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Constitutional convention enhances our democracy

"All the ills of democracy can be cured by more democracy."

— Alfred E. Smith, four-term,
progressive New York governor

The Connecticut Constitution, as amended in 1965, requires a ballot question every 20 years that asks voters whether there should be a constitutional convention to consider amendments. On the Nov. 4 ballot there is, therefore, the following proposal: "Shall the state Constitution Convention be convened to revise or amend the state Constitution?"

The Federation of Connecticut Taxpayer Organizations supports a constitutional convention to amend Connecticut's Constitution to provide for direct rights of initiative and referendum for Connecticut citizens. The goal is to encourage the General Assembly to add initiative and referendum to Connecticut's Constitution.

Statewide initiative and referendum is necessary to reverse the concentration of government power, neutralize the power of well financed special interests, increase public understanding of issues, stimulate public involvement in the political process to improve voter turnout, and make government more responsive.

Consider the limitations that taxpayers and voters face to affect change in state government. In the absence of statewide initiative and referendum, the recourse is to capture the interest of state representatives. But the disconnect between politicians and the public they represent results in a breeding ground of disenfranchised citizens who distrust and perceive indifference from elected representatives. And time after time, lackluster legislative sessions leave issues of importance to voters and taxpayers on the table.

Some say the election time is when the public can influence government and affect change. But more and more seats in the General Assembly are not contested. This year 59 seats are unchallenged. A more telling sign that voters don't think they can affect change is that voter participation continues to decline. On the national level, the United States is 20th out of 21 in voter turnout among established democracies. On the home front, towns and states are lucky if 40 percent or 50 percent of registered voters go to the polls.

The Civic Beat Charlene LaVoie

Today, 31 states have direct democracy laws, which include initiative, referendum and recall. Connecticut is one of only 19 states that have no citizen empowerment laws. Many voters in Connecticut have the right of initiative and referendum at the local level. The statewide initiative and referendum process is similar: Citizens develop an issue, collect signatures on a petition and put the issue before voters at a referendum. Such a process necessitates a great deal of public education on issues of collective importance.

In addition, the evidence shows that citizen-sponsored referendums generate a greater interest in politics in general. Studies by Mark Smith (courant.com/topic/politics/mark-smith-PEPLT006157), a political scientist at the University of Washington, show that when there is an initiative on the ballot during midterm elections, voter turnout climbs.

John Matsusaka, a professor of finance and business economics at the University of Southern California, has analyzed tax and spending data from the 50 states and 4,700 cities over the past 100 years. In his book, "For the Many or the Few," he concludes that there are important differences between states that allow citizen-initiated referendums and those that do not, including lower taxes and spending in those states that allow initiative. In addition, the data also show that 70 to 80 percent of voters support the process of initiative and referendums.

Democrats, Republicans, independents, liberals, moderates and conservatives support the initiative and referendum process because it gives voters the opportunity to petition the state government for changes necessary to improve their communities and to assume greater control of the government. It empowers voters with the opportunity to speak and act on issues that really matter to them such as property

tax reform, education funding, eminent domain, ethics reform and term limits, to name a few.

For example, eminent domain is an issue on the minds of citizens in Connecticut on the heels of the *Kelo v. New London* case, in which this office participated as an amicus curie. With the initiative and referendum process, voters could determine whether a law should be adopted to prevent municipalities from taking property for the benefit of private developers, regardless of price.

Another example of importance to citizens is the manner in which public education is financed. We are in the process of wrecking and in jeopardy of losing the precious right of free public education by making property taxpayers shoulder the burden. The state and federal government realize the issues here, but are practically insulated from doing the hard work and taking the necessary steps to change this inequitable formula and to ensure that all children in Connecticut receive the historically excellent, and free, public education promised by the state Constitution, regardless of economic status.

What is evident is the public's desire for change as many believe money, power and influence prevail over the interests of the average American family. Americans today want greater control over their government and their public officials, and many are working hard to assume that control through initiative and referendum. Statewide initiative and referendum promotes civic engagement and rejuvenates voters hopeful for a government of, for and by the people.

The Federation of Connecticut Taxpayer Organizations believes that a constitutional convention is right for Connecticut. Look on the Web site for more information, ctact.org

Let's support more democracy.

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