

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Democracy is more than voting

Today is Primary Day, and if this day is anything like the most recent local government primary, in May 2017, about 1,000 Pottstown residents will cast a vote. That's out of some 13,000 registered voters. More people come out for the general election — in the case of 2017, about 2,500 voters.



Commentary by
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The largest turnout, of course, is in presidential election years. In the last presidential election in 2016, about 9,000 Pottstown residents turned out to vote for either Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump.

Theoretically, democracy is all about voting. Voters dutifully educate themselves about the candidates and vote for the ones who most closely meet their preferences. In presidential elections, virtually everyone knows something about the candidates.

But in local elections, there are so many offices, and so many candidates, that voters can't possibly remember all their names, much less form an educated opinion about their merits.

Consider today's election. In Pottstown, we're not just electing school directors (pick five) and county commissioners (pick two), but we're also electing Superior Court judges (pick two), Montgomery County Common Pleas judges (pick three), a county clerk of courts, a county controller, a district attorney, a prothonotary, a recorder of deeds, a register of wills, a sheriff, a treasurer, and even a coroner.

But Pottstown residents have it easy compared to Owen J. Roberts, where 17 candidates are running for six seats on the school board.

Democracy is a lot more than voting, which is one way of several that that citizens can make their government accountable.

An equally effective way is the ability to challenge public officials about their actions.

As one political scientist put it:

"If citizens have the right to complain, to petition, to organize, to demonstrate ... to shout, to publish, and to wheedle in back corridors, government will tend to respond to the sounds of the shouters and the importunings of the wheedlers... It will necessarily become responsive — pay attention — whether there are elections or not."

One famous example is women's suffrage: Because women could not vote, they could not grant themselves the right through elections, but obtained it through other means.

Likewise, Pottstown friends of public education will be joining residents statewide for a rally June 12 in Harrisburg to demand the legislature promptly implement the fair funding formula it adopted in 2016 instead of phasing it in over many years. Pottstown is one of 137 school districts that are underfunded according to the formula.

