

Philly Elections: A Contact Sport

A Brief Tour of Philadelphia Politics and Elections

Philadelphia politics is not for the faint of heart. Getting on the ballot as a candidate, being heard as an advocate, or championing an ambitious new bill as a public official can be a fight. And to an extent, this is the way it should be. Politics is, after all, the battleground in which we negotiate conflicts of value and interest, and determine how to use finite resources for the public good. The results of this process impact us every day.

This three-module overview provides a glimpse at how politics and elections work in Philadelphia:

- I. Ward System 101: Ward leaders and committeepeople**
- II. Getting out the vote: Street money and sample ballots**
- III. Game Day: Polling place workers and rules**

Important Disclaimer: A “brief tour” cannot provide an exhaustive panorama of the electoral or political process in Philadelphia. This is an introduction to several fundamental and underlying features of city elections that are influential, yet little known or understood. To learn more, we recommend getting into the game yourself: organize with a campaign, work for a public official or volunteer for an advocacy organization.

Module Components:

- **Key Terms** – Know the basics. Make note of these terms and their definitions.
- **Critical Questions** – Think about these while reviewing the background information. Answers may be useful in tackling the “Challenge” at the end of each module.
- **Background Information** – The selected articles, videos and websites offer a glimpse into world of Philadelphia politics and elections.
- **Challenge** – Responding to the exercise at the end of each module will require you to understand key terms, ponder critical questions and review the background information provided. Thorough responses will draw connections or relationships between people, places or things you’ve learned about, while considering how people behave in the real world.

I. Ward System 101

Mayors might not be chosen in smoke-filled rooms anymore, but party machinery still retains enormous power over races for elective office in the city, and especially lower-level offices (e.g., city judgeships). This is why an understanding of the Philadelphia ward-and-committee system is essential to understanding our politics.

Key Terms

Ward	Division	Ward leader	Committeeperson
Ward Committee*	City Committee	Party Chairman	Political machine

Key Questions

- What is a political machine? Identify at least one cost and one benefit of such machinery.
- Who are committeepeople and ward leaders?
- Who is powerful in the ward system? Who can influence who, and how?

- Do voters have a say in the ward system?
- What type of voter is left out of the ward system?

Background Information

- WEBSITE: phillywardleaders.com, built in March 2015 as a Code for Philly Project
- VIDEO: Dave Davies schools Patsy on 'feudal barons' of Philly politics, WHYY Newsworks, March 10, 2015¹
- ARTICLE: 30th Ward Reformer Fight: Are New Philadelphians Finally Flexing Their Political Muscle?, Philadelphia Magazine, Jon Geeting, May 16, 2014²
- MANUAL: How to Run for Committeeperson, Committee of Seventy, December 2015³

Challenge

Create a diagram that illustrates how the ward system is constructed. Include each of the key terms and how they are related. What are the roles and responsibilities of the various positions and committees? You do not know everything about the system yet so there will be gaps in your model; however, you should be able to create a basic design using the background information listed above. (Hint: Seventy's "How to Run for Committeeperson" manual may be helpful in providing an idea of what this diagram could look like.)

Additional Resources

- ARTICLE: The big-city boss behind Philly's winning bid, Politico, Katie Glueck, February 18, 2015⁴
- ARTICLE: How Bob Brady survives, thrives The life of the party, The Philadelphia Inquirer, Tom Infield, August 25, 2009⁵
- ARTICLE: Philadelphia's Republican civil war is over - why it matters, WHYY Newsworks, May 9, 2013⁶
- ARTICLE: The City's System Of Ward Politics: A World All Its Own, Philadelphia Inquirer, Tom Infield, September 28, 1987⁷
- WEBSITE: Ward Leaders and Committeeperson, Committee of Seventy⁸

II. Getting out the vote in Philadelphia

Street money and so-called "sample ballots" are widely used in Philadelphia elections to get voters out to the polls and inform them about select candidates on the official ballot (the one used on the face of a voting machine). And although there are legitimate uses for both – street money compensates campaign workers and sample ballots help communicate to voters the preferred choices of their party – there is opportunity for misuse. Then add to the mix an assortment of PACs, super PACs and other groups with their own interests in election outcomes. Understanding how influence flows in this political ecosystem is complicated but powerful.

¹ www.newsworks.org/index.php/homepage-feature/item/79369-dave-davies-schools-patsy-on-the-feudal-barons-of-philly-politics

² <http://www.phillymag.com/news/2014/05/16/30th-ward-philadelphia-election-reformer-fight/>

³ <http://www.seventy.org/tools/run-for-elected-office>

⁴ <http://www.politico.com/story/2015/02/the-big-city-boss-behind-phillys-winning-bid-115267>

⁵ http://articles.philly.com/2009-08-25/news/25275104_1_democratic-chairman-democratic-leader-politics

⁶ <http://www.newsworks.org/index.php/local/off-mic/54519-philadelphias-republican-civil-war-ends-at-last>

⁷ http://articles.philly.com/1987-09-28/news/26208125_1_first-ward-ward-leaders-candidates

⁸ <http://www.seventy.org/tools/ward-leaders-committeeperson>

Key Terms

Street money	PAC vs. super PAC	PA Department of State
Sample ballots	Philadelphia Ethics Board	Federal Election Commission

Key Questions

- What are the risks and benefits of street money and sample ballots for the democratic process?
- What's the difference between a PAC and a super PAC?
- What is the role of the Philadelphia Board of Ethics? How is the role similar and different from the PA Department of State and the Federal Election Commission?

Background Information

- ARTICLE: Street money 101: How, in 2014, cash still gets out the vote in Philly, Billy Penn, Mark Dent, Nov. 3, 2014⁹
- ARTICLE: In Philly, a feeding frenzy for candidates' money, Philly.com's The Next mayor, Tom Ferrick, October 27, 2015¹⁰
- ARTICLE: Election Day? A big payday for Philly political bosses, Philly.com's The Next mayor, Tom Ferrick, October 28, 2015¹¹
- VIDEO: Patsy learns how money and ethics influence Philadelphia politics, WHYY Newsworks, March 30, 2015¹²
- WEBSITE: Philly Ballots, May 19, 2015¹³

Challenge

Return to your ward system schematic. It should include each of the key terms from the first section (ward, division, ward leader, committeeperson, ward committee, city committee, party chairman) and how they are related. It should also include some roles or responsibilities of the people involved. Using what you've learned from the resources above, draft a new version of the schematic that incorporates street money and sample ballots distributed through the ward system. Also include in this draft an example of how a candidate could use the system to increase their chances of winning an election.

Additional Resources

- ARTICLE: A citizen's guide to Philly street money, Oct. 1, 2012, WHYY Newsworks, Holly Otterbein¹⁴
- ARTICLE: A run for judge? It'll cost you, Sept. 21, 2015, Philly.com's Next Mayor¹⁵

⁹ billypenn.com/2014/11/03/street-money-101-how-in-2014-cash-still-gets-out-the-vote-in-philly/

¹⁰ www.philly.com/philly/news/politics/mayor/Ferrick_Philly_feeding_frenzy_candidates_money.html#VcEzI2EObQclhqLV.99

¹¹ www.philly.com/philly/news/politics/mayor/Ferrick_Election_Day_A_big_payday_for_Philly_political_bosses.html#zbo1AyeyVjQzoGqy.99

¹² http://www.newsworks.org/index.php/homepage-feature/item/80135-patsy-learns-how-money-and-ethics-influence-philadelphia-politics?linktype=related_articlepage

¹³ <http://phillyballots.tumblr.com>

¹⁴ www.newsworks.org/index.php/local/beyond-the-ballot/44849-a-citizens-guide-to-philly-street-money

¹⁵ www.philly.com/philly/news/politics/mayor/20150921_A_run_for_judge__It_ll_cost_you.html#WE0EHBXILvMB56m6.99

III. Game Day at the Polls

So what actually happens on Election Day? It's a huge operation conducted by thousands of poll workers and with hundreds of rules. Most people are trying to do the right thing, and most of the rules make sense. But that doesn't make executing the big show any easier. Knowing who's who and the critical procedures on Election Day is important.

Key Terms

Judge of Elections	Inspector of Elections	Clerk	Machine Inspector
City Commissioner	District Attorney	Poll Watcher	Election Board

Key Questions

- Who is responsible for administering elections across the City of Philadelphia? Who is responsible for administering elections at the neighborhood level?
- Identify three (3) laws or requirements that are likely important in ensuring clean and fair elections. What might happen if these rules were not in place? How might people behave in spite of the rules?
- How is the construction of Election Boards and observation of poll watchers supposed to help ensure that rules are followed? (Hint: Party affiliation...)

Background Information

- MANUAL: Election Ambassador Handbook, Committee of Seventy, September 2016¹⁶
- ARTICLE: Kensington election craziness raises doubts about Philly's weird poll-watcher rules, Philadelphia City Paper, Ryan Briggs, May 22, 2014¹⁷
- WEBSITE: Philadelphia City Commissioners, www.philadelphiavotes.com
- MANUAL: Philadelphia Election Board Manual, City Commissioners, 2016¹⁸

Challenge

Considering what you know about the system of elections in Philadelphia, what improvements or reforms would you recommend to ensure that: **1)** the voting process is easier and more understandable for voters or **2)** the election process is clean and fair.

Notes for Teachers

We encourage teachers to adapt this material as necessary for their classes. For additional questions or support, contact Patrick Christmas at pchristmas@seventy.org. Seventy also offers Election Ambassador Corps and Election Innovation Challenge programs for Philadelphia-area high school students to gain first-hand experience with voting and elections.

Thoughts and feedback on this document are welcomed. Please contact us at futureofthecity@seventy.org.

¹⁶ Posted on Seventy's website: <https://www.seventy.org/get-involved/election-ambassador-corps>

¹⁷ <http://citypaper.net/News/Kensington-election-craziness-raises-doubts-about-Phillys-weird-poll-watcher-rules>

¹⁸ http://www.philadelphiavotes.com/files/election-workers/Election_Board_Training_Guide.pdf