

Public office and civic duty

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The families of the *Daig* dominated the government of Basel until the democratisation of the nineteenth century. Their members sat in the small and the great council, held the offices of mayor and guildmaster, administered the city's finances and its rural territory, represented the city in the diet of the Confederation and led its diplomatic missions. Public office, regarded as a duty of the wealthy and educated, was largely unpaid or poorly paid. The holders of office financed their public service from their private wealth, expecting in return honour, influence and the possibility of protecting the interests of their families and their businesses.

This system had the advantage of recruiting able and wealthy men for public service at little cost to the city. It also had the disadvantage of concentrating power in a small group of families and of blurring the line between public and private interests. Nepotism, the favouring of relatives in appointments, and the use of public office for private advantage were constant temptations. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the competition for offices in Basel had led to practices of canvassing and bribery, known as *Praktizieren*, that threatened the integrity of the government.

In 1718, the council of Basel adopted a remarkable reform to combat these practices: it introduced the drawing of lots for the filling of many public offices. Under the new system, the council nominated several candidates for an office, among whom the final choice was made by lot.¹ The lot made it pointless to bribe the electors, since no one could know who would be chosen. It also gave every nominated candidate an equal chance. The system was used in Basel for most of the eighteenth century, while similar systems were used in other Swiss cities and in Venice.

The Basel lottery for public offices is an early example of institutional design against corruption that has attracted the interest of modern political theorists who discuss the use of sortition in democratic institutions. It is

also relevant to the governance of financial institutions. The prevention of conflicts of interest, the independence of decision-makers and the protection of procedures against manipulation are central concerns of modern corporate governance and financial regulation. The citizens of Basel who drew lots for their offices in the eighteenth century understood that good governance requires institutions that make corruption difficult in practice.

1 Notes

1. On the introduction of the drawing of lots (Losverfahren, Ballotage) for the election of officials in Basel in 1718 as a measure against canvassing and corruption (Praktizieren), see HLS, article "Los (Wahlverfahren)"; the literature on the constitutional history of Basel. Date to be verified. ↩

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