

Commonwealth Forum: Should Pennsylvania Adopt Direct Democracy?

YES

Direct democracy, such as through the initiative, popular referendum, and recall processes, allows citizens to place statutes and sometimes amendments to the state constitution on the ballot. Usually this requires the gathering of enough citizen signatures to put the proposal up for a popular vote. Similarly, the recall process requires gathering signatures to remove an elected official from office and hold another election according to the popular vote. Through these processes, citizens can overturn a law created by their legislature, put legislation on the ballot, or remove an unpopular politician from office, all while bypassing the usual legislative channels. Pennsylvania is one of just sixteen states, mostly clustered on the eastern seaboard, with no form of direct democracy.

From a purely democratic perspective, direct democracy in Pennsylvania would be the product of work on behalf of people usually shut out of the legislative process. Special interests have far too much influence in the legislature today, with money for campaign donations dictating the policy positions of elected officials. Furthermore, direct democracy creates more-informed citizens on policy issues. To prepare for voting, citizens must learn the ins and outs of various proposals. Additionally, direct democracy ensures that the will of the people is being exercised even if their elected representatives cannot or will not enact legislation to carry it out. For example, while gerrymandering directly affects the legislative process and which party controls the agenda, enacting legislation by popular vote would override the role of partisanship when drawing legislative boundaries.

NO

One of the fundamental tenets of American government is democratic rule by the people. Belief that citizens should consent to the laws that govern them is at the core of this belief. Pennsylvania government, like the national government, was constructed around the principle of representative democracy. Most of us do not have the time, or, frankly, the knowledge, to examine complex issues of public policy. To solve this problem we elect politicians to do our work for us. They examine issues through hearings and research, deliberate on the consequences of policy options, and then make decisions. We then hold them accountable for the full body of their work when they run for reelection.

Adopting direct democracy in Pennsylvania sounds like a great idea because it would give more “power to the people.” However, in practice it would have numerous negative effects on the Commonwealth. Initiatives or referendums are passed when 50.1 percent of the voters approve a measure. What about the opinions of the remaining 49.9 percent? They get nothing. Representative democracy allows for compromise to make sure that multiple points of view are part of the policy-making process. Direct democracy also promotes making decisions on individual issues without thinking about their effect on the whole scope of what government does. Everyone wants lower taxes and more services. However, legislators and the governor are forced to think about the entire package of services provided to Pennsylvania and pass a balanced budget. Direct democracy doesn’t force voters to link all of these issues together. The last, and probably worst, effect of direct democracy is to allow special interests one more vehicle to push their own interests. Well-funded groups, often from out of state, have successfully funded direct democracy campaigns in many states. Do we really want that in Pennsylvania?

For More Information

Initiative and Referendum Institute (<http://www.iandrinstute.org/index.cfm>) is located at the University of Southern California. The institute is a nonpartisan educational organization dedicated to the study of the initiative and referendum.

National Conference of State Legislatures (<http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/initiative-referendum-and-recall-overview.aspx>) provides a useful overview of the process of direct democracy in the United States. NCSL also tracks initiatives and referendums through a database, at <http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/initiative-referendum-database-2014.aspx>.

Democratic Delusions: The Initiative Process in America (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), by Richard Ellis, explores the role of money and outside interests in what he calls the Initiative Industrial Complex.

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