

# A Conversation Guide

## Reject Question 1



Our civil liberties are at stake if ballot Question 1 is approved and a constitutional convention moves forward in Rhode Island. Our state Constitution could be changed in ways that undermine or eliminate some of the civil liberties and hard-fought rights we take for granted. **The threat of losing our rights is why we must reject Question 1 in November — and you can help us prevent a constitutional convention!**

**A simple conversation with your friends, neighbors, and coworkers to explain why we need to reject ballot Question 1 in November can make a big difference to protecting our rights.** Below you'll find information about Question 1 and what a constitutional convention would mean. We've also included responses to some frequently asked questions, and conversation starters that can help kick-start a dialogue.

### CONVERSATION STARTERS

Last time Rhode Island had a constitutional convention, nearly 40 years ago, amendments were made to our state Constitution that seriously damaged our civil liberties. There's no reason to think the same thing wouldn't happen again this year when outside interests can spend unlimited amounts of money to influence what happens in our state.

I don't want my tax money going to fund a constitutional convention, when there are more important issues we should be putting millions of dollars into.

A constitutional convention would be just as political as the General Assembly, but with fewer checks and balances to make sure the delegates represent our priorities. Last time, many of the delegates had partisan political backgrounds, or used the convention to kick-start a political career.

### KEY POINTS

1. We need to protect our civil rights. Last time a convention happened, our Constitution was amended to include anti-abortion language, restrict the fundamental right to bail, and expand the number of people denied their right to vote because of a criminal record.
2. Our Constitution is not for sale. The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that there can't be limits on how much money corporations spend on ballot referenda, including changes to the Constitution. This means we can expect a lot of special interest money coming into our state to undermine affirmative action, reproductive rights, LGBTQ+ rights, unions and workers' rights, and immigrant rights.
3. Rhode Island doesn't need a constitutional convention to make changes. We can address important issues like separation of powers and voting rights through ballot questions proposed by the General Assembly, as has been done in the past. A convention would allow wealthy, out-of-state groups to interfere and influence the outcome of any proposed constitutional changes.
4. Constitutional conventions are very costly. Recent estimates by a bipartisan commission put the cost at \$2-4 million. There are better ways to use that money for other important services.

### **Q: What is ballot Question 1?**

**A:** Question 1 is a question that asks us — the voters — if we want to hold a constitutional convention in Rhode Island. If approved, voters will have little say on costs of a convention (estimated to be \$2-4 million), the length of time it would meet, or the issues it would consider.

### **Q: What is a constitutional convention?**

**A:** A constitutional convention is like an unrestrained version of the General Assembly. First, a special election, which would likely to be decided by very few voters, would be held to choose delegates from across the state. The delegates have no accountability to their constituents once elected.

Those delegates then propose amendments to the state Constitution. There are no limits on what amendments can be proposed once a convention meets — anything could be changed in our state Constitution, including restricting reproductive freedom or limiting voting rights, two actual examples of the damage done to civil liberties that were approved in the last convention in 1986.

Proposed amendments are then put on the ballot for voters to approve or reject. However, last time, 25 amendments had to be bundled together into only 14 ballot questions, leaving extremely confusing choices for voters.

### **Q: What's wrong with amending the state Constitution?**

**A:** Nothing's wrong with making changes to the state Constitution, but we already have a lower-risk process to put questions before the people. The General Assembly can approve ballot questions during any legislative session.

And while the political process can move slowly, there are checks and balances in place, unlike the unilateral actions taken by a convention. For example, at the last convention, some ballot measures were watered down or written so poorly that voters rejected them, only to approve modified versions of the same issues when they were proposed by the General Assembly.

### **Q: Why don't you trust Rhode Island voters to make the best decisions for our state?**

**A:** Rhode Islanders are not the only people who would have an impact: There are no limits on how much money out-of-state corporations or entities can spend to influence the outcome of a constitutional convention. And in such a divisive time, some critical civil liberties issues — reproductive rights, workers' rights, immigrants' rights, LGBTQ+ rights — would likely be targeted by out-of-state special interests.

### **Q: Isn't a constitutional convention a way for us to get specific issues passed?**

**A:** Unfortunately, it isn't that simple. Last time a convention happened, multiple amendments were bundled together making it impossible to vote for just one issue. For example, in 1986, if you wanted to vote for adding a "free speech" clause to the Constitution, you also had to vote for a provision eliminating legal protection for abortion rights, because they were bundled into one question. There's every reason to believe this would happen again.

### **Q: Isn't a constitutional convention a way to get away from all the politics of the General Assembly?**

**A:** No. While it might be billed as a non-partisan, non-political process, the last convention was extremely political. The General Assembly kept a pledge that no current legislator would run as a delegate. Instead, seven former legislators won seats to the convention; at least four relatives of sitting legislators were also elected, including the Speaker of the House's son and sister; and seventeen convention delegates used their participation as a steppingstone to running for a General Assembly seat that very same year.