Re-warding Pittsburgh

By Susan Lewis

In May 1987, Pittburghers chose by referendum to return to by-district election of City Council, a method of election eliminated in 1911. With voters going to the polls this spring, newspapers ran headlines like, “Non-traditional candidates try for council seats.” We can justifiably wonder at what is meant by “traditional” or by assertions that “[c]redentials or experience in city government doesn’t mean as much as it used to,” or that a race for Council under the by-district scheme has “turned into a neighborhood popularity contest, more or less.”

Such statements exemplify the rhetoric used throughout the century when discussing election of City Council. People who support at-large elections claim the method avoids parochial politics and more efficiently represents the entire city. Those in the by-district camp argue that neighborhood interests become lost in the at-large political shuffle. Both sides have crusaded under the banner of efficient and responsive government, but this debate tends to obscure a fundamental political consideration at its core, namely the balance of power between Council and the mayor. A brief glance at the history of this debate seems appropriate.

In the nineteenth century, an era of urban growth, municipal governments developed as neighborhoods expanded and cities incorporated adjacent regions. This kind of growth within the context of universal suffrage meant that political power tended to be diffused throughout the city. Corrupt political machines often developed in ward-based systems of government. This, along with concerns over municipal development, led some cities, like Pittsburgh, to move toward a more centralized political structure, including an at-large council; others, like Chicago, developed ways of coping with corruption and growth-associated problems while maintaining a by-district council.

Early twentieth century Pittsburgh was chopped into many very small political units; voters from these wards elected a bicameral city council that numbered in the hundreds. Reformers of the era, mostly businessmen and professionals, focused on widespread corruption in a move to centralize government on their behalf. Historian Samuel Hays’ work shows that the change to at-large council in 1911 represented a class reorientation of city government, away from the working class of the last century in favor of upper class reformers who felt concerned about “the way in which factors throughout the city affected business growth.” He further notes that “they did not oppose corruption per se — although there was plenty of that. They objected to the structure of government which enabled local and particularistic interests to dominate.”

The shift to a nine member council, orchestrated in Harrisburg via changes in state statutes, marked the beginning of a “strong mayor system” in Pittsburgh. “The real power was taken from the City Council and given to the Mayor,” argues James Cunningham, a Professor of Social Work at the University of Pittsburgh and executive director of a commission formed in 1972 to study local government. The at-large system continued through the shift from Republican dominated political affairs to Democratic domination in the 1930s. On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the at-large system, the Pittsburgh Sunday Sun-Telegraph noted the corruption and awkwardness of the earlier structure; another article that year concluded that the duties of council were “for the most part humdrum.” It proclaimed that “with seven staunch Democrats to two Independent Republicans, one

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thing is certain of the 1936 Council: it is more than ever the instrument of the... Democratic Organization.96

The strong mayor arrangement persisted with no public calls for a by-district council for six decades. But in 1972, the state legislature wrote and passed a Home Rule Charter law permitting municipalities to set up study commissions to examine local government and to write new charters. Pittsburgh established a commission of 11 — the one Cunningham headed — which proceeded to investigate a variety of issues, including the electoral basis of council. Holding over 100 meetings and hearings across the city, the commission found support for a change to an 11 member council — nine by-district, two at-large.

Eighty-three witnesses and statement writers, representing various occupations, expressed opinions to the commission. Forty-three favored a change to by-district, 27 opposed, and 13 had a preference with conditions. A majority of neighborhood organizations favored the change while those people in the "political/government" category — elected and appointed political figures and government administrators, overwhelmingly Democrats — tended to oppose by-district representation.97 With these results, the commission drew up a draft discussion that included by-district elections, but in the end the new charter retained the at-large process. Jonathan Robison, an unpaid advisor to the commission who was later active in referendum challenges to the at-large plan, explained in an interview that downtown "power brokers" made it clear that by-district elections would not be acceptable; in order to avoid jeopardizing the entire charter, which included other important reforms, a compromise of sorts was reached. Council would have nine at-large representatives, and the city could set up community advisory boards for interested neighborhoods. These boards, intended to appease

points, however, would undermine the strong mayor system they felt committed to retain.

Calls for a by-district council did not disappear. By the early 1980s, significant political pressure prompted City Council to offer an advisory referendum on the by-district issue in 1981. A petition drive supported by Councilman Tom Flaherty, coupled with pressure from neighborhood groups, most notably Neighborhoods First Coalition, forced the issue; Council responded by sponsoring what was widely considered an intentionally ambiguous referendum dubbed the "Three-headed Monster." City residents could vote for more than one of three options: at-large, by-district, and both. (Campaign signs at the time read "Yes Yes No" or "No No Yes."). But Council prepared the ballot measure in the form of a non-binding "advisory referendum"; any result that might signal a mandate from the voters would not legally require action by the City. In the end, voters approved the at-large plan (23,892 to 19,982) and the proposed district plan (23,466 to 19,193).

The ambiguous nature of the referendum expressed the consensus of a Council dominated by East End representatives. When Flaherty argued such, the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette noted it was "not surprising that some of his colleagues would be less than enthusiastic."98 Virtually all East End neighborhoods voted for the at-large option. Although the by-district proposal did have a degree of black support, referendum results showed that many of the city's black neighborhoods voted against the change. A newspaper article at the time suggested that some black political figures were pressured into opposing by-district representation. It is clear that the Democratic Party put considerable effort into maintaining the at-large system; they outspent by-district backers 23 to 1.99

Two new strategies emerged. One took the route adopted by other cities — litigation based on the Voting Rights Act. Black community activists filed a suit in U.S. District Court on January 22, 1986, claiming that the at-large election system denied Pittsburgh's 101,813 blacks constitutional rights to equal representation.10 The second approach moved to secure a clearer referendum through new legislation in Harrisburg. Rep. Tom Murphy, a Northside Democrat, sponsored the enabling legislation, H.B. 1731. The more distinctly racial nature of the struggle for the 1987 referendum emerged when no black was nominated by Democratic voters in the May 1985 Primary.11 For some Pittsburghers, this event underscored the need for by-district elections; indeed, it appeared to many as an issue whose time had come.

In some American cities, litigation has played a leading role in moving to by-district elections. In Pittsburgh, however, the significance of Metropolitan Pittsburgh Crusade for Voters, et. al. v. City of Pittsburgh, et. al. continues to be debated. Some argue vehemently

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those seeking a community voice, never really succeeded or translated into a meaningful substitute for a by-district council. Only a handful of the 24 board districts actually ever set up boards; six of these remain today.

The commission noted that the strong mayor system worked well, but it hoped to ameliorate the remote nature of dealings between council members and their constituents and to establish some checks and balances on the power concentrated in the executive branch. To go very far on either of these
that the second referendum, and indeed its success, would never have occurred without the litigation. Others stress a completely different path to the referendum. Both approaches, however, had the same goal. Jonathan Robison, co-chair of the Coalition For District Elections, believes that the litigation, though probably helpful, did not significantly alter the fact that the referendum was offered in 1987.

The opposition’s concern for city government and the at-large system is best exemplified by a response of former Councilman O’Malley to a 1985 proposal before Council to consider amending the city charter, in particular the at-large system. The Pittsburgh Press reported that “O’Malley accused the bill’s supporters of using race to ‘camouflage’ their desire to dilute the powers of the mayor.”

Backers of by-district elections began forming a campaign coalition in 1985. By 1986 the Coalition for District Elections had a list of endorsing organizations that included: ACORN; Pittsburgh Jobs with Peace; Front for Black Unity; Pittsburghers Against Apartheid; Association of Pittsburgh Priests; Pittsburgh Operation Big Vote; Democratic Socialists of America; Vote and Struggle; Coalition of Black Trade Unionists; Bakery, Confectionery and Tobacco Workers Union Local 12; 31st Ward Citizens Council; Freedom House; Homewood-Brushton NoDope Coalition; Perry Hilltop South Community Development Corp; Americans for Democratic Action; and the Rainbow Kitchen Community Center. The Coalition reflected a variety of neighborhood interests, but in general, the May 1987 referendum had much greater black support than the 1981 version. Voters agreed on the proposed by-district plan 33,734 to 14,862; the referendum for retention of the at-large system failed with 22,392 yes votes to 20,606 no votes.

The strong-mayor system has characterized Pittsburgh government since 1911 with candidates for an at-large Council necessarily being a product of
that political environment. More often than not, substantial financial backing and/or informal political ties figured prominently in gaining office. Annoyance with this, and unresponsive political behavior, surfaced in the post-civil rights era when blacks and neighborhood groups found common cause in working for by-district elections.

In the end, however, the change to by-district council should not be viewed as a structural panacea to problems of community voice in vital city issues, like budget allocation. Certainly this move suggests decentralizing forces at work, but it isn’t the brass ring. Part of the formula for more responsible government rests on thoughtful voter participation in by-district elections, but the position of Council vis-à-vis the mayor and City Hall remains important. What by-district elections mean for Pittsburgh’s political future remains unclear. Certainly, they offer an opportunity to tap some of the abilities and energies in the city’s neighborhoods; clearly it’s a change worth trying.

2 Samuel P. Hays, “The Politics of Reform in Municipal Government,” American Political History as Social Analysis (Knoxville: 1980), 225. Here Hays notes that municipal governments developed within the context of universal suffrage which decentralized political control.
3 James Cunningham, “Findings and Flaws: What the Pittsburgh Home Rule Effort Is All About,” Public Hearings Summary, Government Study Commission, 1973-74. Cunningham reported a Council membership of 150 for the early twentieth century; however, the number of councilmen fluctuated as the city incorporated new areas.
7 Public Hearings Summary, Government Study Commission. Fifteen neighborhood organizations responded with 12 in favor of by-district. Twelve of the 24 in the political/government group opposed the change, with five favoring and seven conditionals.
11 For example, Clarke Thomas, senior associate editor at the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, noted in an interview that this event was responsible for tipping the newspaper’s editorial page editors over to support by-district elections. Another factor in the public debate about black representation was the inability of Councilman Bill Robinson, who is black, to gain the Democratic City Committee’s endorsement for re-election during this period.
13 Coalition for District Elections records, from the private papers of Joni Rabinowitz.
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