

New York Voters Reject Chance to Rewrite State Constitution

BY: [Alan Greenblatt](#) | November 7, 2017

This story is part of our [2017 elections coverage](#).

New York voters have once again declined to call a state constitutional convention.

Once every 20 years, under the existing state constitution, citizens are asked if they'd like to call a constitutional convention and reexamine the fundamentals of the government process. Even this year's supporters of the idea understood all along that it would be a longshot. The state hasn't held a constitutional convention in half a century.

New York state government offers plenty of opportunities to complain. To start with, the legislature has witnessed an epidemic of scandals in recent years. Last year, the former leaders of both legislative chambers were sentenced in separate corruption cases. (Their convictions have since been overturned.) In fact, the last time the legislature held a session in which no members resigned due to ethical or legal troubles was back in 2002.

All of that is putting aside the endemic complaints about the lack of transparency in a system under which "three men in a room" -- the governor and the two legislative leaders -- set the budget and other policy priorities.

"There is no more effective way to engage the public than a constitutional convention, and there is no place that needs it more than Albany," Assembly Republican Leader Brian Kolb [wrote](#) earlier this year.

But the reason voters were wary of rewriting the state constitution was obvious. Even if no one is happy with the current culture in Albany, there are plenty of powerful interests who worried about what could happen to provisions that benefit them.

"The convention is unlimited, so that puts fear into people about things they want to protect -- pensions, environmental protections, the rights of the poor," says Gerald Benjamin, a political scientist at the State University of New York at New Paltz.

Benjamin argues that such fears are overblown. But dozens of organized interest groups lined up to oppose the measure, including teachers unions and advocates on both sides of the abortion issue.

"Your pension could vanish in a constitutional convention," the New York State Alliance for Retired Americans warned its members.

A convention might have simply pruned away some of the outdated and contradictory language in the constitution, or it could choose to radically alter the structure of state government. There would have been no limits. Naturally, that made people nervous.

"All too often, state constitutional conventions are failures," [writes](#) Joshua Braver, a politics fellow at Tufts University. "They aspire to revolutionize politics, but instead they are dominated and hijacked by the same political class that was the problem in the first place."

This story is part of our [2017 elections coverage](#).

This article was printed from: <http://www.governing.com/topics/politics/gov-new-york-constitutional-convention.html>