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In Our Opinion: New Yorkers need to approve a convention

Updated 16 hrs ago

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Imagine ... just imagine that there might be a chance to deal effectively with New York state's cesspool of massive corruption.

Whoa!

Yes, you might fairly say "whoa" or "get out of town" or some such other utterance of incredulity.

C'mon, we're talking about Noo Yawk here, home of the "three men in a room" form of government that has resulted in Assembly speakers and state Senate leaders wearing a path from the state Capitol building to the state penitentiary.

How do we possibly change that?

By holding a constitutional convention to make big changes in the state's charter, that's how.

By state law (and maybe that should be changed, too), we only get to do this sort of thing every 20

years. That's way too long to wait. Even cicadas get up and do stuff every 17 years.

In November of 2017, there will likely be a ballot question to decide whether to have a convention. Should voters approve it, delegates would be elected across the state in 2018. Then, in 2019, the delegates would meet for four months to draw up changes to the constitution that would then go before voters for final approval.

Sounds like an awful lot of work, doesn't it? It might also cost as much as \$100 million. But if we look around at the government waste, the high taxes, the gerrymandering of districts, the power of those "three men in a room" (the governor, the Assembly speaker and the Senate leader), we figure it would be well worth it.

"This is an opportunity to deal with a government that's not performing," said Gerald Benjamin, vice president for regional engagement at the State University College at New Paltz. "It's an opportunity for direct democracy. It's time to press the reset button."

We absolutely agree. Press that button.

However, it is anything but a unanimous sentiment. Powerful unions who seem to be doing just fine under the current setup will be working hard to discourage a "yes" vote.

"It would open the door for dark money and billionaire hedge-funders to try to buy changes to the constitution that would harm working New Yorkers," said Carl Korn, spokesman for New York State United Teachers.

The anti-convention forces won out in 1997 when the citizenry voted down a ballot measure calling for one. In fact, since the state constitution was adopted in 1777, there have been only nine conventions, with the most recent being in 1967.

It is well past time for another.

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"I think it is going to be something of a referendum on what it means to be a reformer," said Richard Brodsky, a former Westchester County assemblyman. "A lot of people say they want change. But when, all of a sudden, they get a chance to change things, they back off."

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Critics of the ballot measure insist that we don't need a convention to change the constitution, that it

has been amended about 200 times without one.

But those people are missing the point, which is that the corruption, the power in too few hands and the system that favors the moneyed interests over the working men and women in this state won't disappear in drips and drabs.

This November, we are going to be electing every member of the state Legislature. All of them will tell you that they will fight for your interests in Albany when in reality all they will really be doing is the bidding of those "three men in a room" and passing out to you enough of your tax money to keep you voting for them.

It's a lousy, crooked way to run a state, and it needs to change, beginning with voting to have a constitutional convention.

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