"I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore! Taxes are too high, elected officials are out of touch, spending is out of control; state government is a train wreck. Bah humbug."

If you have ever felt like this (and who hasn't at one point or another?) and if you also want to do something directly -- like petition for a new law or other ballot proposition -- better pack your bags and plan some travel first, because you can't do it in Pennsylvania. You are going to have to move to one of the 24 states that allow ballot initiatives.

Or maybe it's a particular politician that has your ire -- the governor perhaps, or one of the statewide officials like the auditor general or attorney general, or a state appellate judge. You believe that the state may not survive another day with them in office, and you want to do something about that.

If so, keep those bags packed because you can't do anything about that in Pennsylvania either. You are going to have to move to one of the 14 states that allow elected statewide officials to be recalled before their term is over.

Both these actions -- getting something on the ballot or someone out of office -- are often referred to as "direct democracy," a term that includes the initiative and referendum as well as recall. Pennsylvania doesn't have either the initiative or the recall at the state level, and in fact in Pennsylvania there's very little that's direct about democracy.

The state does have a limited referendum process, known as a legislative referendum. Constitutional amendments and bond referenda go on the ballot some years, but only the legislature decides if and when they do. The voters' role is limited to yes or no approval.

Among the devices of direct democracy, recall most resembles a normal election. Procedures vary from state to state, but typically voters may request a recall election of an elected figure by circulating a petition among qualified voters. Typically, 25 percent of those who voted in the last election must sign the petition, whereupon the elected official must stand for a special election.

Usually voters are asked to vote referendum style, yes or no on the recall question: should the elected official remain in office? Some states also allow rival candidates to run in the same recall election to fill the vacancy if the vote goes against the recalled elected official.

Recall is praised by some, but criticized by others. In practice, however, it's not heavily used -- and when used, it is often unsuccessful. Some high profile efforts do occur, such as the one going on now to remove California's governor. But nationally most recall efforts are drives to remove local officials, county judges or school board members.
Initiatives are another matter. Technically, there are two versions of the initiative: the "direct" and the "indirect". The indirect is most common. Under its provisions, a proposed law or constitutional amendment is placed on the ballot for a vote after a prescribed number of voters -- typically 5 to 15 percent of the electorate -- have signed a petition.

The indirect initiative also requires a petition and signatures, but adds an extra step to the process. The proposed law or amendment must be submitted to the legislature before it goes on the ballot. If the legislature doesn't act on it within some prescribed period, it then goes to the electorate for a direct vote.

Nationally about 15 percent of all initiative proposals actually qualify for the ballot. Once on the ballot, their chances of passage are relatively high -- the voters approve about 40 percent.

For all this, relatively few public policy issues are decided via the initiative. But some that are approved turn out to be monumental. The single best-known example is probably California's notorious Proposition 13 that capped property taxes in that state. But the term limit movement as well as a number of environmental issues first gained momentum as ballot measures. Gambling, abortion, environmental issues and gay rights are also commonly addressed in initiatives.

Would either initiative or recall work in Pennsylvania?

Reasonable people answer this question differently. Advocates believe that instituting the initiative would infuse new ideas into state politics, improve public policy, and energize an electorate not always conspicuously enthusiastic about either voting or politics. These would not be trivial benefits.

But opponents argue that the initiative would undermine representative democracy, create confused voters and confusing issues, and add unnecessary expense to the electoral process. These are not insignificant consequences.

Recall also generates passionate support as well as vehement opposition. Supporters argue it helps representative democracy work better by increasing accountability, while giving voters a direct check on the behavior of incumbents. But critics counter that the threat of recall encourages elected officials to pander to passing whims of the electorate, while recalls themselves are unfair to elected officials who have been given a set term to accomplish their goals.

Clearly, both sides make some good arguments, but most of the good arguments they make are based on experience in other states. Pennsylvania is unique politically, culturally, and historically. What has worked elsewhere may not work here. On the other hand, what has not worked elsewhere may work fine here.

What matters is not how good these arguments sound coming out of a textbook, but how well all these arguments actually play out in the context of Pennsylvania politics and government. To date, most of the arguments heard have been more textbook than context.

We are not likely to know whose arguments actually make sense in Pennsylvania until we actually have a debate about them in the state. To date, we haven't done much of that.
The welter of weighty issues before us these days certainly provide food for thought. How would things like gambling, property taxes, environmental issues, or education reform play out if Pennsylvania allowed more direct democracy?

It's hard to know for sure, but almost certainly some of them would turn out differently. And would that be good or bad? Again, who really knows? Ultimately, would the Commonwealth be a better place to live, and would our government work better, if we had more direct democracy? These are all reasonable questions, and they deserve some reasonable answers.

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