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Government Structure in Minneapolis and its Impact on the Municipal Response to the George Floyd Uprisings

May 25, 2020, along with the days and weeks that followed, mark a period of American history that will never be forgotten. On that day, at the intersection of East 38th Street and Chicago Avenue in Minneapolis, George Floyd, an unarmed black man, was killed at the hands of the police.¹ This fatal arrest, which was captured on video, sparked countless uprisings in the city of Minneapolis and across the nation. In the days that followed, Minneapolis city officials were faced with some of the toughest decisions of their political careers, and in the eyes of many citizens, they did not rise to meet the challenges they faced. Though there is “no playbook” for such a crisis, as Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey said in his own defense, the functioning of the municipal government, both from within and in cooperation with state governments could have been improved to address issues in a more productive manner.² Not only could the situation have been handled better during the time of the uprisings, but long-term response efforts, especially as they relate to police brutality, could have been a lot clearer and more consistent with the promises made. What follows is a review of the uprisings and their aftermath, a description of the municipal government structure in Minneapolis, and finally an analysis of the ways in which this structure may have impacted the response to the now infamous George Floyd uprisings.

¹ “George Floyd: What Happened in the Final Moments of His Life.” *BBC News*, BBC, 16 July 2020, www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52861726.

² Stockman, Farah. “‘They Have Lost Control’: Why Minneapolis Burned.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 3 July 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/07/03/us/minneapolis-government-george-floyd.html.

Two days after the killing of George Floyd, the uprising began to gain momentum in Minneapolis. That night, the night of the 27th, dozens of buildings were burned to the ground, including a new apartment building, a high-tech factory, and even locally-owned small businesses; all of this without any noticeable effort by the fire department to subdue the flames. Due to an overwhelmed 911 dispatcher line and unmet requests from the fire department to get protection while fighting the fires, very little was done to combat the destruction, especially on that first night of mayhem.³ During the three days that followed, a five-mile stretch of Lake Street in Minneapolis crumbled in the wake of fires and looting, destruction seen by many as a reasonable reaction to the years of vicious police brutality and lack of reform.⁴

Though the National Guard was requested by Mayor Jacob Frey on the first full night of destruction, miscommunications and misunderstandings led to a disorganized and inefficient response effort. Governor Walz, who took some time to consider the request from Mayor Frey, said that he was surprised by the lack of a plan for the National Guard on the part of the city. When the soldiers arrived three days after George Floyd's death, they were instructed to protect the downtown Nicollet Mall as well as the Federal Reserve, leaving the previously threatened police precinct house vulnerable. Later that night, after an order by the Mayor to evacuate the precinct house, the building was set on fire and burned to the ground, the National Guard nowhere to be found until hours after the first flame. As all of this chaos ensued, Patricia Torres Ray, the state senator that represents the targeted district, expressed her frustration with the city government and pleaded to Governor Walz for help. "I need help. My district is burning," she said. Later, she continued: "I don't know what the plan is and absolutely I'm not going to wait for the city to tell me [...] I thought, 'They have lost control.'"⁵ Recognizing a need for further

³ Stockman, Farah. "They Have Lost Control": Why Minneapolis Burned."

⁴ Penrod, Josh, et al. "A Deeper Look at Areas Most Damaged by Rioting, Looting in Minneapolis, St. Paul." *Star Tribune*, Star Tribune, 13 July 2020, www.startribune.com/minneapolis-st-paul-buildings-are-damaged-looted-after-george-floyd-protests-riots/569930671/?refresh=true.

⁵ Stockman, Farah. "They Have Lost Control": Why Minneapolis Burned."

support, Governor Walz finally stepped in, taking full authority of the situation and pushing Mayor Frey, as well as other municipal leadership to the side.

Despite the legitimate reasoning expressed by many justifying this long-awaited outburst of civil unrest, the city of Minneapolis and the close-knit communities within it were left undeniably ravaged by these uprisings, in a time already stricken with sickness and pain. Minneapolis city officials too have been left worse for wear after this tough stretch for the city. Despite their positive outlook to build back better, they have been criticized by business owners, police and activists alike, for failing to protect property, abandoning the precinct house and refusing to act on “defund the police” initiatives, respectively.⁶ Of these critiques, the claim that has taken the spotlight since the uprisings is the failure to carry out the policing system transformation that was promised by the Minneapolis City Council soon after the bulk of the protests in June. This transformation described by the City Council involved “ending policing as we know it.”⁷ To this day, despite incremental steps towards police reform, little has been done in the way of achieving a complete restructuring of the system as promised, much to the dismay of civil rights activists.⁸ Though a great deal of the blame put on city officials is warranted, the complexity of the situation is undeniable and may point to the idea that structural characteristics of Minneapolis municipal government played a big role in the poor management of this situation.

In order to understand the impact that government structure had on the response to the civil unrest in the summer of 2020, we must first understand the government structure under which the city of Minneapolis functions. Unlike many other comparably-sized cities, Minneapolis utilizes a weak mayor-council government structure. This means that the City Council acts as

⁶ Stockman, Farah. “‘They Have Lost Control’: Why Minneapolis Burned.”

⁷ Herndon, Astead W. “How a Pledge to Dismantle the Minneapolis Police Collapsed.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 26 Sept. 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/09/26/us/politics/minneapolis-defund-police.html.

⁸ Ferkenhoff, Eric. “Minneapolis Leaders Promised Big Changes in Policing after George Floyd's Death. Keeping Them Is Taking Longer than Some Hoped.” *USA Today*, Gannett Satellite Information Network, 20 Mar. 2021, www.usatoday.com/story/news/2021/03/18/defund-police-minneapolis-struggles-reforms-after-george-floyd/4591158001/.

the city's primary legislative body, and is responsible for "adopting the city budget, approving mayoral appointees, levying taxes, and making or amending city laws, policies and ordinances."⁹ The mayor, on the other hand, who acts as the city's chief executive, holds limited veto power¹⁰ and is responsible for "proposing a budget, signing legislation into law, appointing departmental directors [including the chief of police], and overseeing the city's day-to-day operations. The mayor also represents the city on a state, national and international level."¹¹

This structure of government had a notable impact on Minneapolis response efforts both during and after the George Floyd uprisings. The first way in which this structure affected the city's response is based on the most fundamental aspect of this structure: the weak role of the mayor. Because the mayor is responsible for day-to-day operations, as well as both the fire and police departments, the majority of the responsibility immediately fell to Jacob Frey in the case of the summer uprisings. However, because he lacked many of the powers to make serious executive decisions, without approval and support from the City Council, he could not act as quickly in this particular situation that required speed and efficiency. This slow, uncoordinated response could be seen in the responses of both the police and fire departments on the first night of unrest, as well as the call for the National Guard, which was delayed and involved a great deal of miscommunication across government officials. Additionally, Governor Walz's move to assume authority over the situation and Mayor Frey is yet another tell of Frey's inability to act under the weak mayor-council system.

The second and more direct impact of the government structure in Minneapolis on the uprising response largely took place in the wake of the action, during the long process of deliberation over police reform. As mentioned above, the Minneapolis City Council verbally promised to dismantle the police force and ultimately replace it with a public safety system. Unfortunately, due to disagreements between the City Council and Mayor Frey, who is more in

⁹ "Minneapolis, Minnesota." *Ballotpedia*, ballotpedia.org/Minneapolis,_Minnesota#cite_note-2.

¹⁰ "Mayor-Council Government." *Ballotpedia*, ballotpedia.org/Mayor-council_government.

¹¹ "Minneapolis, Minnesota."

favor of incremental reform, as well as some dysfunction within the City Council, the government has been stuck in a stalemate for quite some time. This stalemate was first made possible by retreat and dysfunction within the City Council that led to a loss of the originally-veto-proof majority protecting the reform initiative. Then, by holding up his proposed city budget, or at least threatening to do so, Mayor Frey was able to block the significant cut to the police department funding that came next, which he believed was necessary to combat the higher summer crime rates. This tactic also killed a City Council vote to cut the maximum size of the force by 15% and even led to an increase in the police budget later on to once again combat rising crime.¹² Clearly, the allocation of powers, namely the mayoral veto power, and the mayoral power to block the city budget, have had a serious impact on the response to the George Floyd uprisings. Even though the mayor is said to be weak under this particular structure of government, it is clear that certain political strategies can be used to make up for that limited power and ultimately make a difference in municipal policy.

The George Floyd uprisings will likely go down in American history as one of the most powerful and moving uprisings that our nation has ever seen. It will likely also be known for the destruction that it left in its wake and the people that it affected, in this already challenging time. Finally, I am hopeful that these uprisings will mark the beginning of a new age of police and social justice reform, an age in which our society will not only learn to recognize the social injustices that exist in our communities, but also address these injustices and eliminate them for good. Though these are the most notable impacts that this memorable movement will have on our world, it also showed us a few things about the inner workings and structures of municipal governments. From this event, we can draw that the weak mayor-council system can have both short-term and long-term effects on response efforts to civil unrest. Although there are positive

¹² Ferkenhoff, Eric. "Minneapolis Leaders Promised Big Changes in Policing after George Floyd's Death. Keeping Them Is Taking Longer than Some Hoped." *USA Today*, Gannett Satellite Information Network, 20 Mar. 2021, www.usatoday.com/story/news/2021/03/18/defund-police-minneapolis-struggles-reforms-after-george-floyd/4591158001/.

and negative effects to every governing system, and these particular system effects will not always be negative, the ties drawn between poor responses by city officials and government structure in this Minneapolis case are well worth noting.

Going forward, Minneapolis could consider responding to its government's recent pitfalls by shifting power in one of two directions. One concept, that may even be brought up in a ballot measure (as planned by the Minneapolis Charter Commission), is to shift executive power from the City Council to the mayor. Such a move could help the mayor to address emergency situations with more pace and efficiency. Alternatively, shifting powers in the other direction, towards the council, could make for a smoother and more productive legislative process. Though making such changes without disrupting government checks and balances is difficult, it could mean all the difference between a safe, represented community and the devastation we witnessed just a year ago. Though my personal political beliefs align more with that of the current City Council, I believe that a move towards a strong mayor system would benefit the city of Minneapolis in the long run, as it would allow for more efficient governing. Even if this current mayor may not support initiatives such as "Defund the Police," more power given to the mayoral role could allow for at least some incremental change now and hopefully more systemic change down the road. No matter what the changes that would come of such a structural shift, it is bound to be an improvement from the unproductive stalemate that we have witnessed for this past year.

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