



## HOW PHILLY WORKS

### May 2015 Ballot Question Overview

#### *What You Should Know about Philadelphia's May 19 Ballot Questions*

When you go to the polls Tuesday, don't think that you're finished after you plow through all those candidates. (No, there aren't 767 folks running for judgeships – just 67.) At the bottom of the ballot are four questions awaiting your “yes” or “no.” Each would, with the approval of a simple majority of voters, amend Philadelphia's Home Rule Charter (the City's “Constitution”), but none would do so in a way that significantly reorganizes city government or costs an enormous amount of money. And one is a *non-binding referendum*, i.e., a glorified opinion poll that would be inserted in the Charter.

Below, you can find the official question wording for the four questions, the “plain English” explanation the City provides for them and our thoughts on what the amendments mean and what effects they might have. The Committee of Seventy hasn't taken a position on any of them.

**REMEMBER: All eligible voters, regardless of their party affiliation, can vote on ballot questions.**

--May 15, 2015

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### Ballot Question #1: Referendum on the School Reform Commission (SRC)

#### Ballot Question Language:

“Shall The Philadelphia Home Rule Charter be amended to call upon the Pennsylvania General Assembly and the Governor to abolish the School Reform Commission and return local control of Philadelphia's schools?”

#### “Plain English” Statement:

This is a non-binding referendum calling on the State Government to return the Philadelphia public school system to local control. The School District of Philadelphia currently is governed by a State-controlled School Reform Commission. This proposed amendment to the Home Rule Charter would express the view that the State takeover of the public school system has weakened the voices of parents and community in the operation of public education in Philadelphia, and that the School Reform Commission should be abolished.

#### Seventy says...

The School Reform Commission (SRC) is, essentially, the school board for the Philadelphia School District, with the power to negotiate union contracts, set policy, pass a budget, hire a superintendent and approve or reject charter school applications. Until 2001, the District was overseen by a nine-member board appointed by the mayor. But because of poor academic performance and financial management, the state replaced it with the five-member SRC. With three members appointed by the governor and two by the mayor, the SRC can be abolished only if a majority of its members vote to do so and with the approval of the state Secretary of Education.



There is vocal opposition to the SRC in Philadelphia, chiefly because the City has no real control over it, and because the state (with three gubernatorial appointments) has been funding schools at a rate many consider to be insufficient. Still, some people favor keeping the SRC. Some say it isn't to blame for the funding issues, since it doesn't have any say in how much money is allocated to the schools by the state or city governments. Another argument is that the SRC ensures the state has some direct responsibility over Philly's school system. Finally, others suggest that we shouldn't abolish the SRC until we can agree on what should replace it. An elected board? An appointed board? A combination of the two?

Whether you oppose the existence of the SRC or not, the important thing to know is that this is a *non-binding referendum*. It would have no legal effect. It's that glorified opinion poll we were talking about.

## Ballot Question #2: Commission for Women

### Ballot Question Language:

"Shall The Philadelphia Home Rule Charter be amended to provide for the creation of a Commission for Women to be charged with promoting civic, educational and economic policies for women and providing advice and recommendations to the Mayor and City Council on policies and programs that advance equal rights and opportunities for women in the City?"

### "Plain English" Statement:

This proposed amendment to the Home Rule Charter would establish a new independent City commission, the "Commission for Women." The Commission will have 27 members, appointed by the Mayor and City Council; the members will represent the diverse population of the City and will serve without compensation. City Council can change the method of appointment by ordinance. The Commission will have the purpose of advancing women to full equality and promoting equal opportunities for women in areas such as employment, compensation and education. The Commission will exercise advisory powers and duties with respect to the Mayor and Council on issues that affect women.

### Seventy says...

Women's commissions, created to promote the economic interests of women, are relatively commonplace. New York City, Los Angeles, Boston and the state of Pennsylvania all have them. But they can take different approaches: New York's is proactive, helping connect women with financial resources and government services, while the commissions in Boston and Los Angeles focus on providing research and policy ideas to their city governments.

Philly's would be more like Boston's and L.A.'s, exercising "advisory powers" to the Mayor and Council to help them create laws and administrative policies to promote the needs of women. It wouldn't cost much: The only paid staff would be a director and an administrative assistant (about \$150,000 per year total, according to the proposal's sponsor, Councilwoman Blondell Reynolds Brown). The 27 commissioners would be volunteers. Incidentally, Philly had a women's commission during the 1980s. Created under an executive



order by Mayor Bill Green, it was continued under Wilson Goode but lapsed during the Rendell administration.

### Ballot Question #3: Multi-lingual services

#### Ballot Question Language:

“Shall The Philadelphia Home Rule Charter be amended to require all City agencies to prepare, and comply with, plans to promote access to City services, compliance with City law and ease of contact with, and participation within, City government for people with limited English proficiency?”

#### “Plain English” Statement:

Currently, a Mayor’s Executive Order requires all City agencies that report to the Mayor to develop Language Access Plans. These Plans are designed to improve access to City services for people with limited English proficiency and to make it easier for them to participate in City government. The proposed Charter change would require all City agencies, whether they report to the Mayor or not, to develop and carry out Language Access Plans. For example, the requirement would apply to independent agencies such as City Council, the District Attorney, and the City Commissioners. The amendment also would authorize the Mayor to designate a City agency to evaluate compliance with such plans.

#### Seventy says...

Just to be clear, this initiative isn’t focused on things like making all city street signs multi-lingual; it’s about ensuring fair access to City services.

Our non-English speaking population is growing rapidly: Philly’s foreign-born population has increased by 40,000 in the last 15 years, and 21.5 percent of Philadelphians speak a language other than English in their homes. These trends are expected to continue.

Right now, many City departments do provide language services, though some more than others. In 2008, Mayor Nutter signed an executive order requiring City offices to create a plan for providing them. However, the Mayor’s office has no control over any office headed by another elected official. A Charter amendment would make these language access plans permanent and ensure uniform standards across the entire city government. It would also require compliance monitoring.

One other thing: The City is legally obligated to provide language services under the U.S. Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Title VI), according to Community Legal Services of Philadelphia senior staff attorney Beth Shapiro, who testified in favor of the measure before City Council. Failure to do so, she added, could result in the loss of federal funds.

Councilwoman Maria Quiñones-Sánchez, who sponsored the measure, has said that the cost of its implementation should be relatively low, but her office couldn’t provide a cost estimate.



## Ballot Question #4: Pre-K Commission

### Ballot Question Language:

“Shall the Philadelphia Home Rule Charter be amended to provide for the creation, appointment, powers and duties of an independent Commission on Universal Pre-Kindergarten which would recommend an implementation and funding plan for achieving universal high quality pre-kindergarten for three- and four-year-olds in Philadelphia without taking away funds used for existing education?”

### “Plain English” Statement:

This proposed amendment to the Home Rule Charter would establish a new Commission on Universal Pre-Kindergarten. The Commission would be composed of 17 members, including certain designated public officials and members appointed by the Mayor and Council. The Commission would be responsible for developing and recommending a plan to provide high quality pre-kindergarten for all three- and four-year olds in the City. The Commission would develop both an implementation plan and a funding plan. The Commission is required to make recommendations that would not decrease existing funding for education. The amendment also would require City Council to consider any funding plan recommended by the Commission; if Council fails to adopt such a funding plan, the Commission is directed to re-convene and to propose a plan in each following year until Council adopts one.

### Seventy says...

Structurally, this commission would be nearly identical to the Commission for Women proposed in ballot question #2. It would provide research, advice and testimony to City Council and the Mayor, but would have no legislative or administrative authority to spend any money, create positions or change the way schools teach our children, or how current pre-K programs operate.

As with the Commission for Women, changing the City Charter isn’t necessary for it to be created. The Mayor could include those staff positions in the city budget and appoint volunteer members on his or her own. But by adding it to the Charter, no future mayor could undo the commission without another charter amendment.

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*As always, if you have any questions or ideas for future **HOW PHILLY WORKS**, please send your ideas to [futureofthecity@seventy.org](mailto:futureofthecity@seventy.org). Join the conversation - “Like” us on [facebook](#) and “Follow” us on [Twitter](#)!*