



# Pennsylvania Council of Churches

## Civic Engagement

### Policy Positions

Citizenship involves rights and responsibilities. According to some theological traditions, the responsibilities of citizens include faith-shaped advocacy, and, on occasion, for some, resistance to the government. Because we believe that God calls us to be full participants in civil society, the Council affirms the following:

- Full civil rights for all persons.
- Rule by the majority, with protection of the constitutional rights of the minority.

In light of these principles, the Council supports legislation, regulations, government policies, and corporate practices that protect the rights of all citizens to participate in and have impact on government processes by:

- Supporting campaign finance reform, disclosure of expenditures by lobbyists, and other reform measures that promote accountability and protect the integrity of government and the processes of governing.
- Ensuring ease of voter registration, making retention of the right to vote as simple as possible, and restoring the right to vote for convicted felons who have served their time and returned to active participation in society.
- Ensuring fair and competitive elections that give citizens a true choice for who will represent them.
- Supporting equal access to all citizens to participate in shaping government legislation and policies, and promoting practices that ensure that all voices will be heard.
- Ensuring that elected and appointed officials fairly represent their constituents.
- Promoting efforts to educate citizens about their civic responsibilities.

### Background

From the very beginning of our republic, questions have arisen concerning the enfranchisement of certain portions of our population. Our Declaration of Independence says, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all **men** (emphasis added) are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” While there are those who might argue otherwise, these words were in fact used by interpreters of the document to mean free, white males. It became clear that only free white persons were fully enfranchised with the drafting of our Constitution with the enactment of the Three-Fifths Rule that counted “all other persons” at a rate of three-fifths for purposes of determining representation in Congress. In other words, slaves, Native Americans, women, and any others that did not fit the definition had no real standing or representation.

**Give the king your justice, O God,  
and your righteousness to a  
king's son. May he judge your  
people with righteousness, and  
your poor with justice.**

*Psalms 72:1-2 (NRSV)*

There have been numerous efforts to ensure fair access to all with regard to voting rights: the extension of the vote to African-Americans (15<sup>th</sup> Amendment, 1865) and women (19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, 1920); passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 designed to protect every American from racial discrimination in voting; “motor voter” legislation that makes it possible for citizens to register to vote when they obtain or renew driver’s licenses; enactment of simpler and more accessible voter registration; attempts to make most polling places accessible to disabled persons; and passage of the Help America Vote Act that is designed to protect voters from simple mistakes or malicious tampering with the electoral process. While safeguards for voters and voting are a positive step, these safeguards do not help if appointed and elected officials do not ensure that the

safeguards are enforced and the rights of citizens protected, and if voters do not have competitive campaigns that offer a true choice of candidates or access to elected officials once they are in office.

There have also been efforts to ensure that the views of the minority are heard and taken into account in the highest levels of government. While recent battles over confirming conservative federal judicial nominees have elevated the concern that minority voice be heard, historically the issue has cut both ways. During the 1960s, southern legislators filibustered against passage of the civil rights legislation that would have guaranteed and protected the rights of African Americans. Both cases have raised anxieties over the rights of those holding minority opinions to participate fairly in the government process and to have their concerns be heard.

Similar concerns exist in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Article I, Section 2 of the Pennsylvania Constitution says, "All power is inherent in the people, and all free governments are founded on their authority and instituted for their peace, safety and happiness. For the advancement of these ends they have at all times an inalienable and indefeasible right to alter, reform or abolish their government in such manner as they may think proper." In recent years, some citizens and many persons in advocacy roles have begun to question whether the Commonwealth's system of government truly protects the power of "the people." Some examples for citizen concern:

- Pennsylvania is the only state in the country without a lobbyist disclosure law. Without lobbyist disclosure, citizens cannot know how much special interests are spending to influence legislators regarding the laws they enact. Under Senate rules (which fall short of the force of law) lobbyists reported that they spent \$64 million in the first half of 2004 (over \$1 million per Senator), and it was projected that the total would exceed \$100 by year's end. Leaders in the House of Representatives have claimed that the public isn't calling for it, while a May 2005 Issues PA/Pew Poll says, "Pennsylvanians participating in the poll showed a strong appetite for campaign finance reform and stronger rules that impact the roles and responsibilities of lobbyists."
- In 2004, the Pennsylvania Legislature sent 118 bills to Governor Rendell for signature during the last week of a lame duck session (November 20-24), while sending only 117 between January and November 19. These are often controversial bills that allow legislators to vote and not face the consequences for their actions in the polls because many of their actions in lame duck sessions are forgotten by the next election. Pennsylvania is one of only 11 states that permit these sessions, and the only state to schedule them regularly.
- Pennsylvania House members voted to relax rules on "ghost voting" that allow each party's leadership to cast votes on behalf of members in their absence.
- Legislators routinely override or ignore constitutional procedures to approve laws. A prime example is the 145 page gambling law (Act 71). Article III-A, Section 1 says, "No law shall be passed except by bill, and no bill shall be so altered or amended, on its passage through either House, as to change its original purpose." Section 2 states, "No bill shall be considered unless referred to a committee, printed for the use of the members and returned therefrom." And finally, from Section 3:

**But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."**

*Matthew 20:25-28 (NRSV)*

*Every bill shall be considered on three different days in each House. All amendments made thereto shall be printed for the use of the members before the final vote is taken on the bill and before the final vote is taken, upon written request addressed to the presiding officer of either House by at least twenty-five percent of the members elected to that House, any bill shall be read at length in that House.*

The gambling legislation was amended onto a minor, unrelated bill, with the final form developed solely by legislative leadership, not considered in committee or in public hearings, and not made available to rank and file members until it was distributed to legislators less than 24 hours before a vote. While the Pennsylvania

Supreme Court found in the legislature’s favor in a lawsuit challenging the law on constitutional grounds, Pennsylvania lawmakers routinely pass bills using amendments to incorporate new issues that may not carry the same intent as the original bill.

Polls indicate that citizens have a growing awareness that their voices are not being heard by those who need to hear them, though this has yet to be borne out in the most important poll—the voting booth on election day. Perhaps anecdotal evidence—letters to the editor, op-eds, electronic discussion groups, etc.—are evidence that this may be changing as well.

### **Theological Perspective and the View of the Pennsylvania Council of Churches**

There is a tension inherent in being both a creature of God and a citizen of the state. The gospel of Matthew addresses this tension when the Pharisees ask Jesus whether or not they should pay taxes to the emperor. Jesus asked them to show him a denarius, then asked whose head was on it, to which they replied, “*The emperor’s.*” Jesus then responded, “*Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.*”<sup>1</sup>

In addition, our forebears recognized our responsibility as citizens in public life. John Calvin, a father in the Reformed tradition, referred to civic participation as “the most sacred and honorable” calling. Martin Luther “wrote over one thousand letters to civil authorities, including letters regarding their public policies; fervently admonished preachers to preach against economic injustice and against economic practices and public policies that thwarted the well-being of the poor; called for modes of trade and commerce that defied the emerging capitalism where it oppressed the poor; and insisted that if civil authorities call Christians to actions that disobey God, then Christians must resist.”<sup>2</sup>

**Civil magistracy is a calling not only holy and legitimate, but by far the most sacred and honorable in human life.**

*John Calvin*

In other words, our faith, grounded both in scripture and tradition, calls us to responsible civic engagement.

The Council’s ***Principles for Public Advocacy*** (draft, 5/05) says:

*Scripture describes a good society as one in which those who act with sovereignty provide justice for all. In a democracy, representatives of the people act with sovereignty, and need to provide justice.*

*A just Commonwealth protects the rights of individuals and groups, and imposes corresponding responsibilities on the whole community that support and sustain the common good. A just Commonwealth ensures that all persons have a voice in government at all levels—including the right to vote—and that access is not limited because of situational factors such as economic disadvantages or distance, or demographic characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, religious affiliation, disability, or sexual orientation.*

<sup>1</sup> From Matthew 20:17-21 (NRSV).

<sup>2</sup> Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, in ***Public Church: For the Life of the World***, p. 42.