

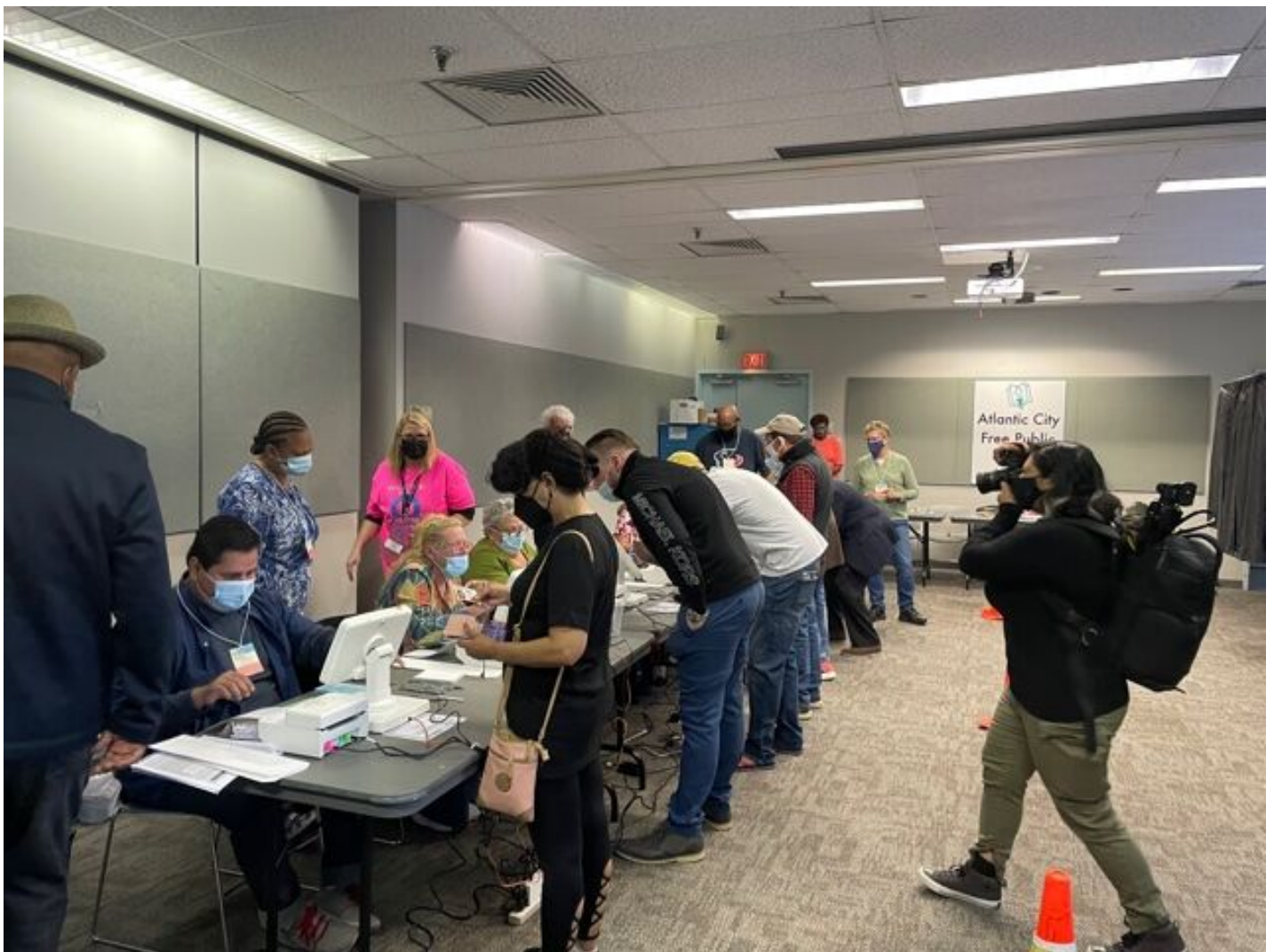
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TOP STORY

The pros and cons of Atlantic City's nonpartisan election ballot question

Michelle Brunetti Post

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The first day of early voting on Oct. 23, 2021, opened with a crowd of voters at the Atlantic City Free Public Library. If a ballot question passes Nov. 8, 2022, to change to nonpartisan elections in May, the city would run its local election separate from the primary and general elections for county, state and federal offices.

Michelle Brunetti Post



In addition to their president, Brazilians will elect 513 members of parliament on October, 2. The number of women running for office is on the rise, as is the number of black people, indigenous or lgbt candidates, as our team on the ground reports.

ATLANTIC CITY — Voters here will decide Nov. 8 whether they want to move to nonpartisan elections in a city where the Democratic Party strongly dominates.

The resort would follow other local shore towns like Ventnor, Margate, Longport and Ocean City in holding nonpartisan elections in May, with candidates running as individuals with no indication of party affiliation.

There are pros and cons to the move, said John Froomjian, executive director of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.

“Nonpartisan elections can seem appealing, especially these days when the two parties are always in conflict and the country seems so polarized,” Froomjian said. “On a municipal level you can make the argument that ideology takes a back seat to the government’s ability to provide services. There’s not a Democratic or Republican way to pick up the trash.”

Nonpartisan elections eliminate the need for primary elections, Froomjian said, where candidates on the more extreme ends of the spectrum often get the nomination, rather than more moderate candidates.

But there are negatives to giving up the partisan approach, Froomjian said.

“The flip side is that the primaries act as a filter to weed out candidates that are clearly not qualified,” he said.



Partisan elections good for diversity, Small supporters say

Without a primary contest, sometimes factors not related to a candidate’s qualifications determine the outcome.

“Often a nonpartisan election becomes a personality contest, or the one with the most name recognition triumphs,” Froomjian said.

And turnout can be extremely low, because it is an extra election held out of synch with primaries and general elections.

According to a report in the New Jersey Globe, only 16.6% of all voters in the 11 municipalities with May 10 municipal elections voted this year.

In Newark, only 11.1% of voters participated to determine the race for mayor and four ward council seats, according to the Globe.

That's about the turnout rate for primary elections, where only the most active voters participate. Atlantic County's turnout in the June primary was just 11%, and the statewide turnout 12%, compared with 39% for Atlantic County and 40% for state in the 2021 general election, which included the gubernatorial race and was a low turnout for a general election historically.

In 2020 the general election, which included the presidential and congressional races, saw about a 70% turnout rate in both the county and state.



Support grows on Atlantic City council for nonpartisan elections, vexing mayor

“Taking it out of the general election makes it really a small-scale election, more akin to a school board election than the general,” Froonjian said. “In lower turnout, weird things can happen. It doesn’t take a lot of votes either way to swing an election.”

Turnout doesn’t have to be low in nonpartisan towns, however.

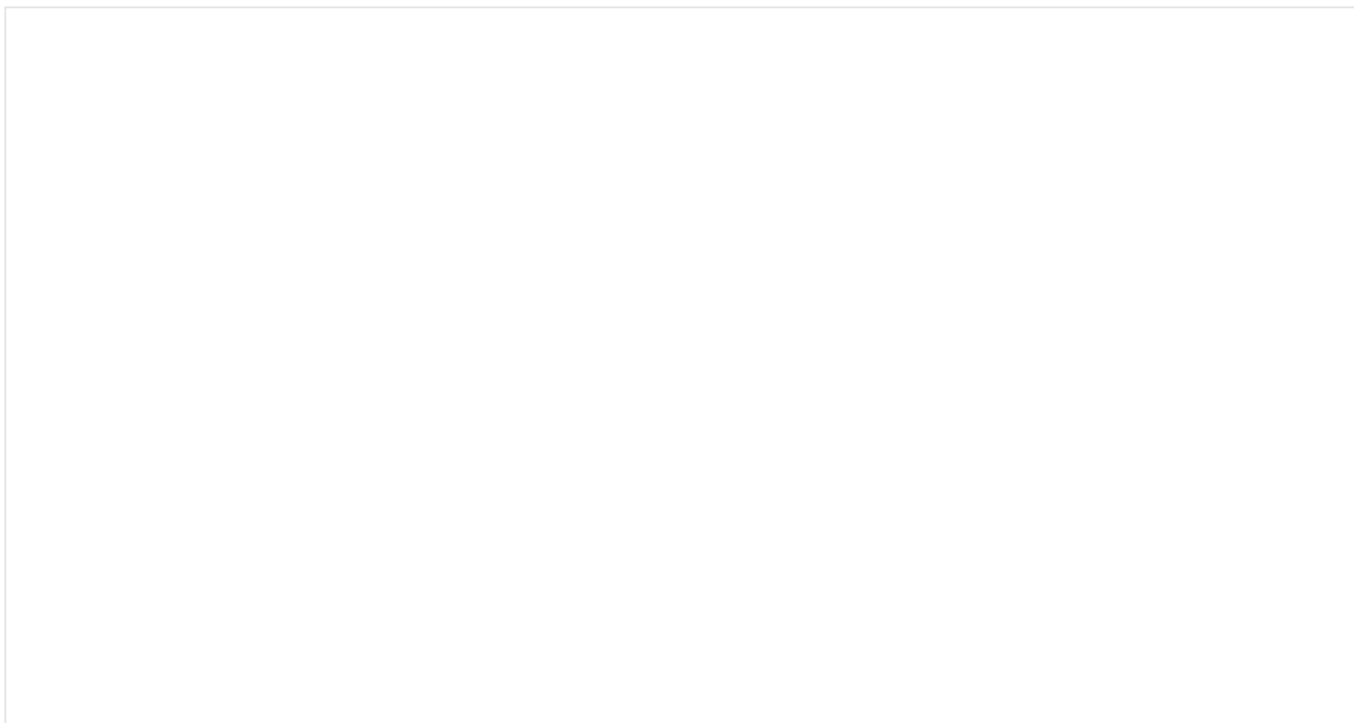
In Ocean City, 4,274 votes were cast in May in the municipal election that included a mayoral race. That means about 44% of the 9,633 registered voters in Ocean City participated.

Supporters of the change in Atlantic City, including four of nine City Council members, say the goal is to make it easier for ordinary people to get involved in government, compared to the situation now with partisan elections. Currently the Democratic municipal committee determines which candidates to support, and critics say that favors connected people too much.

Opponents, including Mayor Marty Small Sr. and the other five council members, say it adds the cost of another election to the city budget, and will result in lower turnout for both nonpartisan elections and for primary and general elections for county, state and federal offices.

Those opposed also caution that the Democratic Party has done a good job of making sure diverse candidates are supported, and a nonpartisan system would risk losing that diversity.

Partisan elections also allow local candidates to run on the “party line” or under well-known national and state candidates, Froonjian said.





November referendum will decide if Atlantic City moves to nonpartisan elections

Sometimes a well-known local candidate can even help county and state candidates with low name recognition, he said.

“It helps both ways up and down (the ballot),” Froonjian said.

Partisan elections also allow voters to easily identify which candidate is most in line with their thinking, Froonjian said.

“Especially at the local level, voters may not have the time or inclination to research candidates on their own or explore what positions they hold,” Froonjian said. “It’s a shortcut for people to endorse the party they prefer without having to get in the weeds of political positions.”

And nonpartisan elections don't eliminate polarization and party participation, he said.

"It can become nonpartisan in name only, or they break into factions or cliques based on local issues," Froomjian said. "Candidates even run as a team."

If approved on Election Day, the change is likely to benefit Republicans and a faction of Democrats who are pushing back against the Small administration, Froomjian said.



Atlantic City mayor calls proposed election changes a GOP ploy

Small's supporters recently wrested control of the municipal Democratic Committee from political operative and Small political enemy Craig Callaway, a former council president who went to prison on bribery charge in the 2000s.

Callaway helped collect hundreds of the more than 2,000 signatures the group compiled to get the question on the ballot.

“Generally what happens in (places) dominated by one-party rule, the opposition party never gets any traction but rifts develop within the majority party and factions develop,” Froonjian said. “The opposition party poses no real threat, but factions within the dominant party do.”

There is only so much power to go around, and only so many positions to award, so those left out become opponents.

“Whoever is in control now probably stands to potentially lose the most,” Froonjian said.

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