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MONDAY, OCTOBER 9, 2017

## Debating a Constitutional Convention

Posted By Hillary Harvey on Mon, Oct 9, 2017 at 9:00 AM

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left to right: Gerald Benjamin and Fred Kowal

Turn the ballot over this November while at the polling station, and New Yorkers will be able

to cast a vote on whether New York State should hold a convention to amend its constitution.






New York's constitution was the first state constitution written, drawn from the Declaration of Independence, and it preceded the federal constitution by a decade. It's more detailed than the federal constitution, too, establishing the structure for local government, the judicial system, and the basic rights of New Yorkers. It was rewritten four times, most recently in 1894. At a pivotal constitutional convention (there have been nine in the past 240 years) in 1846, this mechanism for convening a constitutional convention was added: every twenty years, a question would be automatically added to the New York State ballot which would ask, "Shall New York hold a convention to revise the constitution and amend the same?" In five weeks, on November 7th, voters all over New York will be asked to mark, yes or no.

On Monday, October 16th, that question will be publicly debated in the Coykendall Science Building Auditorium at SUNY New Paltz .

Debating in favor of a "yes" vote is Gerald Benjamin, Director of the Benjamin Center for Public Policy Initiatives at SUNY New Paltz, a research center which engages students with communities, governments, not-for-profits, and businesses across the region. About the ballot question, Benjamin says, "Our Jacksonian forbearers, the 19th century leaders who provided us with this regular opportunity to review the fundamentals of our governance, proceeded with a profound faith in democracy. Theirs was a very American – a very New York – belief in the possibility for progress and improvement. The pending vote on calling a convention may be the most important decision we can make for improving governance in our state in this century. If we truly want to reform New York government, a convention is our only path."

Debating in favor of a "no" vote is Fred Kowal, Statewide President of the United University Professions, the nation's largest higher education union, representing more than 42,000 academic and professional faculty and retirees. About the ballot question, Kowal says, "If approved, a convention could bring about major changes to the state's constitution, which would risk many basic rights and protections, including public pensions, workers' compensation rights, collective bargaining rights, social welfare and 'Forever Wild' protections. It is important for all New Yorkers to be informed before they decide on a statewide Election Day referendum on whether or not a constitutional convention should be held."

Yes or No? A New York State Constitutional Convention? forum will take place from 6–8 p.m. on October 16th, in the Coykendall Science Building Auditorium at SUNY New Paltz. It's free and open to the public.

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