



## **Philadelphia Resolution 1**

### **A Proposal to Strengthen Philadelphia's Local Democracy**

The way Philadelphia does politics—how we choose our elected officials, and the powers we grant them to make important decisions—has a big impact on the city's future. Our political culture influences the rights and responsibilities of local citizenship. It also determines whose voices matter in our local democracy, and whose are ignored. And, because the way our local politics works too often discourages new ideas and concentrates power in the hands of a select few, it has a major effect on our ability to create jobs and generate wealth for all of our residents, in every neighborhood across the city.

For generations, the political industry in Philadelphia has been a closed shop. Decisions and deals are made in a back room. Voters lack real choices on Election Day. And citizen participation lags far behind where it should be for a city with our history and heritage. It's not surprising that longtime residents expect so little from our local political process, and that a pervasive cynicism dominates our attitudes about local politics. Some call it the Philly Shrug.

As one plank in a new platform for an inclusive and growing city, Philadelphia's political culture must become much more open, more transparent, and more competitive. Only then will our local democracy enjoy the trust and confidence of its citizens. Only then will Philadelphians know that the playing field is level and that we all have a fair shot at the game. Only an open and accountable local political culture will give small business owners and entrepreneurs the confidence to grow here, and to generate the jobs and tax revenues we need to tackle our most serious problems. Because our problems are entrenched, endemic, and persistent: deep and widespread poverty, underfunded schools, and public health crises like our raging opioid epidemic.

Many Philadelphians have recently expressed outrage at the state of national politics, and marched and petitioned and protested to protect the fundamentals of our representative democracy in Washington. H.R.1, the For the People Act that recently passed the U.S. House, is one expression of that activism. It would expand voting rights, curb gerrymandering, overhaul campaign financing rules, bolster election security, and strengthen ethics laws. H.R.1 passed with the full support of Reps. Dwight Evans, Brendan Boyle, and Mary Gay Scanlon, Philadelphia's congressional delegation. A complementary bill has also been introduced in the U.S. Senate. Similar proposals for reform in Harrisburg are also taking shape, championed by newer, reform-minded members of Philadelphia's legislative delegation including Reps. Jordan Harris, Joanna McClinton, and others.

Any Philadelphian who supports proposals like these in Washington and Harrisburg ought to demand similar reforms back home. It's time for a Philadelphia version of H.R.1--let's call it Philadelphia Resolution 1, or PR1. Here's a start at the issues PR1 should address. We need to:



- 1) Make elections open, fair and competitive:** Local Philadelphia elections are notoriously closed, insular affairs. Voters often have few real choices on Election Day. Too many elections go uncontested. Even in the few that are contested, victory is heavily influenced by the luck of the candidate's position on the ballot and backroom endorsements from a handful of party leaders. The system ignores thousands of elected neighborhood committee people and independent voters---now the second largest bloc of voters in the city. Elections featuring a long slate of candidates, with no runoff provisions, mean that a tiny number of voters end up electing citywide candidates. In 2015, Council at-large candidates were elected in the Democratic primary (and therefore, given the 7-1 registration edge, nearly certain to win the general election) with as few as 49,000 votes--less than 5 percent of all registered voters.

Philadelphia needs elections that encourage a robust competition of candidates and ideas, and that ensure all voters are represented. Other cities have moved far past Philadelphia in this respect. Most cities have nonpartisan local elections that welcome *independent voters*, and progressive cities like San Francisco and St. Paul use *ranked choice voting* (also called instant runoff voting) to make sure that winning candidates earn more than 50 percent of all votes, not just a small plurality. Modern voting systems (including those that Philadelphia will employ starting this fall) allow for *randomizing ballot order* to remove the absurdly large impact of ballot position on a candidate's political fortunes. Finally, cities with healthy local democracies like Portland, Seattle, and Louisville demonstrate the value of *open, transparent, democratic local political organizations*. Voter turnout in those cities in 2015 was more than twice that of Philadelphia.

- 2) Curb councilmanic prerogative:** The ten district City Council members have a critical role to play in representing their constituents on development decisions in their communities. Over time, though, we've seen too many examples of inappropriate, conflicted and secretive arrangements that benefit the elected official and his or her friends and not the people they represent. District council members' power to approve or halt development projects out of the public eye and without explanation opens the door to corruption at worst and public distrust at best. The far greater cost, however, of powerful local prerogative is that it limits the city's ability to manage growth and development according to a strategic plan based on broadly shared values and goals.

The Philadelphia Land Bank, created by Council in 2015, was supposed to fix a lot of these problems by creating a transparent, accessible and deliberate process for moving the city's enormous stockpile of vacant properties back into productive use. Unfortunately, the Land Bank has remained understaffed, under-resourced and, due to the involvement of City Council, without much property either deposited or withdrawn. By one estimate, only about a quarter of the city's 8,000 unused city-owned parcels are



held by the Land Bank. Council took the right step by creating the Land Bank, but now we need it to work.

- 3) **Enable citizens to lead the redistricting process:** Even as thousands of Philadelphia voters have mobilized to push back on partisan gerrymandering in Pennsylvania, few realize that Philadelphia has a gerrymandering problem of its own. In Philadelphia, Council members draw and vote on their own district maps. They have the power to pick their own voters, rather than the other way around. Local political gerrymandering causes the same mischief it does elsewhere. It favors incumbents and allows party leaders to reward friends and punish enemies. Local partisan-drawn political maps can split communities by “packing and cracking” just as much as congressional or state legislative maps. Local political maps should be drawn by independent citizens commissions with clearly established and transparent criteria and 21st-century standards of transparency and public engagement.
- 4) **Enact council term limits:** Serving in an elected public office can be a noble and important calling, but no one ever intended it to be for life. By one count, only eight in 80 District Council races over the past four cycles were competitive, with incumbents averaging nearly 90 percent of the vote. Another tally found only 13 incumbent members with a full term under their belt had lost to a challenger in the past 35 years. Every legislature needs steady turnover to stay representative and responsive, coupling new members’ energy and ideas with the experience of longer-serving lawmakers. Reasonable term limits---three or four terms allowing 12 to 16 years of service---would bring Philadelphia in line with other major cities and ensure a healthy degree of competition for these important seats.
- 5) **Ensure a more transparent and accessible City Council:** City Council has a tremendous impact on Philadelphians’ daily lives. Members consider and approve the City’s \$5-billion annual budget, and have the final say on taxpayer dollars that fund a host of critical City services from social service workers to law enforcement to street maintenance. But as Council members debate the priorities for the City’s budget, their own budget---more than \$17 million---is not aired and debated during budget season. Even the legislative process itself must be made more open, with current versions of bills, proposed amendments and member votes posted online in real time, and in a manner where the interested citizen can access and understand. Most legislatures are the exclusive territory of insiders and lobbyists. Our Councilmembers often take time to hear from their constituents and advocates, but Philadelphia could be in the vanguard of making its lawmaking the most accessible and transparent in the country.

These proposals are not set in stone. In the short term, we hope they spur public discussion and debate widely across the city, among elected officials, candidates, civic groups and voters. If there’s a better way to get where we need to be, let us know. Just send your thoughts or ideas



## Committee of Seventy

Join us in our campaign for better government

to [bettergov@seventy.org](mailto:bettergov@seventy.org). By fall 2019, our intent is to have prepared a package of draft legislation to put in front of the new City Council and the next Mayor. Because Philadelphia deserves better, and we need to expect more.