

Citizens Union 2017 Public Policy Agenda

CITIZENS UNION brings New Yorkers together to strengthen our democracy and improve our City. The health of our democracy and the effectiveness of our government have a direct bearing on the quality of life for New Yorkers.

Nonpartisan and independent, our goal is to build a political system that is fair and open to all, that values each voice, and engages every voter. As New York's democratic reform organization, we inform, empower and organize citizens to strengthen the integrity of our political institutions. We fight against corruption; work to reform our voting and electoral systems; and press for city and state governments that are transparent, accountable and effective.

We welcome everyone, of any political or professional background, who wants to work with other New Yorkers to create a cleaner, healthier democracy for our City and State.





2017 Public Policy Agenda for the State of New York

CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION

- Win a YES vote on the statewide ballot referendum in 2017 to hold a state Constitutional Convention for the first time in 80 years.
- Simplify voting for delegates by allowing voters to cast one vote for district delegates, eliminating slate voting for at-large delegates, lowering petition signature requirements, and providing public financing.
- Eliminate “double dipping” by requiring state legislators to vacate their seats if elected as delegates, and limit accruing of pensions for all government officials.
- Require publication of voter information pamphlets about candidates for convention delegate seats.

ETHICS REFORM

- Increase disclosure of all sources of outside income by eliminating the personal services loophole.
- Limit outside income earned by state legislators up to 25%, while enacting a salary increase for legislators and eliminating their stipends.
- Reform the Joint Commission on Public Ethics, giving it greater jurisdiction over investigations and hearings, reforming its voting procedures, and increasing disclosure of its decision-making.
- Modernize reporting of outside income and lobbying activities through fully electronic reporting.
- Empower the Attorney General to investigate and prosecute cases involving public corruption.
- Amend the state Constitution to extend pension forfeiture, subject to due process safeguards, to public officers and elected officials who have been convicted of felonies.
- Restore the Comptroller’s authority to provide oversight for SUNY, CUNY and Office of General Services centralized contracts, and align the procurement procedures of authorities with those of state agencies.

ELECTION REFORM

- Increase voter participation and raise voter turnout by instituting early voting, Election Day voter registration, no-excuse absentee voting, instant runoff voting, and pre-registration of 16- and 17-year olds.
- Institute true electronic voter registration.
- Redesign and simplify the ballot for 21st century voting, and institute electronic poll books.
- Eliminate the bipartisan structure of the Board of Elections, putting in place professional, nonpartisan election administration.
- Grant New Yorkers on parole the right to vote.
- Reduce signature requirements and simplify the petition process for candidates.
- Reform how vacant seats are filled to eliminate delay and to increase voter choice.
- Allow primary winners to decline party nominations, ending use of judicial appointments to lure candidates off the ballot.

CAMPAIGN FINANCE REFORM

- Institute a public matching system, lower campaign contribution limits, and enact “pay-to-play” restrictions on those who do business with the state.
- Close the LLC loophole to ensure that limited liability corporations have the same contribution limits as other corporations, rather than the higher limit for individuals.
- Ensure effective implementation of the law creating the chief enforcement counsel at the Board of Elections.
- Ensure enforcement of new statutory requirements for disclosure of independent expenditures for political communications made independently of candidates.

2017 Public Policy Agenda for the State of New York (continued)

MUNICIPAL HOME RULE

- Make mayoral control of city schools permanent with a governance system that provides for accountability, transparency, parental engagement, and democratic participation.
- Amend the Municipal Home Rule Law to limit the ability of a mayor-appointed charter revision commission to “bump” other local charter amendments from appearing on the ballot.

LEGISLATIVE REFORM

- Reinvigorate the committee system and use conference committees, particularly during the budget process.
- Increase opportunities for public testimony and improve public disclosure of committee proceedings via expanded webcasting.
- Establish equitable distribution of funds to legislators for staffing and resources regardless of party affiliation.
- Ensure legislative continuity by allowing bills to remain on the calendar between the first and second year.
- Restrict “messages of necessity,” which allow the governor to call for immediate votes on legislation and waive the 3-day aging requirement, providing for greater legislative and public review.

BUDGET REFORM

- Require state use of Generally Accepted Accounting Principles.
- Reform the lump-sum appropriations process to eliminate vague placeholders in budget legislation, increase transparency and reduce opportunity for corruption.
- Create a more transparent, user-friendly budget process with ample time for public and legislative review.
- Establish an independent nonpartisan budget office.

- Bar the executive branch from transferring funds between agencies or programs wholesale, without legislative approval.
- Limit the governor’s ability to change policy via appropriation bills.
- Establish a later start date for the fiscal year.

JUDICIAL REFORM

- Simplify the state’s court system by consolidating the nine trial courts into a two-tiered system.
- Create a merit appointment system for all state judges.

STATE GOVERNMENT REFORM

- Maintain the Port Authority as a bi-state authority while reforming the governance structure with a single chief executive, tighter rules on the board of directors, and extending the open meetings law to the Port Authority.
- Ensure continued posting of data on NYS Open Data Portal, and improve transparency of lobbying, campaign finance, and budget.
- Expand the Governor’s Executive Order on faster appeals for Freedom of Information Law requests for all government bodies.