



“IN THE KNOW:” (Almost) Everything You Want to Know about Voting in Philadelphia’s November 8 General Election

The Philadelphia Eagles next game is Monday night, November 7. If they do to the Bears what they did to the Cowboys, everyone in town should be in a very good mood the next morning.

Which is good – because at 7 a.m., the polls will open.

There are no rain delays when it comes to football or elections. So, rain or shine, Tuesday, November 8 is general election day in Philadelphia. There are races for Mayor, City Council, Sheriff, City Commissioners, Register of Wills, statewide judges and local judges.

Who wins really matters. The candidates you will vote for on November 8 make decisions that affect your everyday life, from the taxes you pay to the city services you receive to the laws you live by. So it’s up to you to learn as much as you can about who is running and what their priorities will be, if elected. (You can do this by going to Seventy’s website at www.seventy.org.)

This “**IN THE KNOW**” is not really about the candidates though. It’s about you – the voter. And the things you need to know in order to have the best possible voting experience on November 8. **Warning:** We are throwing a lot of information at you. We promise that not all of Seventy’s “**IN THE KNOWs**” (and we have many installments) are quite as long!

If you still find yourself unsure about what to do on November 8, or if you run into problems, call **Seventy’s Election Protection Hotline: 1-866-OUR-VOTE (1-866-687-8683)**. We’ve been running a Voter Protection Program for over 100 years and can answer (almost) any question you have.

- November 3, 2011

Why should I vote?

The better question is why shouldn’t you vote? With only two exceptions (the District Attorney and the City Controller) every non-judicial office in local government is on next Tuesday’s ballot. If you care about this city, you should make it your business to have a say in who runs your government.

Let’s be real. Does my vote really count?

Think back to last May’s primary. The voters ended the careers of two long-time officials: City Councilman Frank Rizzo and City Commissioner Chair Marge Tartaglione. The outcome of the race to represent Council’s Second District was so close that it ended up being resolved in



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court. There are several genuine contests on the November 8 ballot, including City Council At-Large, the Tenth District Council and City Commissioners. So, yes, your vote really does count.

What's the most important race on the ballot?

Of course, a mayor's race is always important. The oversight of city elections by the three City Commissioners impacts the experience of every person who votes in Philadelphia. Most Philadelphians have contact with the Register of Wills (who administers wills, estates and marriages) at some point in their lives and many people interact with the Sheriff (who supports the court system and conducts sales on properties that are foreclosed, seized by the court or owned by delinquent taxpayers).

What about City Council?

City Council is particularly important since all 17 seats are on the ballot. There will be at least six new members (maybe more) and different people will land in key leadership spots. A new and energized City Council has the potential to help the mayor make the most of the next four years – or stand in the way. City Council can prompt major changes by tackling big issues like the city's enormous debt to the pension fund (which threatens its ability to provide essential services) and by restructuring the heavy tax burden on residents and businesses. And at a time when the city's nearly \$4 billion operating budget is still fragile, guess who holds the purse and decides how your money is spent? City Council.

OK, I get why I should care about this election. I just turned 18. Can I register to vote?

Sorry, not this time. The deadline for registering to vote on November 8 was on October 11, 2011. But you don't want to miss the next election, which is the primary for the U.S. President. You need to register to vote by Monday, March 26, 2012. (The primary is on Tuesday, April 24, 2012.) You can download a voter registration form in English or Spanish by clicking [here](#).

What's on the November 8 ballot?

Let's start with the judicial races since these are at the top of the ballot. Everyone in Pennsylvania's 67 counties gets to vote for judges who sit on the statewide courts. There is one open seat on each of the state's two intermediate appeals courts: Superior Court and Commonwealth Court.

What about Philadelphia judges? There seem to be so many every time I vote.

You'll see them this time too. All city voters can vote for up to 11 judges running for the Court of Common Pleas (the trial court that handles major criminal and civil cases), up to two judges for the Municipal Court (that hears less serious criminal and civil cases) and for one judge on the Traffic Court (that handles traffic violations).



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What does “judicial retention” mean?

Statewide judges are elected to ten year terms. Every ten years, they can decide to seek “retention” to another ten year term. Unlike judicial candidates running for the first time, retention judges are not running against each other; in a sense, they are running “against” themselves. Pennsylvania’s voters decide if each judge deserves to stay in office by voting either “yes” or “no.” On November 8, some judges on all three statewide courts – the Supreme Court (the state’s highest court), Superior Court and Commonwealth Court – are seeking retention. You will usually see judicial retentions off to the side on the ballot, or sometimes at the bottom.

Do local judges run for retention too?

Yes, and it works the same way as with the statewide judges, except only city voters get to vote “yes” or “no.” Like the statewide judges, Common Pleas Court judges seek retention for another ten year term. Judges of the Municipal and Traffic Courts running for retention are looking for additional six year terms.

What about the mayor?

You would think the mayor’s race would top the November 8 ballot, but it doesn’t. It’s in the middle of the pack. Three people want to be the next mayor: Democratic incumbent Michael Nutter, Republican Karen Brown and Independent Wali Rahman. Below the mayor’s race are contests for three other citywide offices: City Commissioners, Register of Wills and Sheriff. (We already told you what these offices do.)

How will I know how many candidates I can vote for?

Don’t worry. It tells you right on the ballot. Here’s a quick summary: Mayor, Register of Wills and Sheriff (one candidate each) and City Commissioners (up to two candidates).

What about City Council?

Council is the last office you’ll see on the ballot. There are two types of City Council members: District and At-Large. District Council members represent specific parts of the city. There are ten districts so there are ten District Council members. You can only vote for one person running to be your District Council member. Council At-Large members – there are seven – represent the entire city. On November 8, you can vote for up to five candidates for Council At-Large from among five Democrats, five Republicans and one Independent.

Do I have to vote for five Council At-Large candidates?

No, you don’t. Five is the *maximum* number you can vote for. You can vote for five, four, three, two or one candidate – or for no one at all.

I’m a registered Democrat. Can I vote for a Republican?



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Yes. In primary elections, you can only vote for candidates in your own political party. In a general election – such as November 8 – you can vote for any candidate, regardless of their or your political party.

What if I don't like any of the candidates?

You can cast a write-in vote for someone you do like. You can even vote for yourself. There's a write-in box next to each office on the ballot. Press the write-in button in the box. Then press the red flashing button at the top of the voting machine to open the write-in window. Write or stamp your candidate's name on the paper inside the window. Then pull the black shutter down over the name.

What are ballot questions?

These are questions you see almost every time you vote. They are usually about changes that can't happen without the approval of the city's voters, such as amending the Home Rule Charter (Philadelphia's governing document). Ballot questions require just a "yes" or "no" answer. On November 8, there are two questions. One has to do with creating what is called a "rainy day fund," which is like a savings account where the city can put money to deal with fiscal shortfalls. The other asks voters for permission to borrow money to spend on certain improvement projects. To learn more about these ballot questions, click [here](#).

How can I tell if my vote counted?

After you choose all the candidates you want to vote for – which you do by touching the box next to the candidates' names (red lights will go on) – you have to press the green "VOTE" button. It's the big button in the lower right corner of the voting machine so you can't miss it. When you do, the red lights will go off. That's the signal that you are finished voting and your vote has been recorded. (Don't forget to answer the ballot questions before pressing "VOTE.")

What if I forget to press the "VOTE" button before leaving the voting booth?

There's a name for people who do this: "fleeing voters." Officials who are working at the polls are instructed to try to catch fleeing voters before they leave. If they can't, the votes of "fleeing voters" are cleared and will not count.

Can I stay in the voting booth as long as I want?

The Pennsylvania Election Code says that each voter (except visually impaired voters using an audio voting device) has three minutes to vote, unless no one else is waiting. We've never seen anyone with a stop watch, but try to be courteous to the next voter if there are long lines.

Am I allowed to ask for help?

You are entitled to help from anyone you choose if you can't read, write or speak English well or are unable to enter the voting booth or operate the voting machine. But that person can't be



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your employer, an officer of your union or the person in charge of the polling place (who is called the “Judge of Elections”).

I’m taking my grandmother to vote and she only speaks Spanish. Can I help her?

Yes. Or, if she doesn’t want you to know who she’s voting for, many polling places will have Spanish/English interpreters. If not, and your grandmother needs one, call 215-686-1500. This is also the number to call for other foreign language interpreters.

When and where can I vote?

The polls are open from 7 a.m. until 8 p.m. After you registered to vote, you should have received a card in the mail telling you where to vote. If you are unsure about where to vote, visit Seventy’s online Citizen’s Guide (<http://guide.seventy.org>) or call 1-866-268-8603.

I broke my leg and am in a wheelchair. How can I find out if my polling place is handicapped accessible?

In Philadelphia, the City Commissioners have a list of fully accessible polling places, which they publish in local newspapers and is also available [here](#). If you have a disability and have been assigned to a polling place that is not accessible, you can vote by alternative ballot. You can read about this process [here](#).

I moved but forgot to re-register to vote. What should I do?

You can go back and vote at your old polling place. But you can only do this once. Then you need to re-register to vote in your new division.

What if I registered to vote, but my name is not in the voters’ list at my polling place?

If your name does not appear in the list of registered voters (this is called a “poll book”) for some reason, call the Committee of Seventy’s Election Protection Hotline – 1-866-OUR-VOTE (1-866-687-8683) – to make sure you are at the correct polling place. Or ask the Judge of Elections to call Philadelphia’s voter registration office to confirm that you are registered. If this can’t be confirmed, you can request a provisional ballot (a paper ballot). Your vote will count if election officials determine after the election that you were properly registered.

Can I vote if I don’t have a permanent address?

Yes, although you do have to provide an address of some kind. Residents who are homeless may register to vote using an address where they receive mail, such as a homeless shelter.

Going back to what happens when I show up to vote. Do I need to bring an ID?

You have to show your identification to the person in charge of the poll book only if you are voting for the first time ever or voting for the first time in a new division (if you moved from one place in the city to another). Otherwise, you don’t have to show any identification.



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What kind of identification should I bring?

Pretty much any official photo ID, such as a driver's license, student ID card, military ID card or a U.S. passport will do. But if you don't have photo ID, you can also bring a non-photo ID as long as it has your name and address, such as a utility bill, paycheck or bank statement. For a complete list of acceptable forms of ID, please look [here](#).

What if I forget my identification?

You can fill out a provisional ballot. As we said earlier, a provisional ballot is a paper ballot. It has all the same choices as the ballot inside the voting booth. Your provisional ballot will be counted if election officials confirm you were properly registered.

I won't be home on November 8. Can I still vote?

There are alternatives to in-person voting if you won't be home on Election Day. The alternatives are different depending on whether you learned you wouldn't be home far in advance of an election – or if you suddenly must go out of town. If we describe all the rules and deadlines, we're afraid your eyes will glaze over. Instead, we'll give you a link to check for information that applies to your exact situation: click [here](#).

I was saving this for last. Can I vote if I have a criminal record?

This is one area of voting that is often misunderstood. If you have been convicted of a felony (the most serious type of crime) and are currently in jail, you are not permitted to vote. But if you have a past felony conviction and are not in jail – even if you are still on probation or released on parole (including if you are living in a half-way house) – you are allowed to vote.

What if I was convicted for a minor offense?

We won't take you through the state's criminal code since this is about voting. But if you were convicted of a misdemeanor (which is less serious than a felony), you are permitted to vote – even if you are in jail. You can learn more about the voting rights of people with criminal records [here](#).

If I have more questions, where should I go?

You can check the Committee of Seventy's website for all kinds of details and links to forms related to voting: www.seventy.org/elections. You can also find information about voting in Pennsylvania on the state's website: <http://www.votespa.com>.

We hope this helps you understand more about the voting process. If you have any questions, or have thoughts about other topics for our "IN THE KNOW" series, please contact us at futureofthecity@seventy.org.