



# DETROIT'S CITY CHARTER & THE 2018 ELECTIONS

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*This primary election, Detroiters will vote on whether or not to revise the City Charter.*



## WHAT IS A CITY CHARTER?

Michigan's 1909 "Home Rule Cities Act" allows a city's citizens to govern themselves, and gives Detroit the right to create its own City Charter, approved by the Governor. Detroit's City Charter defines how our city government is structured, and what its powers and responsibilities are. It's like a Constitution for the city, but operates within the framework already established by the U.S. Constitution and Michigan Constitution.

Originally, Detroit's City Charter was written and revised by the state legislature. In 1918, after many people were fed up with corruption, Detroit voters adopted the city's first Home Rule charter. The partisan, ward-based, 42-member legislative body was replaced with a strong mayor form of government and a City Council with nine non-partisan at-large members.



*Adapted from the National Civic League's "Guide to Charter Revision"*

## WHEN TO CONSIDER CHANGING THE CHARTER

Not every local government issue is a charter issue and may be better handled in other ways. So, before voting on whether to revise the charter, consider:

- Can this problem be addressed by the passage of an ordinance or a change in policy?
- Should a solution to this problem be sought by getting new officials in office?
- Might state legislation address this problem more effectively?
- Can the change be made by a charter amendment as opposed to a charter revision?

If the answer to any of these questions is "yes," that issue is probably not suited for a two-year comprehensive charter revision process. Furthermore, many local government services and regulations are mandated by state or federal law and cannot be altered or eliminated by changes to the charter.

## WHAT CHARTER CHANGE CAN AND CAN'T DO

So what can charter change do? And, perhaps more importantly, what can it not do?

Here are some examples:

### CAN

- ✓ Change the form of government (city manager, strong mayor, etc.)
- ✓ Alter electoral representation (i.e. district and/or at-large representation)
- ✓ Clarify ambiguity or confusion caused by existing charter language
- ✓ Redistribute powers among elected officials, appointed officials, and governing bodies as well as between city officials and citizens

### CAN'T

- ✗ Automatically increase the quality of governmental products and services
- ✗ Eliminate political in-fighting
- ✗ Stop a controversial public project
- ✗ Change or eliminate state or federally-mandated activities.

## SELECTED SOURCES

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