

Voters should give Constitutional Convention a chance: Editorial

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There is a lot of misinformation and confusion about the proposed constitutional convention.
Dick Moss, news director



New York will vote in November on whether to hold a Constitutional Convention, whether to allow judges to alter corrupt officials' pensions and whether to change Adirondack Park 'Forever Wild' regulations.(Photo: AP FILE PHOTO)

Addressing the pervasive political corruption in Albany. Overhauling the out-of-control public authorities. Vastly improving the secretive, top-down budget process. Creating a fair, objective process for the drawing of legislative districts.

There literally is no end to the good a state Constitutional Convention could do for New York – if it were approved by the people this year and then properly executed.

Voters can start a series of actions leading to such long-sought-after reforms by voting “yes” on the Nov. 7 to proposal 1. That proposal simply asks “Shall there be a convention to revise the Constitution and amend the same?”

The state Constitution itself mandates the question be placed on the ballot every 20 years for New Yorkers to consider.

Given the undeniable problems crippling Albany, New Yorkers should seize the opportunity, especially since they will have another chance to vote of any proposed changes.

More: [Watch: Experts discuss Constitutional Convention ballot question](#)

Here’s how it works: If voters give the convention the go-ahead this November, they head back to the booth in November 2018 to select the delegates serving at the convention. The convention would held be in April 2019, and any proposed constitutional changes would have to go before voters for approval in November 2019. Thus, not only is this a long process, it’s one with various safeguards along the way.

Throughout the state’s storied history, constitutional conventions have done a world of good, including making it clear New Yorkers believe the Adirondacks and Catskills should have certain “forever wild” protections and that the state acknowledges a commitment to care for the needy and provide for at least a basic education to students.

It’s true the more recent history of conventions hasn’t fared as well. The last convention was in 1967, but the proposals were ultimately rejected by the voters. And the mere idea of holding one was roundly beaten at the polls in 1987.

Critics often cite the costs, which would go into the tens of millions of dollars, and the fear the process would be hijacked by political bosses and big-money lobbyists; powerful unions in particular are concerned that pension protections could be jeopardized.

The state Constitution can be, and has been, amended through other means – an affirmative vote of two successive legislatures and then approval by the voters. But the so-called “reforms” accomplished this way have been more like placing a Band-Aid on a gunshot wound. A convention, in contrast, authorizes elected citizens (that is, the delegates) – to look at the entire document and make recommendations.

Consider that dozens of former state lawmakers, including various legislative leaders, have been indicted and convicted or have faced ethical scandals in the last decade or so – yet the state doesn’t have a truly independent ethics panel.

Consider that raw politics, not objective reasoning, determines how the political lines are drawn, and these so-called “gerrymandered” districts give incumbents an unfair advantage against challengers – yet the state doesn’t have an independent commission to redraw these lines.

Consider that New York’s own reports have shown state public authorities “often operate under the radar and with their own set of rules” and have amassed billions of dollars of debt – yet there has been no real effort to streamline these authorities and put them under true legislative oversight.

The list goes, from the alarming increase in the governor’s powers, to the state’s weak-kneed efforts at campaign finance and voting improvements.

The well-respected Dr. Gerald Benjamin, associate vice president for regional engagement and director of the Benjamin Center for Public Policy Engagement at SUNY New Paltz, cites the “once in a generation chance a convention may bring to address the pandemic corruption and dysfunction in Albany.”

He is right. The convention provides the only hope, the only true mechanism, for citizens to get around the entrenched Albany bureaucracy and make the changes they want. Voters shouldn’t rule out the option. They should instead give a convention a chance, recognizing they ultimately will get to decide whether any proposed changes go through.

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