

# ***POLICY BRIEF***

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## **Decision Time in Allegheny County**

The time for momentous change is at hand. Will Allegheny County voters seize the opportunity to adopt substantial improvements in its governmental structure? On May 17, voters will be able to make a profound statement about the future they want for the County. The issue to be decided is whether or not to reduce the number of row offices from ten to four. Ideally, the vote would be for reduction of from ten to two, but eliminating six offices represents a tremendous step forward for County government.

Indeed, dropping the number of row offices from ten to four will bring Allegheny County in line with the majority of large counties across the country. In an earlier study the Allegheny Institute found Allegheny County to be the only large county (in a sample of counties across the nation with over 600,000 people) to have ten row offices. Cuyahoga County, Ohio, home of Cleveland, had the second most row offices with eight. No other county in the survey elects a jury commission and only one other county elects a prothonotary. Meanwhile, only two counties elect a coroner. In short, Allegheny County stands out among large counties nationally with its ten row offices.

Why should Allegheny County voters approve the elimination of six offices? There are two important reasons. First, as independent offices, the hiring of employees is not subject to the County's merit system. As a result, the row offices have for a long time been viewed as having a decided preference for hiring Democrats. Indeed, an Allegheny Institute study a couple of years ago found that other than the jury commissioners' office, registered Democrats accounted for the overwhelming percentage of employment in row offices. In seven offices, registered Democrats accounted for 96 percent or more of employment.

This in a county with about 30 percent registered Republicans. Statistically, the probability that such a disproportionate employment mix could be the result of unbiased hiring is essentially zero. Insofar as possible, the County needs to hire the best-qualified people for every position. Beyond the failure to use merit hiring, the row office employees are not subject to the normal County work rules, prohibition against political activities, or the County ethics code. Clearly, this is undesirable in County that wishes to govern itself in the best possible manner.

The second reason to bring the various row office functions under the County Executive and Council is to achieve synergies and management efficiencies not now possible. County residents should expect to see in a fairly short period of time a substantial upgrade in the quality of service provision at lower cost. In fact, the Controller has estimated initial savings at three quarters of a million dollars. But, with creative management and application of technology, the savings could be much greater and county services made much more accessible to the public.

Thus, the question boils down to whether Allegheny County residents are ready to opt for more consumer friendly and more cost-effective government or would rather continue with a system that is more interested in serving those who work for the row offices. This is not a trivial exercise. The results will speak volumes about the attitude of County residents toward the role of government and how it is conducted.

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