

A lot to learn on ballot measure

Poll shows wide support for, little knowledge about, state constitutional convention

By Matthew Hamilton

Albany

A recent poll shows that voters statewide show broad support for holding a constitutional convention, though they have yet to hear interest groups' loud calls for and against holding one. The question will be on the ballot this November.

A Siena College poll released last week shows that 62 percent of voters statewide support having a convention in 2019, at which elected delegates would propose and vote on constitutional amendments. Any proposed changes would require final sign-off by voters.

Should they elect to hold a convention, voters will pick delegates in 2018.

Yet 67 percent of voters say they've heard nothing about the convention.

A constitutional convention enjoys broad support across party and regional lines. Sixty-seven percent of Democrats, 55 percent of Republicans and 59 percent of independents support holding one, as do 63 percent of upstate respondents. Even in union households — those likely to already have heard from some major state unions opposed to a convention — 60 percent say they support holding a convention.

The support hasn't wavered, but neither has the lack of information voters have about a convention.

Support for holding a convention was at 69 percent in May 2016. It fell off to 59 percent in April. In May 2016, 66 percent said they had heard nothing about a convention, while 61 percent were uninformed as of April of this year.

"As we head into the fall, you're going to see millions of dollars spent to educate voters from the special interest groups — supporters and opponents — that will have an effect on voters," Siena College pollster Steven Greenberg said.

To a degree, the spin machine already has been turned on. Consider for example the creation of an anti-convention website supported by the New York State United Teachers union.

"NY Political Insiders Are Planning a Party ... And You're Not Invited," the website states. "An exclusive bash for the politicians, insiders, and corporate special interests. A price tag running in the hundreds of millions of dollars. Your fundamental rights at risk. Are you ready to party?"

There is no prohibition on elected officials or other Albany insiders becoming delegates, though the process is open to the public at large. Gov. Andrew Cuomo has in the past proposed reforming convention process to ensure that independent delegates are elected, though such reforms haven't come to fruition. Cuomo has in the past expressed support for a convention, though he has been almost silent so far this year.

As for the cost, the number is in dispute: Convention expert Gerald Benjamin of SUNY New Paltz estimated that the inflation-adjust cost of holding the 1967 convention today would be roughly \$47 million, not hundreds of millions.

Voters cast their ballots against holding conventions in 1977 and 1997.

NYSUT has warned that fundamental labor rights such as collective bargaining could be imperiled by a convention. However, those behind nypeoplesconvention.org — led by the good-government group Effective NY — say there is no risk to constitutional labor protections in holding a convention, and other issues supported by unions could be addressed through the amendment process.

Effective NY has produced an online video series in support of various constitutional amendments and holding a convention. That includes an "Environmental Bill of Rights" that the group and environmental advocates were pushing at the state Capitol last week.

That amendment was the subject of a January video produced by Effective NY that features Willie White, executive director of South End neighborhood group A Village Inc. In the video, White highlights the railyard next to the Ezra Prentice

Homes where oil tank cars pull into the Port of Albany and constant truck traffic clogs South Pearl Street

"We've identified a lot of different issues — asthma, emphysema, bronchitis, thyroid issues, and on and on and on," White says in the video. "This is living proof that New York state needs the constitutional amendment for clean air, for a clean environment for all New Yorkers."

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