

Policy Position on the 2017 Constitutional Convention Ballot Question

In the November 2017 election, New York State voters will be asked whether they support convening a State Constitutional Convention. Citizens Union vigorously urges New Yorkers to vote YES.

CU firmly believes that New Yorkers must “take back our democracy.” A Constitutional Convention provides a once in a generation opportunity to “open” the state constitution and make much-needed reforms to improve the performance of our state government, strengthen the integrity of our political institutions and reform our broken 20th century voting and electoral systems.

CU wants a state government that is not corrupt and lacks the regrettably all too common “pay to play” culture in which campaign contributions unduly influence legislative outcomes and the awarding of contracts. New Yorkers have a right to that. New Yorkers also deserve fairer and more competitive elections, where candidates can get on the ballot easier and voters have more ways and days to cast their ballot. Fairer and simpler elections would increase voter turnout, improve accountability, and decrease corruption. A “cleaner” democracy will result in better schools and healthcare, a stronger economy, a cleaner environment, and a safer and freer state.

In our effort to achieve a YES vote, CU will be, over the coming year, mobilizing a movement of New Yorkers in support of a Constitutional Convention. We will articulate a positive vision for political reform and a government that works for ALL New Yorkers. We will offer the promise of HOPE for what is possible, rather than FEAR of what may be lost. In the past, too many New Yorkers succumbed to negative campaigns and fear mongering, leading them to reject previous calls for a State Constitutional Convention in 1957, 1977, and 1997. Our campaign will be an optimistic one aimed at bringing civic-minded New Yorkers together in coalition to effect positive change.

Our guiding principles for reform within a State Constitutional Convention include:

1. **Fair Elections.** Elections should be impartial, neutral and equitable, minimizing partisan and financial interests. Voting should be accessible, easy, consequential, and expected.

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Guiding Principles Continued:

2. **Honest and Ethical Government.** The constitution should include stronger ethics regulations, with vigorous oversight and established ethical requirements for government officials.
3. **Accountable and Balanced Government.** As the legislature and governor work together to pass laws and budgets, their actions should be transparent, with a more equitable balance of power.
4. **A More Effective Court System.** The judicial branch must be updated to streamline and enhance operations, with a consolidated trial court system and merit-based appointments for judges.
5. **Strong and Functional Local Government.** Municipal governments must be empowered to manage more of their own affairs, and to adequately represent and provide services to local residents.
6. **Methodical Maintenance of State Constitution.** The constitution is appropriately difficult to change, yet there should be mechanisms to conduct targeted upkeep, ensuring the will of the people is met.

CU recognizes that many advocates, special interests and even some of our allies may have significant concerns regarding opening up the constitution in this way. After a YES vote, CU will work to ensure that the convention would focus on a platform for democratic reform. Though an unlimited Constitutional Convention does present some risk to currently codified protections, CU believes that this risk is worth taking, as it provides the opportunity to construct governmental systems that improve representative democracy through increased accountability, transparency, effectiveness, and ethical conduct. With restored political systems and a better functioning democracy, New Yorkers will create a more accountable state government that will more effectively serve the public interest than any time we have seen in decades.