



IN THE KNOW: Tuesday's Vote on the Future of the City's GOP

Tomorrow – Tuesday, February 16, 2010 – a big, but little understood, political decision will be made. It involves the Republican City Committee, a group whose choices aren't often heard about in a town where Democrats outnumber Republicans by more than 6-1.

The issue involves control of the local party, which ultimately impacts how and whether the GOP can emerge as a potent force. Some frustrated local Republicans, backed by state Republican party chair Rob Gleason, are anxious to reinvent Philadelphia's GOP. This could threaten the grip of local Republican leaders, especially the party's real boss, legal counsel Michael Meehan, the third generation of Meehans who have led the GOP since Mayor Barney Samuel occupied City Hall.

(For trivia buffs, Barney Samuel was the last Republican Mayor, serving from August 1941 – January 1952.)

Meehan supporters are proposing a party by-laws change that would probably keep the current leadership intact. The change will be voted on when the GOP leaders of the city's 66 wards get together at 7 p.m. on February 16, 2010, at the United Republican Club, at Frankford and Allegheny Avenues in Kensington.

Even if the by-laws are changed, as most people think will happen, is this the beginning of the end of the Meehan dynasty? This **IN THE KNOW** is designed to provide background information on the local GOP.

What's at stake in the by-laws change?

On its face, the by-laws change is a referendum on who leads the local GOP. On a deeper level, it's about whether there is a serious effort to rebuild the Republican party in Philadelphia.

Republicans are a rare breed in Philadelphia. Will energizing the party really make a difference?

An invigorated local GOP could bring more people into the party and encourage stronger candidates to run for office. Competitive elections are generally considered healthier than where one party is so dominant that voters say "why bother" when the general election rolls around. Races where both sides have a real chance to win also tend to force candidates to talk more about issues. And, in any government, the lack of a forceful opposition party can lead to complacency and corruption in the ruling party.

That sounds like Political Science 101. But this is Philadelphia. Let's talk reality.

The reality is that the GOP faces an uphill battle even if the face at the top of the party changes. There are 829,049 registered Democrats and 134,120 Republicans in the city. If the 93,350 voters not registered as Democrats or Republicans were to switch to the GOP, the Democratic edge would still be overwhelming. But reality can change. Until Democrat Joe Clark became Philadelphia's Mayor in January 1952, the Republicans were in control for 80 years.

So why are you even bothering with this Q&A?

The Committee of Seventy is non-partisan. We don't endorse candidates and don't have a horse in the Meehan-Gleason tug-of-war. But we do care about opening up the political system by encouraging more qualified candidates, Democrat and Republican, to consider public service.

Aren't there some elected Republicans in city government?

Brian O'Neill is a Republican City Councilman. The district he represents has more Republicans than anywhere in the city. Two at-large City Council seats are held by Republicans, but that's because minority party candidates are guaranteed at least two of the seven at-large seats. One of the three City Commissioners is also a Republican – but that seat is also guaranteed for a member of the minority party. The last Republican to win a citywide election was Ron Castille, who was elected to a second term as District Attorney in 1989.

The Republicans still get to control a lot of patronage jobs, right?

Just because Republicans aren't in the majority doesn't mean they lack political perks, such as the ability to fill lots of patronage jobs. According to a recent *Philadelphia Magazine* article, Republicans control 500 jobs at the state-controlled Philadelphia Parking Authority. The head of the Authority is a Republican ward leader. Patronage employees – both Democrat and Republican – are rampant at the School District, in the court system, in the row offices and in other non-civil service government jobs.

What is the state party doing to reenergize the party?

Al Schmidt, the losing GOP candidate for City Controller in November 2009 and former Executive Director of the Republican City Committee, has been hired by state Republican Chairman Rob Gleason as a "senior advisor" to the state Republican party. Schmidt is opposed to the by-laws change.

Why are the state GOP leaders involved?

Since big losses in Philadelphia drag down statewide Republican candidates, the state party is unhappy with the poor GOP election results in the city. State leaders question whether local leaders really want to win. A Democratic city can also help breed Democratic suburbs.

The city Republicans gave up on their judicial candidates in 2009. Doesn't this mean the state party is right?

It could seem that way. Judicial candidates are allowed to run in both the Democratic and Republican primaries, irrespective of their actual party affiliation. In August 2009, the GOP withdrew six judicial candidates who only won the GOP primary and replaced them with Democrats who won their own primary but not the GOP primary. Huh? Party bosses said the candidates didn't want to waste time campaigning when they knew the chances of winning as Republicans were slim to none.

On the other hand, didn't Rob Gleason himself just concede the 2011 mayor's race to Michael Nutter?

"Concede" may be too strong a word, but he was quoted as saying that he thought the party's best chance to make a real showing was in the 2015 mayor's race. It's no secret how tough it is for either a Democratic primary challenger or a Republican to unseat an incumbent.

Shouldn't the state GOP mind their own business and focus on winning statewide offices?

Some people feel that Gleason (despite attending Penn's Wharton School) just doesn't "get" that Philadelphia is different than the rest of the state, where Republicans can get elected. Many local Republicans have decades of loyalty to the Meehans and blame registration numbers – not the GOP's leadership – for the absence of elected Republicans.

Back to the proposed by-laws change. What would it do?

The by-laws change would effect how decisions are made at the Republican City Committee, which is the local arm of the Republican party. (The Republican State Committee, headed by Rob Gleason, oversees state party activities.) In deciding which candidates get endorsed and who chairs the local party, just to give two examples, the proposed change would more heavily weight the votes of local ward leaders whose districts contain more registered Republicans.

Would this do anything to boost the Republican party?

The point of this maneuver seems to be to help keep local leaders in power. The current chairman of the Republican City Committee is Vito Canuso. But legal counsel Michael Meehan is generally considered to be the real GOP leader. From their perspective, the by-laws change is fair because it shifts power to where most Republican voters live.

Where are most Republicans registered?

The largest concentration of Republicans is in Northeast Philadelphia. Of the 12 wards with the most registered Republicans, nine (the 66th, 58th, 63rd, 55th, 57th, 56th, 64th, 45th and 65th) are in the Northeast. The remaining three are in Center City (the 5th and 8th) and Manayunk/Roxborough (21st). Those 12 wards collectively represent just over half of the registered Republicans in the city.

So party leaders wouldn't necessarily need the support of a majority of the ward leaders?

Right. Under the old scenario, the leadership needed the votes from at least 35 ward leaders to become chair. Under the proposed changes, they could win with as few as 12 votes, as long as they came from the wards with the most registered Republicans.

How much more heavily would certain votes be weighted?

Presumably the weight of each vote would be determined by the percentage of the city's Republicans in each ward. So, since the 66th ward has 7.72 percent of the city's Republicans, the 66th ward leader's vote would be counted 7.72 times more than, say, the ward leader's from the 1st ward, which contains exactly 1 percent of the city's Republicans. The 66th's vote would be counted 15.44 times more than votes from the 22nd ward, which contains just half of a percent of the city's Republicans. (15.44 is 7.72 times 2.)

If the big winners are the Northeast Republican ward leaders, who are the losers?

The leaders of wards with the fewest registered Republicans: West, South and North Philadelphia.

Why aren't these small ward leaders rebelling?

Things are pretty hush-hush within the local GOP. But some Republicans think that concentrating leadership in the hands of a few is a big mistake – leading to more hard-line positions, fewer engaged party activists and, ultimately, even a smaller number of Republicans willing to run for office and less choices for the voters.

Wouldn't it make more sense for the Republicans to bolster the smaller wards?

The smaller wards have a tough time as it is. Sometimes, they can't even get 10 Republican signatures on a nomination petition to become a committee person. Some would say this argues for paying MORE attention to these wards than those where the Republican numbers are more secure. If those ward leaders become disillusioned, the party could lose their energy and ideas.

Does the Democratic City Committee have these internal struggles?

With different factions and interest groups, the Democratic City Committee isn't monolithic by a long shot. But finding voters and candidates to run isn't one of their problems.

I have no opinion about the leadership issue, but I'm a Republican and want to be more active in politics. What's the best way to get involved?

You can start by running for committee person. There are 1,684 different divisions divided among the city's 66 wards. Each division elects two Democratic and two Republican committee people to register voters, support party candidates, get out the vote and select the leader of their ward. Right now, only about 900 to 1,000 of the 3,368 potential Republican committee person positions (1,684 x 2) are filled.

How do committee people fit in the Republican City Committee's structure?

Committee people (unless they are also ward leaders) won't vote on the by-laws change, but they are an important part of the party's structure:

- Committee people are elected by registered Republican voters in their voting division. A number of voting divisions – no fewer than 10 and no more than 50 – make up a ward.
- Ward leaders are elected by the Republican committee people who represent the voting divisions within each ward.
- The leadership of the Republican City Committee is elected by the Republican ward leaders.

If the committee people are at the bottom of the pyramid, how can they make the local GOP stronger?

In smaller Republican wards, committee people could potentially build up a base of power. And also help win elections. With so few GOP voters, they have to reach out to Democrats, Independents and non-affiliated voters to come out for the general election. Wards with more Republicans tend to focus more on their own party members.

When do the new committee people get elected?

Committee people run in the May 18, 2010 primary. But first you have to get on the ballot. The first day to circulate nomination petitions is tomorrow, Tuesday, February 16th and the deadline for filing those petitions is March 9th. Find out all the information you need by reading the Committee of Seventy's "How to Run for Committee Person" manual:

www.seventy.org/howtorun.

What's your prediction about how tomorrow's vote will go?

Politics takes strange turns sometimes and we aren't in the prediction business. Find out how the proposed by-laws changed fared by logging onto www.seventy.org on Wednesday, February 17th for an updated **IN THE KNOW: Tuesday's Vote on the Future of the City's GOP**.

For another perspective on the intrigue behind the proposed by-laws change, check out a story in today's (2.15.10) Daily News:

http://www.philly.com/dailynews/local/20100215_City_state_forces_vie_to_run_GOP.html

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In the meantime, please feel free to e-mail your comments, or requests for information on other topics you care about, to info@seventy.org. We look forward to hearing from you.