

## Spotlight News – Pros, cons of voting for a constitutional convention

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Nov 02, 2017 [Government](#), [News](#)



**GUILDERLAND** — On Election Day, New York’s voters will have their first opportunity in 20 years to call for a state constitutional convention via ballot proposition. Should they? Why or why not?

Nearly 100 Capital District voters seeking answers to those questions packed the auditorium at the Guilderland Public Library last Tuesday night for a panel discussion titled “Would New York State Benefit from a Constitutional Convention?” The event, co-presented by the League of Women Voters of Albany County and the Women’s Press Club of New York State, was moderated by Susan Arbetter, host of WCNY’s “The Capitol Pressroom,” a syndicated public radio program about state politics.

## True or False?

**The proposition appears on the reverse side of the ballot.**

*True. If you choose to vote on this and/or the other two referendums, be sure to turn your ballot over.*

**Blank votes will be counted as a vote in favor of a convention.**

*False. Arbetter, along with both panelists, stressed that votes are counted only if the circle next to the Yes or No options is filled in.*

Gerald Benjamin, director of the Benjamin Center for Public Policy Initiatives at SUNY New Paltz, believes voting on a state Constitutional Convention referendum is “a once in a generation” opportunity New Yorkers should avail themselves of. He explained it’s a chance for the people to indicate whether or not they “approve of the character and performance of our [state] government,” quickly adding he can’t think of anyone who’d answer that question with a ‘yes.’

“I think we can do better at governing New York,” he exclaimed. “I think we’ve been given this opportunity precisely so that we can choose to do better. We don’t have to accept second-rate governing, we don’t have to accept corruption, we don’t have to accept state intervention in our local affairs without limit” chief among the reasons why the state’s residents should vote in favor of holding a convention.

Ronald Deutsch, executive director of the Latham-based Fiscal Policy Institute, an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit research and education organization committed to improving public policies and private practices to better the economic and social conditions of all New Yorkers, is equally dissatisfied with the status quo. However, he views this ballot proposition as a means of opening up the state constitution as a whole to extensive scrutiny by extremists on both sides of the political spectrum. While he says good things could result from the people calling for a convention, he’s frightened about the “really bad things [that] could happen,” citing the conservative climate now prevalent in politics at both the state and national levels which has the potential to revert or even repeal existing protections, such as the Forever Wild provision.

Of great concern to Deutsch, are possible changes to Article 17, which currently reads that the state “shall” provide for the care of the needy. With the rumblings of forthcoming cuts to a variety of programs which benefit both the state and nation’s impoverished population, he’s fearful state government will follow the federal government’s lead. While he agrees change is necessary, he believes there is “too much at risk” to call for a convention at the present time.

If state residents decide to vote in favor of holding a convention, they should also be aware doing so is only the first step in a process that will take nearly three full years to complete.

The second step, electing delegates to attend the convention, would take place the following year, in this case, the 2018 general election.

The convention itself won’t actually convene until the third year. Based on the length of previous conventions, it would last between five to six months. After the delegates vote on which changes

they wish to present to state residents, they will be assembled into either a single proposition or multiple propositions on the ballot for the 2019 general election for voters to approve or reject.

Deutsch is extremely concerned the resulting referendum package could ultimately resemble that of a state budget, containing a “mixed bag” of completely unrelated proposals voters will have to accept or reject as whole, even though there are individual items they may or may not agree with.

While Benjamin doesn’t disagree that this scenario would likely play out, he thinks voters should submit to the process anyway, stating if they don’t give this process a chance, “they’ll never get any positive outcomes.”

Election Day is next Tuesday, Nov. 7. Polls in Albany County will be open from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. For more information about any aspect of voting in Albany County, visit the Board of Elections website at [www.albanycounty.com/government/departments/boardofelections.aspx](http://www.albanycounty.com/government/departments/boardofelections.aspx)

A video of the entire panel discussion is available on the Guilderland Public Library’s facebook page at [www.facebook.com/Guilderland.Library](http://www.facebook.com/Guilderland.Library).

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