



Suite 30 Ground Floor | Bretton Hall | # 16 Victoria Avenue | Port of Spain

Bring
the
Referendum!



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Referendum

A referendum allows the electorate to vote directly on issues of public importance.

In a representative democracy, citizens choose representatives in elections who make decisions on their behalf. In contrast, referenda are a form of direct democracy and are used to complement the representative system.

There are many kinds of referenda but a distinction is usually made between popular initiatives and institutional initiatives.

Popular Initiatives

A popular initiative means citizens can initiate a referendum. This involves collecting a sufficient number of signatures requesting a referendum be held on a specific question.

Institutional Initiatives

Institutional or government initiatives can be statutory or optional. A statutory referendum means that a referendum must be held on certain issues under a country's constitution.

Binding and Non-Binding

A non-binding referendum is merely consultative or advisory. In a binding referendum, the result of the vote is legally binding for the government.

The advantages of referenda include:

1. They are an effective form of direct democracy
2. They complement representative democracy by allowing the government to seek public guidance on important national issues.
3. They increase political participation as voting does not only take place every five years, thereby, helping to create a more educated and better informed electorate.



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4. They can check the power of elected governments, ensuring they keep in line with public opinion during its term in office.
5. Referenda can provide a mandate for controversial policies.
6. Referenda legitimise important constitutional issues.
7. Citizen-initiated referenda can help force issues onto the public agenda

Examples of Countries which have Referenda

Switzerland

In Switzerland, citizens can veto or modify existing laws or laws recently passed in the parliament. Referenda can also take place on a vote of no confidence on any individual in public office, including the Prime Minister.

Citizens of Switzerland are so empowered, that anyone of them can challenge a law passed in Parliament. That individual must be able to gather at least 50,000 signatures in support of his stance within a specified time period. Once successful, a national vote is convened where citizens either accept or reject the law by simple majority.

A constitutional amendment, on the other hand, requires 100,000 signatures.

Recent votes include the abolition of the army, abandoning nuclear energy, reform of health insurance or unemployment benefit, and the new railways through the Alps.

Sweden

In Sweden there are two types of national referendum: consultative referendums and referendums on constitutional issues.

The possibility of holding consultative referendums was introduced in 1922. Since then there have been six consultative referendums, most recently in 2003 on the introduction of the euro. Municipal referendums in Sweden are always consultative.



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New Zealand

In New Zealand a referendum can be called as a result of a successful petition under the Citizens Initiated Referenda Act 1993 or on the initiative of Government.

A referendum is required if 10% of enrolled electors sign a petition calling for a referendum. The form of the petition must be approved by the Clerk of the House of Representatives and the signatures must be collected within 12 months of the Clerk's approval. There is a \$50,000 spending limit on advertising, promoting or opposing a petition and a \$50,000 spending limit on advertising, promoting or opposing the answers in a referendum.

Advertising relating to a petition or referendum must include an authorisation statement setting out the name and address of the person at whose direction it is published.

United States

In the U.S., many states are often required to refer certain measures to the ballot for voter approval. For instance, changes to the state constitution must be approved by voters before they can take effect. Many state legislatures are also required by their constitutions to refer bond measures and tax changes to the voters. Legislative referenda may appear on the ballot in all 50 states.

Twenty-four states also allow voters to repeal an act of the Legislature. If the Legislature passes a law that voters do not approve of, they may gather signatures to demand a popular vote. Generally, there is a 90-day period after the law is passed during which the petitioning must take place. Once enough signatures are gathered and verified, the new law appears on the ballot for a popular vote.