism scores.

Another way to assess the face validity of the score is to examine the distribution of the cities. Interestingly, because of our use of the Squire index methodology, we can also directly compare the professionalism of every city in California to the professionalism of every state in the United States [10]. There are several important takeaways from Figure 1. First, the vast majority of California cities are not particularly professionalized. This is expected, as only 20 of the 480 or so cities boast populations greater than 200,000 people. Despite this, there are numerous cities with more professional city councils than state legislatures. The least professional state legislature, Wyoming, is broadly comparable to San Luis Obispo, a city with a population of about

[10] 2021 professionalism scores are used to compare professionalism across states and California cities. This is the most recent professionalism measure at the state level.

47,000. While the city is small, it is a notable tourist destination and was the first city in the world to ban smoking in all public buildings. This perhaps indicates that its council is more professionalized than one might otherwise think.

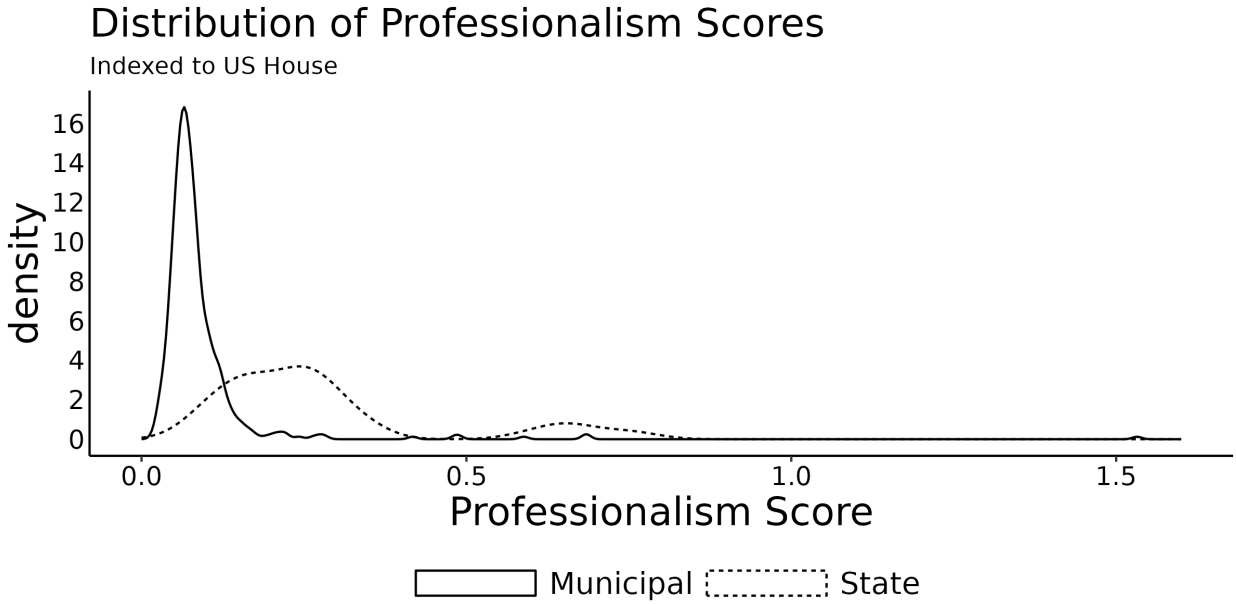


Figure 1: Shows the distribution of city and state professionalism scores, indexed to the US House.

We can also assess the construct validity of the index by examining how well the three components of the measure represent a single underlying concept. As a basic and conservative estimate of internal consistency among the three components, we can look at the Cronbach's alpha. This statistic assesses whether the three values are consistent across cities, with scores approaching one indicating high consistency and scores approaching zero indicating low consistency. Alpha scores above 0.7 are often considered to indicate a reliable level of consistency. In the case of the three professionalism components, the raw alpha score is 0.72.

Another test that helps identify whether the three components are measuring a single latent dimension is a principal component analysis. While used to reduce the dimensionality of a dataset, it also demonstrates when multiple variables can be reduced to a single dimension. In Figure 2, we can see the factor loadings of the three components of the final professionalism

score. These factor loadings link the components of the index to the single dimension identified in the principal component analysis. In the figure we see that the three components all have similar magnitudes and are all positively and strongly connected to the first dimension of the analysis. Interestingly, there appears to be some difference between the session length measure and the salary or staff measure. While all load positively and highly on the first dimension, if there were a second dimension it would perhaps point to time-based versus monetary resources that cities can provide to their council.

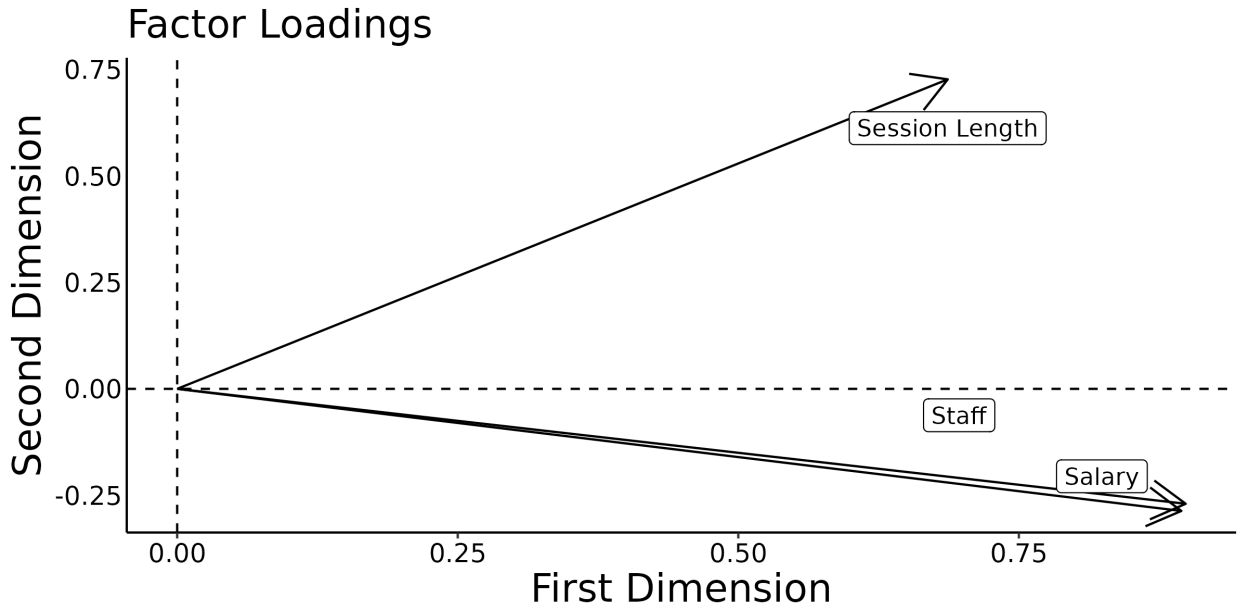


Figure 2: Shows the factor loadings of a principal component analysis on the three components of the municipal Squire index.

Both the Cronbach's alpha and the principal component analysis indicate that the three components of the Squire index can reliably measure a single latent dimension at the municipal level.

Another way to assess the validity of these professionalism scores is to compare them to an alternative measure. While the Cooper and Rimes professionalism scores are for cities across the United States, there are 126 cities from California included in their dataset. Coding the four categories of professionalism they use as a numerical scale from one to four, their score cor-

relates with our own at 0.45, a clear positive correlation. As a more detailed comparison, we examine the distribution of our professionalism scores within each of their four categories. Using box-and-whisker plots, we can see that the average score for the cities in each category does increase, and that the largest increase is between the Hybrid Professional and Professional categories. Figure 3 also highlights the added value of the continuous measure. As we can see in the figure, there is significant overlap between the cities in each of the four categories. For example, around 75% of cities in the "citizen" category are more professional than the least professional city in the "professional" category. A continuous measure allows for more fine-grained comparisons of cities and for more nuanced understandings of what makes a legislature professional.

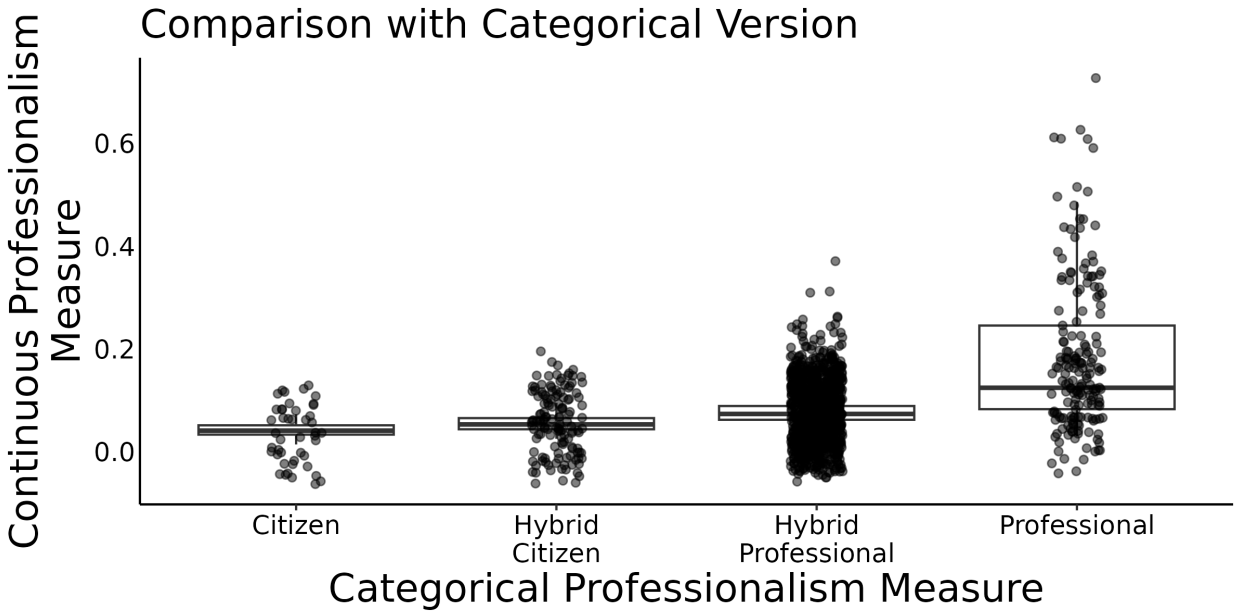


Figure 3: Shows the distribution of city professionalism scores for those cities included in the Cooper and Rimes article on professionalism.

Examining changes in professionalism over time demonstrates that there is no clear trend, with little variation across time and no consistent increase in professionalism. An average standard deviation of 0.01 indicates that professionalism has remained remarkably stable over time [11].

[11] These results and further discussion can be found in Appendix B (pages 3-4).

8 Predicting professionalism

Following previous attempts to measure professionalism, we examine some of the characteristics of cities and city councils that predict more professionalized councils. Prior work has identified two main expected predictors of professionalism: additional resources and increased diversity (Cooper and Rimes 2023; Grissom and Harrington 2013). Because professionalism requires more funds (higher salaries and more paid staff require more spending), cities with more resources should have more professionalized legislatures (Mooney 1995). This theorized connection between professionalism and resources has been confirmed in the prior work on sub-state professionalism. Second, past work has argued that increased racial diversity means a wider range of public problems, stating "Differences in tastes, values, and problem-solving styles may cause more intractable and frequent public problems in heterogeneous populations, thereby increasing the value of a professional, efficient, and authoritative public decision-making body" (Mooney 1995). Neither of the previous studies of local professionalism, despite singling out this specific predictor of increased professionalism, found strong evidence that it exists below the state level.

To carry out a similar analysis, we use a simple linear regression with year fixed effects and errors clustered by city to examine the connection between a city's resources, racial diversity, legislative institutions and a city's legislative professionalism. We use a logged measure of population, median income, and median home value from the five year ACS, beginning in 2009, to measure population, medan income, and median home value. To measure diversity, we use Blau's diversity index, a statistic that quantifies categorical diversity (Blau 1977). Finally, we control for whether a city has district, mixed, or at-large elections as well as whether the city has implemented some form of term limits for city government. To identify a city's institutional features, we visit each city's website and municipal code to identify council election type and whether the city uses term limits. District elections may encourage more constituency service,

which could drive a demand for more staff (Welch and Bledsoe 1988). Conversely, term limits are often linked with professionalism at the state level, and may be linked with lower pay for councilmembers (Kousser 2005). These controls are kept throughout the below analyses[12].

Though purely a descriptive model, we find similar results to those identified at the state level. The two most commonly identified predictors of professionalism, population and increased diversity, both are positively connected to increased professionalism. Interestingly, when examining both median income and median home value, we see opposite effects. Holding home value constant, as income increases we see less professional legislatures. This provides some evidence confirming past work on managerial democracies, where high levels of affluence and low levels of bias lead to less need for a high-capacity council (Oliver 2012). Cities fitting this description are typically wealthy, suburban cities that prefer to keep their governments small. For example, Saratoga, California was recently named the richest retirement town in the United States, with a median income of $241,348. Despite this wealth, councilmembers were paid about $3,000 for their role on the city council. However, in places with high home values relative to income, we see more professionalism. This likely indicates that as housing becomes more expensive relative to income, local government has both more resources and more high-stakes contestation over land-use decisions. This could lead to a more professionalized council. Finally, while previous work at the local level has found that racial heterogeneity may not be linked to legislative professionalism, here we do find a positive and weakly significant relationship. In Appendix C (pages 4-6), we test whether these results are dependent on the largest cities in the sample, finding that the results hold when the four biggest cities are removed from the model.

[12]The unit of analysis is the city-year. When city-years are missing for either one of the controls, main variables of interest, or for a component of the professionalism index, that city-year is dropped from the analysis. For analyses that include election-based variables, the number of units drops due to non-election years having no value on the election-based variables. This affects all four models in table 3.

	Professionalism
Log of Population	0.020***
	(0.005)
Log of Median Income	-0.050**
	(0.015)
Diversity Index	0.014+
	(0.008)
District Elections	0.034**
	(0.011)
Mixed Elections	0.002
	(0.009)
Has Term Limits	0.003
	(0.004)
Log of Median Home Value	0.033**
	(0.010)
Num.Obs.	4491
R2	0.342
FE: Year	X

+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table 2: Shows the model results of a linear regression predicting professionalism.

9 The Importance of Professionalism at the Local Level

In the sections above we provide a theoretical justification for the use of the Squire index at the municipal level and apply it at scale across nearly all California cities. We then examine the validity of the measure, testing its face validity, whether it represents a single latent dimension, and whether it can be predicted using the same variables that are connected at the state level. Across each test, we find strong evidence that our measure is valid, measures what we expect it to measure, and works in similar ways to state level measures. As a final test, we examine whether municipal legislative professionalism is related to both political and policy outcomes that have been identified at the state level as closely connected to professionalism. While not a causal story, finding that legislative professionalism is connected to political and

policy outcomes in similar ways at the state and municipal level would be strong evidence the two measures are comparable.

Four hypotheses from the theory section above focus on the outcomes we expect are associated with municipal legislative professionalism. Focusing on the two political outcomes, we expect to see more candidates running for office when professionalism increases and to see lower levels of incumbent turnover. These findings would indicate that more professional councils are more desirable to potential candidates, but that incumbents have both more incentive and more resources to ensure they can remain in office.

Using the California Elections Data Archive, we count the average number of candidates competing for city council seats in each election year from 2009 to 2022. This is measured as the number of candidates per seat, summed across the city for an election year. Fixed effects for year are employed to ensure that the differences in on- and off-cycle elections do not bias the results. To measure turnover, we count the number of incumbents who run for office but do not win office each year, divided by the number of seats being contested. Finally, we control for the number of incumbents total (measured as the number of incumbents running across all council races in a city-year) alongside the controls described above. As we can see in Table 3, professionalism is positively related to office competitiveness and negatively related to turnover. As we would expect, more incumbents suppress the number of challengers. At-large elections lead to more candidates running for office once population is taken into account, indicating that these seats may be more desirable.

Hypotheses four and five focus on the policy effects of more legislative professionalism, claiming that more professional councils should have higher spending per capita and be more productive (i.e. have more legislative output). We again control for the same set of variables and include fixed effects for year. To measure spending per capita, we use the California State Controllers Office data on city expenditures per capita, then take the log value. While for the first policy effects model we use the full dataset of California cities, the measure of legislative

	Political Effects		Policy Effects	
	# of Candidates	Incumbent Turnover	Spending Per Capita	Legislative Output
Professionalism	1.596**	-0.212**	3.571***	3168.330*
	(0.512)	(0.073)	(1.047)	(1425.131)
# of Incumbents	-0.161***	0.070***	0.003	-27.720+
	(0.023)	(0.005)	(0.014)	(15.777)
Diversity Index	-0.107	-0.072*	0.337*	263.571
	(0.144)	(0.030)	(0.170)	(282.794)
Population (Logged)	0.328***	-0.002	-0.252***	126.016*
	(0.029)	(0.006)	(0.064)	(60.921)
Median Income	-0.174	-0.075*	-0.668***	-584.753+
	(0.113)	(0.029)	(0.144)	(319.349)
District Elections	-0.168*	-0.008	0.152+	218.333*
	(0.076)	(0.016)	(0.081)	(92.545)
Mixed Elections	-0.043	-0.008	0.084	-98.932
	(0.091)	(0.019)	(0.058)	(95.995)
Has Term Limits	0.162*	0.012	0.110	7.800
	(0.064)	(0.012)	(0.084)	(109.256)
Log of Median Home Value	-0.048	0.000	0.620***	431.639*
	(0.078)	(0.019)	(0.090)	(185.108)
Num.Obs.	2002	2002	2002	199
R2	0.291	0.142	0.272	0.605
FE: Year	X	X	X	X

+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table 3: Shows the results of four linear regression models examining professionalism's effect, in order, on office competitiveness, turnover, spending, and productivity.

output uses the data collected from Legistar cities to count the number of agenda items tackled per year. With only a small subset of cities using Legistar and often only using Legistar for a short period of time, there are fewer observations in the model. Even still, we find strong positive relationships for both of our policy effects models. Both spending per capita and legislative output increase as a city becomes more professional, even when holding other important pre-

dictors constant. Interestingly, the number of incumbents is negatively connected to legislative output, a finding that deserves further investigation in a separate research study. Again, we test in Appendix C (pages 4-6) whether these results rely on the largest cities in the dataset, and again find that the results remain mostly the same.

10 Discussion and Conclusion

Professionalism has become an important theoretical concept in the state politics literature, helping researchers to explain variation in a wide variety of institutional, political, and economic areas. As discussed above, professionalism has been linked with electoral competitiveness, turnover, spending, and productivity. Beyond what we were capable of testing here, professionalism has an even wider sphere of influence. Research has connected professionalism to increased campaign spending, policy innovation, interest group influence, particularism, descriptive representation, strong party leadership, substantive representation, and incivility (Rocca, Krebs, and McArthur 2023). Given this widespread usefulness, it is critical to understand whether professionalism translates to the sub-state level. While there are reasons to think it would not, including the importance of city managers, the low information political environment, and the oftentimes administrative focus of local government, there is also reason to believe it would. Mayors are frequently members of the city council and city managers are hired and fired by the council, making it the only truly independent policy-making body at the municipal level. City councils tackle important political questions and are increasingly dealing with thorny issues that have gone unaddressed at higher levels of government.

This paper represents an important step towards understanding professionalism's role at the municipal level. Serving as the first attempt to replicate the Squire index at the local level, we demonstrate both that the three components of the Squire index credibly measure a latent dimension within local government and that the index is connected to the expected predictors

of professionalism. This confirms previous work that was limited to the school board level, as well as work using a more limited, categorical measure of professionalism. We then go a step further and begin testing professionalism's connection to various political outcomes of interest that other work has identified as related to professionalism.

This paper offers several advancements in the study of municipal professionalism. First, no existing study of municipal professionalism has tested the consequences of professionalism on either political or policy dimensions. While previous work (Cooper and Rimes 2023; Grissom and Harrington 2013) has identified some predictors of professionalism, this is the first to connect professionalism to outcomes of interest to political scientists. Second, we both confirm some prior findings regarding the predictors of professionalism and push back on others. While we find city resources and city size are positively associated with professionalism, we also find that increased diversity is positively associated, though weakly, with professionalism. This conflicts with other research finding that diveristy had null or negative effects on local professionalism (Grissom and Harrington 2013; Cooper and Rimes 2023). This brings municipal professionalism research more in line with findings at the state level. Third, this project is the first to comprehensively measure municipal professionalism with observed rather than reported behavior. Previous work by Cooper and Rimes relies on self-reporting in ICMA surveys, which may introduce inaccuracies. Indeed, previous work on a similar but separate survey published by ICMA has identified significant concerns with using it for descriptive work (Lamothe, Lamothe, and Bell 2018; Lamothe 2025). Furthermore, while previous work using the ICMA survey has a higher total number of cities, its sample is biased towards larger and more professionalized cities that have the capacity to respond (Cooper and Rimes 2023). The dataset collected here covers the full range of cities, and is only bounded by geography. Fourth, by replicating the measure of professionalism used at the state legislative level and putting municipal professionalism on a common scale with state measures, we can directly compare results and findings to the state professionalism literature. This allows us to directly test findings from

the state level and the municipal level. Finally, our creation of a continuous measure allows for a more nuanced analysis of the variation between cities. Previous work using categorical levels of professionalism removes the vast majority of variation between cities, making it harder to determine the true effects of changes in professionalism.

Across a variety of factors, we find that professionalism at the municipal level looks remarkably similar to professionalism at the state level. We start by creating the theoretical underpinning for why municipalities may want to build professional capacity. We then demonstrate how to measure legislative professionalism at the municipal level by measuring it for nearly every city in California. Then, we examine how well the measure works from both a practical and statistical perspective. We test whether key predictors of professionalism at the state level work similarly at the municipal level, and we test whether professionalism is itself a key predictor of both political and policy outcomes. Across each step, we provide strong evidence that professionalism can be measured using the same approach as at the state level, can be used in similar types of analyses, and can be expected to work in similar ways.

While this project takes an important step towards better understanding professionalism at the municipal level, it has several limitations. First, we only focus on cities in California. While California is one of the largest states in the country and has wide variation in city demographics, future work should apply this measure to cities in other states. The data used to measure professionalism should be equally well suited to measuring professionalism in other states, though finding centralized sources of the data may be more difficult. California's state government is one of the most proactive in collecting sub-state government data and making it publicly available. In other states, tracking down councilmember salaries and staff positions may prove more difficult. Current work in progress by several scholars points to AI innovations in Large Language Models and automated web scrapers as a potential solution. Work collecting city council meeting records at a larger scale is ongoing, and will open the door to expanding the work done here. Similarly, identifying councilmember salary may be a task well suited to au-

tomated data collection approaches, as this information can often be found on standardized, online, publicly available municipal codes. Council staff may prove the hardest piece of the puzzle, as identifying every member of a city's staff, their placement in the organization, and how they interact with the city council requires a nuanced understanding of each city. Future researchers may need to rely on sources such as the ICMA survey alongside newer datasets to recreate the measure discussed here at scale.

Finally, this project only takes a cursory glance at a variety of important political and policy topics related to professionalism. Future work should more carefully dig into the relationships between professionalism and the various political outcomes examined here. Does professionalism affect the campaign environment beyond competitiveness and turnover? Do more professional cities tackle different types of policy issues or tackle them in different ways? While these various topics are touched on above, they each deserve more detailed work.

As cities tackle complex policy issues, understanding which cities have the capacity to address those issues is critical. Furthermore, as cities professionalize themselves in response to difficult problems, we must better understand the consequences and impacts of that professionalism. Here, we measure professionalism at the municipal level and show that the measure is both valid and can explain expected relationships between electoral and governing outcomes.

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