



## New Yorkers divided over need for state constitutional convention

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Published: August 7, 2017, 8:27 am



ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — Corruption and a rigged political system are battle cries of both sides in a debate over whether New Yorkers should vote this fall to rewrite the state constitution.

Advocates of a “yes” vote say a constitutional convention is the only way to fix dysfunction, corruption and inefficiency in government and throw the bums out of Albany. Opponents warn the convention itself would be rife with corruption, potentially stripping away hallowed protections of the environment, labor and reproductive rights.

Both sides are launching media campaigns urging voters either to go for an overhaul or keep the status quo when they go to the polls Nov. 7.

The ballot measure is dictated by a provision in the constitution saying every 20 years, voters must be asked if they want to revise it. New York is among 14 states where the question of whether to hold a constitutional convention is automatically put on the ballot.

"This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity," said Dick Dadey, executive director of Citizens Union, a government reform advocacy group that favors a convention. "Our democracy isn't working for the average New Yorker and the way we're going to fix it is through a constitutional convention."

New Yorkers Against Corruption, a coalition of over 130 organizations opposing the referendum, says a convention would be a "\$300 million boondoggle" that benefits only corrupt Albany insiders and big money interests that would take control of the process.

"It's rigged. It's fixed. I think this is a huge risk for New York to take," said Donna Lieberman, director of the New York Civil Liberties Union, which opposes a convention but is not part of a coalition. "There's a mechanism to amend the constitution inch by inch through the legislative process. That's how it should be done."

That process has added over 200 amendments to the state constitution since 1894, which is the last time a convention produced a new constitution. Efforts of the last two conventions, in 1938 and 1967, were rejected by the electorate.

Environmental groups fear a convention could open the door to delete or weaken protections for clean air and water, healthy forests and the 6-million-acre (2.4-million hectare) Adirondack Park.

"There are a thousand ways for something bad to happen to the 'forever wild' clause at a wide-open convention," said William Janeway, executive director of the Adirondack Council.

If voters say yes, delegates would be elected next year and the convention held in 2019. Opponents fear the delegate selection process will be hijacked by powerful special interests. But voters will have to approve any proposed revisions.

Convention supporters say there's no evidence of right-wing big money getting involved.

"The real money involved in this is the labor unions that are trying to block a convention because they have great sway with this government and don't want it to change," said Gerald Benjamin, a political science professor and co-editor of a new book, "New York's Broken Constitution: The Governance Crisis and the Path to Renewed Greatness."

Benjamin said no constitutional convention in New York's history has diminished rights or protections, but have added many new ones.

Along with unions, the anti-convention coalition includes some strange bedfellows: Right-to-Life and Planned Parenthood; the Conservative Party and left-leaning Working Families Party; LGBT Network and New York State Rifle and Pistol Association.

"What they share is fear of what might happen against their interests," Benjamin said. "They have an investment in the status quo."

Benjamin said a convention is the only way to fix problems with administration of elections, campaign finance, the structure of the court system and the Legislature, which he believes would be more effective with one house instead of two.

Jerry Kremer, former Assembly Ways and Means chairman and co-author of "Patronage, Waste and Favoritism: A Dark History of Constitutional Conventions," believes voters will reject a convention despite frustration with ethics scandals. More than 30 lawmakers have left office facing allegations of corruption or misconduct since 2000.

"A certain number of people are irate about illegal conduct by elected officials, but there's no big hue and cry on the streets," Kremer said. "People are worried about jobs, their homes, the economy."

But Dadey of Citizens Union said support for the campaigns of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders shows that voters want change. "New Yorkers are simply fed up," he said.

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