

The 1923 municipal manager form of government will harm A.C.'s communities

The Civic Associations of Atlantic City United
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Voting is one of our most fundamental rights as citizens of this country. And since our local government makes the decisions that impact our daily lives the most, the right to choose our local elected officials is crucial. But these rights are currently being threatened by outside special interests who see us and our neighbors as roadblocks to their economic and political plans. As the volunteer leaders of Atlantic City's five civic associations, we stand together against these efforts and are working to educate the city's residents about what's really at stake.

On March 31st, we will go to the polls to decide if we want to change our council-mayor form of government to a form of government from 1923: a time before the invention of television, before child labor laws existed, and before racial segregation was illegal. The "1923 Municipal Manager Form of Government" will harm our city in a number of ways if voters approve this measure.

First, we will lose our six local wards, which currently guarantee neighborhood-level representation on city council. Eliminating wards and moving to an entirely "at-large" council structure will harm our representation and prevent us from electing candidates of our choice. Creating "at-large" districts is a voter suppression tool, which is why this voting structure has been subject to so much litigation across the country.

Second, we will lose our right to elect a mayor. Instead, 5 city council members will choose a mayor among themselves, and then they will hire someone to serve as the City Manager. The City Manager will run the city's operations and can receive "job tenure" after 3 years. How can we hold these individuals accountable for their decisions if we are stripped of our ability to vote them in or vote them out?

Third, our citywide elections will move from November to May, which will increase voter confusion and cause even lower voter turnout, in addition to the added taxpayer costs of running another election.

Finally, we will lose the initiative and referendum rights we currently have as a Faulkner Act city. Our initiative and referendum rights are what we used in 2017 when we collected thousands of petition signatures to protect our public water. These rights allow us to come together as voters and bypass City Council to implement or overturn an ordinance. We will no longer be able to engage in this type of direct democracy under the 1923 Municipal-Manager form of government.

Changing the form of government will do nothing to address any of the concerns shared by the residents of Atlantic City. As civic leaders, we don't just regularly hear about the issues frustrating our families, friends and neighbors – we also personally experience these issues. From the continuous street flooding, to broken street lights, to lack of a nearby supermarket, and to ever-increasing property taxes that make many fearful of losing their homes, we are aware of the current state of the city. But we will not mislead our neighbors into believing that these issues and decades of disinvestment in our hometown are related to the *form* of government.

This year, America celebrates many voting rights milestones: the 150th anniversary of the 15th Amendment extending the right to vote to Black men, the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment extending the right to vote to women, and the 55th anniversary of the Voting Rights Act ending the discriminatory Jim Crow-era laws that prevented African Americans from accessing the ballot box.

While those bankrolling the efforts to change our local government desecrate the memory of those who fought for our voting rights and equal and fair representation for all, we choose to commemorate these historical milestones by fighting to protect our civil and constitutional rights against outsider, big-money special interests. Our interests are with our communities, and we are beholden to no one else. If this makes us "the cartel," then so be it.

We call on our fellow citizens of Atlantic City to stand with us in this fight. Join us in preventing a permanent take-over by visiting nj.gov/state/elections/ to find out if you are registered to vote, to download a registration form, or to request an "absentee" mail-in ballot. You can also contact the County Clerk for voter information and resources at 609-625-7000. Inform your family and friends of the March 31st referendum and what's at stake for the residents of Atlantic City. And finally, join us at the polls on March 31st and vote "no!"