
Votes and Goodwill

Achieving Genuine Success in Bond Elections

M. Gray Donaldson

Local governments, school districts, and other governmental entities that must, on occasion, issue general obligation bonds employ all manner of high-tech equipment and up-to-date procedures in their daily functioning. Yet they stubbornly cling to one obsolescent practice—the manner in which they conduct bond elections.

Why this outmoded procedure has prevailed so long is plain: it is the simplest, easiest, and quickest way to mount bond elections. Simplified, it consists of developing proposals to be voted on, the involvement of a small number of citizens as a show of community support, and the conducting of a vigorous campaign to win votes.

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Old fashioned as this process is, it often works in gaining voter approval. But many times it does not work and this is but one of its many problems. *The Bond Buyer* reports that, during 1990, there were 1,100 such elections in the United States. Of that number, only 658, or 61.2 percent, were approved. The dollar amount of the proposals submitted was \$24.8 billion, with \$14.6 billion approved.

The most disturbing element of this statistic is that \$10.6 billion worth of improve-

ments were not made in some counties, cities, school districts, and other governmental entities. Assuming the expenditures honestly were needed, this represents unbuilt facilities, unpurchased equipment, and perhaps a lessening of services for many constituents.

But the fact that they often fail to authorize the issuing of bonds is not the traditional election's greatest flaw. There are others, in fact so many that it is a wonder that perceptive and competent local government managers and others have not long ago discovered and corrected them.

The Traditional Election's Faults

Of all the election's faults, one transcends the others because it violates a fundamental precept of democratic government. The precept, hammered out at the 1778 Philadelphia convention, holds that the supreme power of government at all levels rests with the people it governs. Thus all activities of any local government must be in harmony with that ethic. But often in traditional elections, they are not.

While elections seemingly are open and freely equal to all voters, there lie beneath the surface abuses and procedures unfitting a governing entity in our nation. Here are some of those faults.

For many citizens the election tends to be adversarial and psychologically unsound. In usual elections, decisions are made by the local government administrative staff and approved by the governing body. To lend an air of community involvement, a "blue ribbon" committee of prominent citizens is formed to study and approve the proposals—although sometimes with suggested changes—and to recommend an election be held.

Although the election is well publicized

M. Gray Donaldson, a retired superintendent of schools, is a freelance writer, Scottsdale, Arizona. He served on the city council of Mesa, Arizona.

and public meetings are held, the basic election decisions are usually already made. Some citizens, therefore, feel excluded and imposed upon by this action of a few. That attitude can be made worse when a promotion campaign urges them to support the election proposals as part of their civic duty.

The traditional election also ignores a well-known psychological fact that the strongest support of a cause comes from those who are involved in its development, even if that involvement is peripheral. When an effort such as a bond election is perceived by the people as their own—rather than the local government's—support will follow.

A breach of ethics occurs if citizens are manipulated to secure "yes" and minimize "no" votes. Manipulation takes many forms. It may be a "quiet" election to reduce voter turnout since large numbers usually mean defeat. Or it may be setting an election date when some potential "no" voters will be away. Manipulation may also be a telephone bank that calls only supporters. Another is the withholding of election information and encouragement of voting among ethnic groups because their participation in elections has been minimal or with senior voters who often vote against election proposals.

It is illegal if public funds and resources are used to promote election proposals. This is an area that may vary according to state laws. The proposition, however, that public servants should not use public funds or resources and even their positions to persuade qualified electors—essentially their employers—to support election proposals is a sound one. How much better it would be for officials to explain clearly why and how the local government arrived at the proposals; then add that voters must study their pro-and-con aspects before deciding whether or not to support them. Above all, this should be said, "Regardless of whether you will vote "yes" or "no," it is crucial to this community that you vote."

Satisfaction with low voter turnout. In some nations, recently freed from dictatorial government, voter turnout may be as high as 80 or 90 percent. By comparison, the United States' voting record is disgraceful. Doing much about this is difficult nationally, but there is no justification for accepting low voter turnout at the local, manageable level.

One reason why local governments have done little in this regard is because officials have been satisfied if, among those who came to the polls, a sufficient number vote "yes." In one recent extreme case, the turnout was only about six percent of the qualified elec-

torate. Of that number, about four percent voted "yes" and the authority to issue bonds was granted. The governing board and administration were pleased with the two to one vote and declared the election a victory. Legally, it was. In the harsh light of public relations it was a disaster!

Because bond elections usually mean an increase in taxes, nearly everyone is concerned. Thus, the legal government has a ready audience before which it can demonstrate its constituent concern.

Failure to recognize and utilize the bond election as the most effective single public relations effort in which governments can engage. Most cities are aware of the urgent necessity of devising and implementing an effective PR program. Yet, and regardless of whether or not they have done this, the bond election provides an unequalled opportunity to move PR to heights of a constituent relationship few governments achieve.

Because bond elections usually mean an increase in taxes, nearly everyone is concerned. Thus, the local government has a ready audience before which it can demonstrate its constituent concern. Furthermore, there is a rare opportunity to involve large numbers of citizens in short-term, but important, activity, sometimes in areas of their vocational skills.

An unusual opportunity that comes with bond elections is the opportunity to reach citizens ordinarily ignored in the governing process. They are usually ethnic groups with language or cultural differences that set them apart from the majority. PR efforts can reach lofty heights if those differences can be minimized or eliminated insofar as they affect participation in government.

Failure to develop and utilize post-election PR procedures. Another shortcoming is the traditional election's failure to follow-up after the polls close. This can be the most effective PR element of the election regardless of the voting outcome, but it is especially urgent if the voting is negative. It is also an effective way to reach the largest citizen group: the non-voters who failed to vote on election day. Poll them to find out why.

In traditional elections the voting outcome is often in doubt. Election procedure as described here is based on an old gambler's admonition, "Don't spin the wheel until all the

bets are covered.” This election procedure calls for a public acceptance committee to estimate the number of yes votes necessary to carry the issue, with a safe margin. It then determines by various means if there are enough “yes” votes. The election is not officially called until there are. The complexity and effort of this effort is infinitely preferable to the uncertainty and the sometimes wrenching results of typical elections.

An Election That Works—In Votes and Goodwill

If we concede there is much wrong with the traditional election pattern, the question arises whether there is an alternative election procedure that will minimize or eliminate the defects. The answer is a resounding yes, but first there must be a change in the way local

governments view the bond election process.

Because the election and the authorizing of a bond issue is nearly always crucial to a local government’s future, officials believe they must do everything within legal limits to get enough “yes” votes. There is some practicality in this, but its narrow purpose is largely responsible for much that is wrong with the traditional election. To achieve a higher procedural level, the purpose of a usual election must give way to a much more enlightened concept. It might be stated this way in describing the proper election’s purpose:

“With the involvement of our citizens—everyone who wished or could be persuaded to become involved—Center Hill City (hypothetical, of course) has defined a problem and proposed what seems to be a reasonable solution to it. That solution is now being presented to you as the qualified electors to decide officially whether or not you approve.”

Although some may dismiss this concept of purpose as the naive twaddle of an artless mind, it is actually at the highest level of democratic governance. Beneath its seemingly simple surface lies an action plan so open and without guile that—when fully implemented—it can raise public relations to heights few local governments ever achieve. If the local government gains enough yes votes, it wins. If it fails to gain enough yes votes, it still wins; it wins in constituent confidence, trust, and goodwill that can carry over far into the future.

For the thoroughly realistic manager and others, such a procedure may seem like giving up all control on election day. Many will say and have said, “I can’t risk it. The election has to be won. I don’t want to leave it to the uncertainty of citizen committees.”

Actually, unless a local government operates with an unusually high degree of accord and unity with its constituents, the process described here is much less a risk than the traditional election. This occurs because you know with virtual certainty how many yes and no votes will be cast. You know because the controls are there, controls dictated in the best way: by the citizens of your community.

The Truly Successful Election

To describe fully the election envisioned requires far more space than is available here. But perhaps by setting forth its four basic phases, an overview can be provided that may aid in understanding the procedures of the truly successful election.

Phase I—The Preliminary Investigation

This phase begins when thought is first given

to a bond election. The first activity should be a hard-edged inquiry by the elected officials, manager, and staff into all possible options to determine whether or not needs can be met by methods other than general obligation bonds. This phase ends when the council decides whether or not to conduct an in-depth study of the advisability of calling an election. It must be clear that this action is not to *call* the election, but only to study the *advisability* of doing so.

Phase II—The Election Study

This phase is the heart of the election process. Because it is comprehensive and will involve perhaps hundreds or thousands of citizens in a study of all relevant factors affecting the election, ample time should be allotted. This should be at least six months and preferably a year if the election proposals are at all complex. These are the purposes of Phase II:

- To create broad awareness of this new approach to a bond election.
- To collect and analyze all possible relevant election data and information. This is done by many citizens' committees, open-ended to allow volunteer membership in addition to selected members.
- To publicize all procedures and especially the tentative election proposals as developed.
- Once the tentative election proposals have been developed, to assess unofficially the degree of their acceptance by the qualified electorate. This is done by a public acceptance committee that determines by polls, straw votes, public meetings, house to house canvassing, volunteer calling in, and other means the degree of acceptance by the qualified electorate.
- To provide a sound basis for the council to make an official decision whether or not to call an election on a specified date and with certain proposals.

Phase II requires the participation of as many people as are willing to become involved on committees. This not only takes advantage of the skills and knowledge many citizens possess, it also creates a positive psychological attitude as citizens are asked to become a part of the election and its decision-making process.

One such committee—perhaps an election council—should stand above all others. It is a committee that is given election oversight, analyzing and evaluating all information it receives from lesser committees. It makes final recommendations to the governing body on whether or not to call an election and, if it is called, on what date and with what proposals.

Through this overall committee, the local government says to its citizens, "While the local government must be legally responsible, this election is essentially your election. Our decisions will be based on your judgments as expressed in committee studies and recommendations."

Functioning under the election council, there could be any number of committees. Examples might be: public information, existing facilities, community growth, fiscal status, public acceptance, voter encouragement, election evaluation and final report, plus others as needed. In addition many committees will have subcommittees. Public information, for instance, may have print and broadcast media, community organizations, speakers' bureau, house to house canvassing, brochures, mailings, signs, etc.

Meanwhile the public acceptance committee has estimated the number of "yes" votes required and identified by name the qualified electors who will support the election proposals and pledge to come to the polls on election day. With this assurance and with information from other committees, the election council makes recommendations to the governing body. The council is then in a position to make valid official judgments about setting the election date and the proposals to be voted on. When the decision is made, Phase II ends and Phase III begins.

Now the sole function of this committee is to encourage and assist all electors, regardless of their vote, to come to the polls on election day.

Phase III—Voter Encouragement and Assistance

The title of this phase describes its purpose. In Phase II, the election officially was called. Now the sole function of this committee is to encourage and assist all electors, regardless of their vote, to come to the polls on election day. Its object is to get as many voters as possible with at least 50 percent of those registered as its minimum goal.

As the polls close on election day, Phase III ends and Phase IV begins.

Phase IV—Post Election Activity

The purposes of this phase are to:

- Continue the election as a public relations activity.
- Thank all voters by individual mailings for

their participation in this critical community function.

- Gain all possible information from voters as to their attitudes toward the election's conduct. (This can be done through a mailed questionnaire.)
- Conduct a poll of non-voters to determine why they failed to vote.
- Gather, analyze, and evaluate all data gained about the election procedure.
- Prepare a comprehensive election report with recommendations for improvement of future elections.
- Encourage citizen participation in community affairs other than elections.

The question of a citizens' promotion group should be mentioned here. In this type of election, it is unnecessary, even undesirable. But if a group—entirely on its own, except for normal information and assistance from the local government—wishes to promote the election proposals, it should be encouraged. It would be much better, however, for such a committee to channel its interests and energies toward supporting community understanding of this new election process and assisting the voter encouragement committee to get the largest voter turnout on election day.

Drawbacks vs. Benefits

Here, then, we have an election procedure that departs radically from tradition. But it, too, has its drawbacks. It is far more involved, takes more time, is more costly, and may need more staff involvement. Yet these drawbacks are insignificant when compared to the long-lasting benefits.

Chief among these, of course, is that it moves the government's relationship with its constituents to a new and exciting level of participatory partnership. This is what Charlotte Ryan in her 1976 book, *The Open Partnership*, defined and described so well. In place and functioning, it completely eliminates any unfriendly or apathy gap that may exist between the government and its people.

An election like that described here can bring a warm personal feeling of accomplishment to elected and appointed officials. This once happened to me—as a school superintendent—when one constituent said after an election, “Mr. Superintendent, I had to vote “no” because I just can't afford that tax increase, but I like the way you handled the election and I'm all for you. Call on me again sometime.” When this happens, you know you have done it right. **PM**