Democracy in Phoenixville

Citizen participation and civic culture are indicators of a healthy democracy. A civic culture can be defined as a behavior that lends support to democratic institutions. Society values the institutions of democracy and values the liberties that they have. Civic culture also places a high degree on trust, partnership, solidarity, and equality. In a civic culture, the individual places a higher value on his or her community than on himself. Citizens in Phoenixville tend to participate in a strong civic society and in social institutions. Democracy is more to them than simply casting a vote.

Phoenixville’s history can be traced back to the 1790’s. It was not officially declared a borough until March 6, 1849. During this time, Phoenixville was a bustling steal and iron town with government contracts. “In 1855, David Reeves, the president of the local steel factories and John Griffen, a local inventor made the Griffen Gun, which was eventually sold to the Union armies during the Civil War. The gun was credited with giving the North a decisive military advantage. Sixty two are still on the field of Gettysburg National Park,” (Phoenixville Area Chamber of Commerce). Reeves and Griffen also established the Phoenixville Bridge Company which also had government contracts. “Airy iron railroad bridges began to transform the face of America. By 1888, the Phoenix Bridges spanned almost every major river in the U.S. and Canada,” (Phoenixville Area Chamber of Commerce.) These two companies provided local jobs to many and provided services to the rest of the world until the end of World War II when both companies closed its doors. Today, Phoenixville is a suburban town, close to Philadelphia with many of its citizens participating within the community and its social institutions.
Today, Phoenixville’s local government consists of eight council members, a mayor, a solicitor, and a tax collector. The eight council members serve the different wards of Phoenixville. The four wards are the Middle Ward, the East Ward, the North Ward and the South Ward. The wards are determined by districting lines. The council members that service the Middle Ward are James DelNero and Henry Wagner. Letitia Jones and James Lolli, who also serves as Council President, serve the East Ward. The North Ward is served by Robert Tigro and John Messina, who also serves as Council Vice-President. Kendrick Buckwalter and Julie Gaudan serve on the South Ward. All council members also serve on the different committees within Phoenixville as chairpersons. These committees include the Appointment Committee, the Finance Committee, the Parks Property and Recreation Committee, the Utilities, Health, and Sanitation Committee, the Community Development Committee, and the Personnel and Police Committee. Each Council member is also easily accessible to the public. They have their telephone numbers, home addresses and email addresses available to the public via Phoenixville’s website and through the local telephone book, (Borough of Phoenixville).

Leo J. Scoda has been the Mayor of Phoenixville since 1998. Mayor Scoda has been committed to improving the quality and safety of Phoenixville. His accomplishments include “increasing the police force from nineteen officers to twenty-five officers, instituting a bike patrol, which has six police officers now patrolling by bicycle, developing the position of School Resource Officer, and has instituted a twelve hour shift for police officers. He also has created and developed the position of Police Lieutenant as second in command for the department, sought training and grants to develop the position of a canine officer, expanded the DARE Program to local schools such as Barkley Elementary School and the Phoenixville Area Middle School. He also has increased the number of officers certified for DARE instruction. He also has
continued participation in the Adopt-a-Cop Program at Barkley Elementary School, and has expanded the police and community participation in Phoenixville National Night Out in August,” (Phoenixville Borough-Mayor Duties.) Mayor Scoda also participates in other activities including “performing wedding ceremonies and is actively involved with the Boys Tennis Team at Phoenixville High School, having coached for 41 years,” (Phoenixville Borough-Mayor Duties). Mayor Scoda is an active member of the community and is generally concerned with the welfare of its citizens.

Mayor Scoda and his fellow council members are concerned with the community and want to have more citizens become participants in the political culture. Community involvement, civic culture, and political culture in a community are dependent on each other to exist. In a political culture there are participants, subjects, and parochials. Participants are reasonably informed, are concerned with the larger picture, and with their community. They also vote in elections. Subjects are less informed; they may read the paper, and may vote. On the other hand, parochials are uninformed and value the individual over the community, (Notes from Comparative Politics Class).

According to the 2000 United States Census Bureau Report, Phoenixville’s population is 32,944; 25,005 people are over eighteen and therefore they legally can vote. In the Presidential Election of 2004, there were “10,147 registered voters,” (Chester County Department of Voting). Of these registered voters, “6,554 voted, which is 64.6%,” (Chester County Department of Voting). Phoenixville’s percentage of voters who voted in the 2004 Presidential Election was higher than the national percentage of voters, which was “59.6%,” (Gains 1). Voters in Phoenixville also vote for the candidates that they felt would fully represent them despite the candidate’s and the voter’s party identification. In the 2004 Presidential Election, 52.5% of
voters voted split ticket. Voters in Phoenixville are also educated to make political decisions because they have common sense and because 87.9% of the population have high school graduate degrees or higher, which is higher than the national percentage of 80.4%. 37.3% of the population of Phoenixville has a bachelor’s degree or higher” (United States Census Bureau).

Along with the effects of voting, the different attitudes of citizens towards government are important in a democracy. Their attitudes can be either submissive or rebellious toward authority. If its citizens’ attitudes are submissive, they respect authority and the positions that authority holds. However if the citizens’ attitudes are rebellious they often seek to challenge authority. Citizens will either cooperate with society or have a conflict with it. If they have a conflict with their society, they tend to reject it. They believe that they should be able to openly express their opinions without any consequences. However if they cooperate with their society, they believe in group rights and will participate in politics and elections. Citizens’ attitudes towards the state tend to be either permissive or active. Those who are permissive tend to want a weak government. They do not want the government to play an active role in their lives. However those who are active and involved in politics they want the government to play a strong role in their lives. They favor state involvement and are willing to work closely with the state.

In Phoenixville, the citizens’ attitudes are often rebellious. They also tend to question the authority and actions of their local Fire Department. Citizens in Phoenixville often do not understand that the members of the Fire Department are volunteers. Citizens expect the Fire Station to be at destination of the fire within seconds of when the call is made. This is impossible because the volunteers are not at the firehouse and have to be paged. The Fire Station then has to wait for a certain number of volunteers to come to the Fire Station before they can arrive at the destination of the fire. Citizens participate in the Fire Department by donating money instead of
time and manpower. Assistant Fire Chief, David Panetta states that “Every year, it is harder to find volunteers. It is easier to receive $50.00 than five hours a week of time,” (Panetta).

The citizens’ attitudes towards the local Fire Department are different than those towards the Police Department. In Phoenixville, the overall attitudes of the citizens are submissive. Citizens respect authority and their positions. They cooperate with the Phoenixville Police Department. The Phoenixville Police Department approximately takes “13,000 calls a year,” (Marx). These calls are consist of citizens reporting crime. Officer Patrick Marx, a police officer, who has resided in Phoenixville his entire life and has been a police officer for the past five years states that “The majority of citizens are participatory and concerned with the overall safety within the community. They participate in the Northside Community Watch Program and are trying to establish a city wide program,” (Marx). The main issues that the Phoenixville Police Department is currently faced with are “quality of life issues, such as drug problems, prostitution, public drunkenness, and domestic assault,” (Marx).

There is also a vast different between the attitudes of the older population and the younger population of Phoenixville. The older population of Phoenixville is active within politics. They vote in local, state, and federal elections while the younger population is permissive and is simply not interested. The older population is concerned with current issues such as healthcare, social security, growth in population, education, roads and utilities. The younger population is concerned with issues such as taxes, roads, and drug and alcohol abuse within their community. The younger population also admits that they do not voice their concerns to government officials because they do not feel that their voices will be heard. Because they are not targeted by politicians, they think that their opinions will not make a vast difference within society, (Citizen Interviews).
Although the younger population of Phoenixville is permissive with politics they are active within organizations within their community. Citizens in Phoenixville also are participating in the local organizations and the twenty service groups in Phoenixville, such as The Historical Society of Phoenixville, Benevolent Arts, and the Kiwanis Group of Phoenixville. The Historical Society was established in 1977 and has over forty-five leaders, who have administrative duties. It has quarterly meetings and newsletters. The Historical Society is concerned with “identifying, collecting, preserving, interpreting, and disseminating materials and information pertaining to Phoenixville area history in order to assist and educate the public in understanding and appreciating their Phoenixville area heritage and how it relates to their lives,” (Historical Society of Phoenixville). The Historical Society also is an active pillar of the community, preserving old buildings and making murals that showcase Phoenixville’s history and pride.

Established in December of 2004, Benevolent Arts is a “nonprofit art gallery created to sell art as a way to support charities that offer services to children and adults in the Phoenixville Area of Pennsylvania,” (Benevolent Arts). It already has been established as an important pillar in the community because of all the work it has done. Local artists donate their artwork to Benevolent Arts. Benevolent Arts sells it and donates the proceeds to organizations within the community. These organizations include Phoenixville Area Violence Prevention, Phoenixville Area Children’s Learning Center, Phoenixville Area Police Athletic Association, Good Samaritan Shelter, Fellowship Health Resources, The Clinic, Help Counseling, Healthy Start, Holcomb Behavioral Health Systems, Phoenixville Area Senior Center, Planned Parenthood, and Northside Community Watch.
The Kiwanis Group of Phoenixville has also proven itself as an important service organization within Phoenixville. It has accomplished twenty-two service projects such as Adopt Reeve’s Park, Habitat for Humanity, and Phoenixville High School Scholarships. It also has worked closely with seventeen organizations in Phoenixville such as the Phoenixville YMCA, Phoenixville Dive and Rescue, and the Lion’s Club. They also sponsor other organizations in Phoenixville including “Circle K, Key Club, the Builder’s Club, and K-Kids,” (Kiwanis Group of Phoenixville). This group has proved its loyalty to Phoenixville and continues to work towards shaping the community towards the future.

The Historic Society, Benevolent Arts, and the Kiwanis Group of Phoenixville are just three of the twenty service groups that the citizens of Phoenixville are participating in. The Phoenixville Public Library is also a social institution that provides services to the community and has active citizen involvement. Citizens in Phoenixville have been actively participating in the library since Pennsylvania passed legislation, allowing public schools to establish a public library in 1896. “Reverend Joseph F. Jannison’s donation of small collection of books from the Young Men's Literary Union, a private subscription Library set up in the mid 1850’s, formed the core collection of the new Library, which was housed in a succession of rented buildings,” (Phoenixville Public Library). Phoenixville eventually purchased the land on and built the library on Main Street and Second Avenue where the library resides today. The library continues to receive donations from citizens today and has become a part of the Chester County Library System. The Chester County Library System allows the citizens residing in Chester County to borrow book from other cities within Chester County. Today, “the Phoenixville Public Library the third largest circulating collection in the Chester County Library System.” The library also offers classes for the public, internet access, and programs for children. “The annual attendance
at the Phoenixville Public Library's children's programs is the second highest in the county,” (Phoenixville Public Library).

Not only are the citizens of Phoenixville actively participating in the services and programs that the library has to offer but they also have been actively participating in the Dogwood Festival since 1943. This annual tradition has a Dogwood Ball, where a Queen, Prince, and Princess are reigned. The Dogwood Ball is followed by a fair that is held for a week where “over 50 Phoenixville area civic groups provide a unique flavor to the Dogwood Festival with games, prizes, food, and community volunteer opportunities. This weekly fair has a crowd that exceeds 80,000 visitors,” (Dogwood Festival). Visitors come from nearby communities in the area. The festival is then followed by a parade, which garnishes equal or more participation than the fair. The Dogwood Festival benefits the community by raising money that is used for parks, recreational activities, and to help others.

Because the citizens of Phoenixville are continuously involved within the community, democracy is able to exist despite the fact that 6,554 voters out of 25,005 eligible voters voted in the past 2004 presidential election. Participatory democracy theorists believe that citizen participation is fundamental in the governing of democracies. They believe that citizens are well-equipped to make decisions concerning politics, their vote, and the issues in their communities because they have common sense. “Voters are qualified to do so, not because they have specialized training but because they possess sufficient common sense. Against those who claim that the many are not suited to such important deliberations, either from weakness of intellect or a flawed moral capacity, Dewey argues that these disabilities can be overcome if ordinary people have opportunities to educate themselves on the findings of experts and to act responsibly,” (Conte 166). The citizens of Phoenixville are able to make educated decisions regarding politics
and the issues within their community because of the education they have received. 37.3% of the population of Phoenixville has a bachelor’s degree or higher and 87.9% of the population has a high school graduate degrees or higher, (United States Census Bureau). When voting, the citizens of Phoenixville also vote for the candidate that they believe will fully represent them despite party identification. Voting, however, does not just determine the effectiveness of a democracy. “The effectiveness of participation cannot be inferred just from the numbers who participate. Effectiveness is also dependent on both the quality of the participatory activity and the context within which the participation occurs,” (Conway 190).

Democracy is also still able to exist because citizens in Phoenixville place a higher value on their community than on the individual by helping other community members, participating in service orientated organizations, and events within the community. Phoenixville, Pennsylvania is a suburban town, close to Philadelphia with many of its citizens participating within the community, its social institutions, and a strong civil society. “I think that private citizens, by combining together, may constitute bodies of great wealth, influence, and strength,” (De Tocqueville 308). By private citizens combining together in the community, they are able to achieve things for the greater good of society. To achieve greater ends, citizens in Phoenixville participate in these organizations because they feel it is their civic duty, they want to help others, and they want to contribute to the community in which they live in. The citizens of Phoenixville believe that citizen participation in society is crucial for democracy to exist. By coming together as a community, the society of Phoenixville functions better and is able to maintain a democracy.

2. Borough Hall Council
140 Church Street; Phoenixville, PA 19460


4. Citizen Interviews


11. Interview with David Panetta, Assistant Chief, Station 85. Conducted on February 6, 2005.

12. Interview with Officer Patrick Marx, Phoenixville Police Department. Conducted on 23 February 2005.


15. Notes from Comparative Politics Class.


17. Phoenixville Area Chamber of Commerce (610) 933-3070.
P.O. Box 29; Phoenixville, PA 19460

18. Phoenixville Area School District: Administration Building
1120 S. Gay Street; Phoenixville, PA 19460 484-927-5000


21. Phoenixville Website: www.phoenixville.org

