

**POLITICS & GOVERNMENT**

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Ranney concedes that it may be right to worry that Americans who don't vote are "less than full citizens," and that nonvoting is a blemish on "democracy's high ideals." Yet if it is such a major ill, why not make voting *compulsory*, as Australia, Belgium, Italy, and Venezuela have done? Because, Ranney responds, "many of us also feel that the right to abstain is just as precious as the right to vote."

Lectures on citizens' civic duties won't raise voter turnout much, Ranney avers. He favors both get-out-the-vote drives and liberalized voter registration laws—allowing registration by mail, for example—but doubts that they would boost turnout by more than 10 percentage points. Blacks, Hispanics, and poor whites, the main stay-at-homes, won't be lured to the polls, he writes, until they "come to believe that voting is a powerful instrument for getting the government to do what they want it to do."

### *City Hall Symbolism*

"The City Council Chamber: From Distance to Intimacy" by Charles T. Goodsell, in *The Public Interest* (Winter 1984), 20th & Northampton Sts., Easton, Pa. 18042.

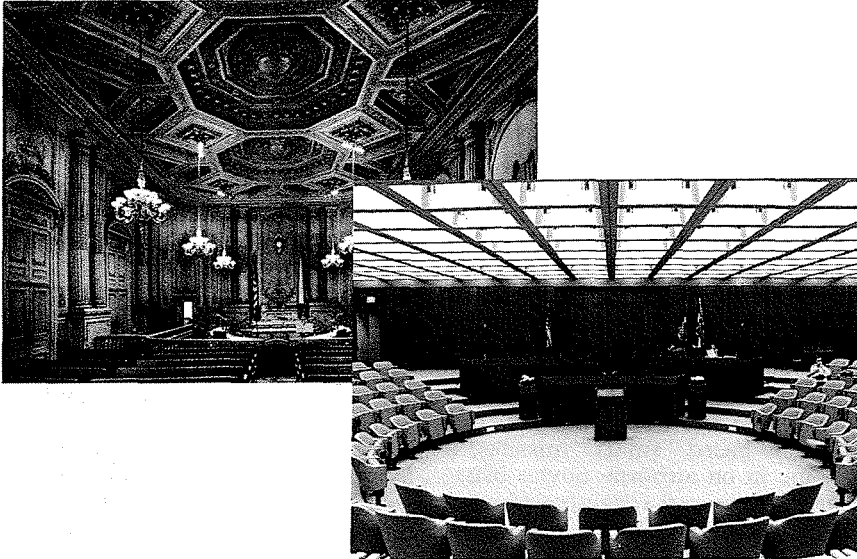
Public buildings, from the White House to town meeting halls, are full of symbolism. In the changing interior designs of city halls during the past two centuries, Goodsell, who teaches at Virginia Polytechnic Institute, sees a chronicle of America's political evolution.

City council chambers built between 1800 and 1930, he writes, "openly asserted public authority." Massive staircases led from the lobbies to the legislators' domain, creating the impression of an ascent to a "civic sanctuary." Citizens could watch only from upper-level galleries with no access to the chamber floor. Ornate furnishings of dark, carved wood and plush upholstery reinforced the "majesty of authority" in the municipal buildings of older cities such as Baltimore and Pittsburgh.

A more egalitarian post-New Deal style is evident in municipal structures erected between 1930 and 1960. Spectators sat on benches on the chamber floor itself. In the "great turnabout," city councilmen no longer sat with their backs to the audience, facing the presiding officer, but looked out toward the audience. Such designs stressed government's accountability. Sparse furnishings "downplay[ed] the officials' superior status," Goodsell observes. But all trappings of authority did not vanish. Officials still sat on raised platforms, and railings separated the governors from the governed.

Since 1960, a new inventory of civic symbolism has been created. Growing city bureaucracies are often housed in office towers, adjacent to a low city council building, as in Phoenix or Wilmington. The bureaucracy is, symbolically, out of reach; the low-lying council building belongs to "the people." Inside, the council chambers are smaller and more intimate. In many cases, the legislators sit in a "pit," *below* the citizens, with minimal physical barriers between them. Mindful of the presence of TV cameras, many architects create, "in effect, a television

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*San Francisco's Board of Supervisors convenes in a majestic chamber (left) completed in 1915. By contrast, the contemporary layout of "the pit," as locals call it, where the Fort Worth, Texas, City Council meets, fosters the impression of informal contact between citizen and legislator.*

studio" that extends the intimacy to the community at large.

Overall, says Goodsell, the new council chambers suggest that citizens and their representatives are equals, "mutually engaged in the work of government." He worries, though, that while the new designs reflect (and perhaps contribute to) openness in city government, they may also foster a false sense of intimacy and informality that will erode local government authority.

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**FOREIGN POLICY & DEFENSE**

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*Making the Bomb Obsolete*

"Reagan vs. the Scientists: Why the President is Right About Missile Defense" by Robert Jastrow, in *Commentary* (Jan. 1984), 165 East 65th St., New York, N.Y. 10022.

Hoots of derision from scientists, journalists, and Washington politicians greeted President Reagan's March 1983 call for a Space Age defense against Soviet nuclear attack.