

ACTION INSIGHTS | RESEARCH FINDINGS FOR CITY LEADERS

The First 100 Days

How Time Management Shapes Mayoral Transitions


Summarizing peer-reviewed original research published in the academic journal

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION REVIEW

RESEARCHERS

Matthew Lee, Quinton Mayne, Jorrit de Jong

October 16, 2025



What does it really take for a new mayor to succeed in their first 100 days? Many imagine they will focus on strategic work and community presence, only to find themselves pulled into the urgent, day-to-day demands of governing. A study published in the journal ***Public Administration Review*** examines how newly elected U.S. mayors forecast their time use during transition and how they actually spent it. Understanding this gap can help leaders turn their early months from a scramble into a foundation for success.¹

New mayors often enter office with ambitious plans to transform their cities. But within days, many discover their time is quickly consumed by the immediate demands of governing. As one mayor recalled, “Once you get elected, there’s about 10 other jobs that nobody ever told you that you were going to be doing.”² Another described the challenge of saying no to a flood of invitations, noting that “my chief of staff jokes that I have community FOMO [fear of missing out].” Others were surprised by their sense of confinement from spending so much time in city hall, remarking that “I feel like I’m locked in my office.”

“Once you get elected, there’s about 10 other jobs that nobody ever told you that you were going to be doing.”

Entering the First 100 Days

Research published in *Public Administration Review* follows fifteen newly elected mayors of U.S. cities, revealing a striking pattern: the way mayors expect to spend their time during transition rarely matches the reality of the job. The first months in office bring a flood of unexpected demands, and how leaders manage their time during this window can shape their effectiveness for years to come. This exploratory, mixed-method study is the first of its kind to shed light on what happens when mayoral expectations collide with reality, and what leaders can do to build the foundations of effective governance.

During the transition period, mayors face competing expectations from the public, staff, and external stakeholders. Yet few leaders enter office with direct experience managing the full scope of mayoral responsibilities. For example, as one mayor explained, “Being a better communicator to the public and with the media are things that I definitely have had to learn on the fly.”

To understand how mayors navigate this period, we surveyed fifteen newly elected mayors twice—once before they entered office, to capture how they anticipated spending their time, and again shortly after the first 100 days, to record how they had actually spent it. The results revealed consistent discrepancies: mayors underestimated the time required for short-term policy work and being physically present in city hall while overestimating the hours they would devote to long-term strategy and community presence. “I think I envisioned more space in my calendar for much larger thinking,” one mayor recalled, reflecting the persistent feeling of misalignment between intention and reality.

¹ The authors used ChatGPT in the early stages of developing this Action Insight.

² This quote and all subsequent quotes are from “An Exploratory Study of Mayoral Transition Work” by Matthew Lee, Quinton Mayne, and Jorrit de Jong, published in *Public Administration Review* on August 6, 2025, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/puar.70016>

* Minor inaccuracies in a previous version of this summary have been corrected in this edition.

Two rounds of follow-up interviews, first immediately after 100 days and again one year later, provided deeper insights into these discrepancies. Together, the surveys and interviews show that mayoral transitions are best understood not as a matter of routine scheduling but as an early investment in the capacities that sustain leadership throughout their term.

Mayoral transitions are best understood not as a matter of routine scheduling but as an early investment in the capacities that sustain leadership.

Why Early Choices Matter

Mayoral transitions are critical windows of opportunity. During this period expectations run high and legitimacy peaks even as leaders are still learning the job. The first 100 days are often described as a sprint, but they can also be used to set long-term patterns, build trust, and strengthen core capacities.

These capacities include **personal capacity** (managing one's own time and energy), **relational capacity** (developing trust with staff and stakeholders), and **organizational capacity** (aligning people, processes, and priorities in city hall).

- **Personal capacity** refers to the knowledge, skills, and mental readiness that reside within the mayor. These internal resources shape how effectively mayors manage time, energy, and decision-making under pressure.
- **Relational capacity** consists of the networks and trust-based relationships between the mayor and key stakeholders inside and outside government. These connections enable influence, collaboration, and legitimacy.
- **Organizational capacity** includes the administrative, operational, and strategic capabilities within city government. It encompasses the systems that help mayors align priorities, delegate responsibilities, and carry out their agendas.

These dimensions reinforce one another. By treating time not as a constraint but as a strategic resource, city leaders can deliberately strengthen their capacity across all three areas and build the foundations for more effective governance.

By treating time as a strategic resource, city leaders can transform early pressure into long-term capacity.

This research shows that time itself is one of the most valuable resources a mayor controls and early inefficiencies can leave leaders struggling to catch up for the remainder of their tenure. Mayoral transitions are not simply about getting through immediate tasks but are also a period for strategic investment in core capacities that last well beyond the first few months.

Implications for City Leaders

Recognizing these dynamics, what can new mayors and city leaders do to manage their early months with greater intention? Our study highlights a challenge every new mayor faces: balancing urgent demands with long-term vision. Yet the daily pull of policy crises, media inquiries, and administrative responsibilities can easily preoccupy leaders. As one mayor explained, it was “difficult to structure my own time, because, fortunately or unfortunately, outside pressures kind of demand their own gravity.”

By showing the gap between expectation and reality, this research encourages leaders to acknowledge that tension and manage it deliberately rather than reactively. Understanding these patterns helps mayors and their teams make early decisions about time management that can strengthen the administration’s capacity. How a mayor spends their first weeks can either deplete their energy or generate the foundations of resilience.

Takeaways

Four lessons stand out from how mayors spend their first 100 days. These are not just time-management tips but strategic choices that help mayors build the personal, relational, and organizational capacities needed for successful leadership.

The first 100 days are not just a sprint to survive, but a window to set the tone for how you will lead.

Protect time for strategy (personal capacity).

Carving out time to focus on the long-term vision ensures that urgent demands don’t consume the entire transition. A few hours each week devoted to reflection and planning can mean the difference between reactive leadership and the ability to set a clear direction for the administration.

Invest in relationships and teams (relational capacity).

Building trust with staff and partners early creates the foundation for everything else a mayor hopes to accomplish. Strong relationships multiply a mayor’s reach and ensure that critical work continues even when their attention is pulled elsewhere.

Map and compare resources (organizational capacity).

Assessing city hall’s strengths and misalignments helps new mayors identify where support is needed most. This early diagnostic helps identify gaps, align priorities, and ensure that transition goals reflect the true demands of leadership.

Review and recalibrate (all three capacities).

Regular conversations with staff or trusted advisors create a feedback loop that strengthens personal discipline, deepens relationships, and improves organizational effectiveness. “Getting to know staff has been really key,” one mayor confirmed, “and I get to know them in a way that I didn’t as a council member.”

Conclusion

One mayor emphasized the importance of building core capacities early on: “The first 100 days is building a foundation...if you’re going to implement something, and you haven’t established the conversation and collaboration with those on the council or the public...you may get to where you want, but you may have less support along the way.” Future research can build on these findings by exploring how differences in city size, governance structure, or prior experience shape the ways mayors-elect allocate their time.

Further Reading

[“An Exploratory Study of Mayoral Transition Work”](#)

Public Administration Review

[“All Minds on Deck!: Engaging Employees in Strategic Work”](#)

Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative

[“Mayoral Transitions: How Three Mayors Stepped into the Role, in Their Own Words”](#)

Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative

Action Insights summarize findings from academic research. They offer management and leadership guidance you can put to use in your work, and they link to the underlying studies.

The Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative, located at the Bloomberg Center for Cities at Harvard University, is a collaboration between Harvard Kennedy School, Harvard Business School, and Bloomberg Philanthropies to equip mayors and senior city officials to tackle complex challenges in their cities and improve the quality of life of their residents.

The Initiative advances research and develops new curriculum and teaching tools to help city leaders solve real-world problems. By engaging Harvard graduate students in research and field work, the Initiative supports current city leaders while investing in future generations. The Initiative also advances the field of city leadership through teaching, research, and new curricular materials that help city leaders drive government performance and address pressing social problems.

This Action Insights summary was authored by Matthew Lee, Quinton Mayne, Jorrit de Jong, Jenny Folsom.



Scan to read this
document online.



**BLOOMBERG
CENTER FOR CITIES
HARVARD UNIVERSITY**

**BLOOMBERG
HARVARD** | City
Leadership
Initiative

A publication of the
Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative
79 JFK Street, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 02138 USA

cityleadership.harvard.edu
cityleadership_research@harvard.edu