



HOW PHILLY WORKS

GIVING THE GOP A SEAT AT THE (POLLING PLACE) TABLE

The fiercest battle on November 6 in Philadelphia was not between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. Or even between voters when someone dared to cut in front of a long line at the polls.

It was instead between poll workers.

In 100 voting divisions, Judges of Elections (poll workers in charge at each voting division and usually Democrats) turned away Minority Inspectors (Judges' assistants and usually Republicans) who, as it turns out, had a right to be there. In this overwhelmingly Democratic town, did they fear the presence of GOP Inspectors would swing the vote to Romney? Or did they truly believe the Inspectors didn't belong?

With lousy pay and long hours, it's tough enough to get people to work at the polls. Why turn away anyone who is ready, willing and able?

Today Seventy continues its **HOW PHILLY WORKS** series on issues that cropped up on November 6 as explanations now start to emerge. The Minority Inspector issue is especially important since elections for Judges of Elections and Inspectors (Majority and Minority) are coming up in 2013. The Court of Common Pleas, the City Commissioners (who run elections) and the local political parties have a chance to bring fairness to situation that just doesn't smell right.

-- December 20, 2012

I have no idea what a Minority Inspector is.

There are five people who work at each of Philly's 1,687 voting divisions. Together, they make up what's called the Election Board. Three are elected by voters: Judge of Elections, Majority Inspector and Minority Inspector. Two are appointed: Clerk, Machine Inspector. Most voters have no idea who's who when they go to the polls.

What's the difference between a Majority and Minority Inspector?

Both assist the Judge of Elections. The different titles have to do with the way they are chosen: In the spring primary, Democrats and Republicans in every voting district nominate one candidate each for Inspector of Elections. In the November general election, the candidate who gets the most votes (usually a Democrat) becomes the Majority Inspector and the candidate with the second highest number of votes (usually a Republican) becomes the Minority Inspector. (Independents and third party candidates can also run in the general election.)

So "Minority" has nothing to do with the fact that Republicans are a minority party in Philly?



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No, although 78% of city voters (855,608) are registered as Democrats and 12.1% (132,463) as Republicans. (The rest are unaffiliated or attached to other parties.) It's often hard to find 1,687 people to serve as Minority Inspectors. Republicans estimate there are about 744 vacancies.

The city has plenty of Republicans. It doesn't seem so hard to me.

It is and here's why: All three elected members of the Election Board must live in the voting division. Of the city's 1,687 voting divisions, 478 have fewer than 25 registered Republicans. (Only 12 divisions, all in the Far Northeast, have more Republicans than Democrats.) Sometimes there are no GOP candidates on the ballot for Inspector of Elections.

Does it really matter whether the Inspectors are Democrats or Republicans?

It does. Having members of an Election Board from only one political party can prompt concerns about the integrity of the voting process. To further ensure fairness, the Minority Inspector gets to choose the Clerk (one of the non-elected members of the Election Board), whose job it is to record the number of votes.

Would having Minority Inspectors in every division have made any difference on November 6?

According to an *Inquirer* OpEd by a Republican lawyer, "obviously not." But she said that, in non-presidential election years when turnout is low and races can be decided by close margins "[a] couple of stolen votes, in just a few of more than 1,600 voting precincts, could change an outcome." You can read the OpEd at http://articles.philly.com/2012-12-03/news/35550231_1_poll-workers-republican-poll-election-day.

Does the Minority Inspector issue have anything to do with Romney getting no votes in 59 voting divisions?

We certainly hope not. (In case you're curious though: Minority Inspectors were turned away in four of the divisions where Romney got no votes – three in North Philadelphia and one in West Philly.) Seventy has urged the City Commissioners to directly address this issue to assure voters (and people who suspect hanky-panky) that the outcome in the 50 (the certified election results lowered the total from 59) voting divisions is trustworthy and lay to rest any concerns about voter fraud. By the way, Romney got one vote in 99 additional voting divisions.

I guess it's not easy being red here.

No, and a faction of the local Republicans is trying to breathe new life into the party. Al Schmidt, a member of this faction who won the guaranteed minority party seat for one of the three City Commissioners, is reportedly trying to mend fences within the party. But, at least at the moment, the two sides can't even agree on the accurate list of GOP ward leaders. (To be fair, the Committee of Seventy's website posts both.)

Back to the Minority Inspectors. What happens if no one is elected Minority Inspector?

The position is vacant. In many voting divisions, the vacancy is filled by "curbside elections" where someone is tapped for the job on the morning of the election. Vacancies can also be filled by the local courts.



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How were vacancies on November 6 filled?

Both by curbside elections and court orders. Six days before the election (October 31), the Romney campaign got court orders for 307 people to fill vacant Minority Inspector seats. But, on November 6, Democratic Judges of Elections refused to seat about 100 of them. Some Judges of Elections don't seem to understand that curbside elections are a one-shot deal: people who "won" curbside elections as the Minority Inspector for the April primary don't have the authority to serve in the same role in the November general election.

What happened next?

About half of the disputes were resolved on-site at the polls. The Republican Party had to go back to court to seat 48 other Minority Inspectors. The President Judge of the Court of Common Pleas ordered the city's Sheriff's office to accompany some of the inspectors back to the polls to make sure they were allowed inside. The whole process took about five hours.

Isn't this a waste of time and resources?

We think so, which is one of the reasons why the process has to be fixed.

Do we know why the Judges of Elections kicked out the Minority Inspectors with court orders?

According to an in-house staff report, which you can read [here](#), the City Commissioners didn't get the list of court-ordered Minority Inspectors until the evening of Friday, November 2. Letters were sent to Judges of Elections and ward leaders in the voting divisions where the orders applied and also to the Democratic and Republican City Committees. The report said it was possible this information was not received by 7 a.m. on November 6, when the polls opened.

Maybe there should be non-partisan referees inside the polls.

The Committee of Seventy would be happy to help out since our non-partisan volunteers are at many city polling places anyhow every Election Day. But Pennsylvania's sometimes goofy election laws allow partisan poll watchers inside polls, not non-partisan observers.

How can the Minority Inspector problem get fixed?

The in-house staff report proposed asking the Court of Common Pleas to issue court orders for Minority Inspectors earlier in the election cycle (not six days before the election) to make sure they are communicated to Judges of Elections. In our view, poll workers' pay should be raised to encourage more people to run for Election Boards. Not many people are willing to spend from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. at the polls for \$95 to \$100. It would also help to change state law to *require* elected members of an Election Board to attend annual training sessions to clarify any misunderstanding about who is entitled to sit on Election Day. (Actually there were a host of problems on November 6 involving untrained members of Election Boards. Mandatory training would make a huge difference.)

How can I run for an Election Board?



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We're glad you asked since we hope you are interested in running next year. It's easy to get on the May 21, 2013 ballot and an important way to serve your community. Think about it for a week. We'll tell you how to run in one of next week's **HOW PHILLY WORKS**.

*The goal our **HOW PHILLY WORKS** is to keep you informed about significant issues and, hopefully, motivate you to act if there's something you think isn't quite right. Let us know what issues you think are important by e-mailing futureofthecity@seventy.org.*