

What is a referendum?

(New Zealand Parliament, 2020e)

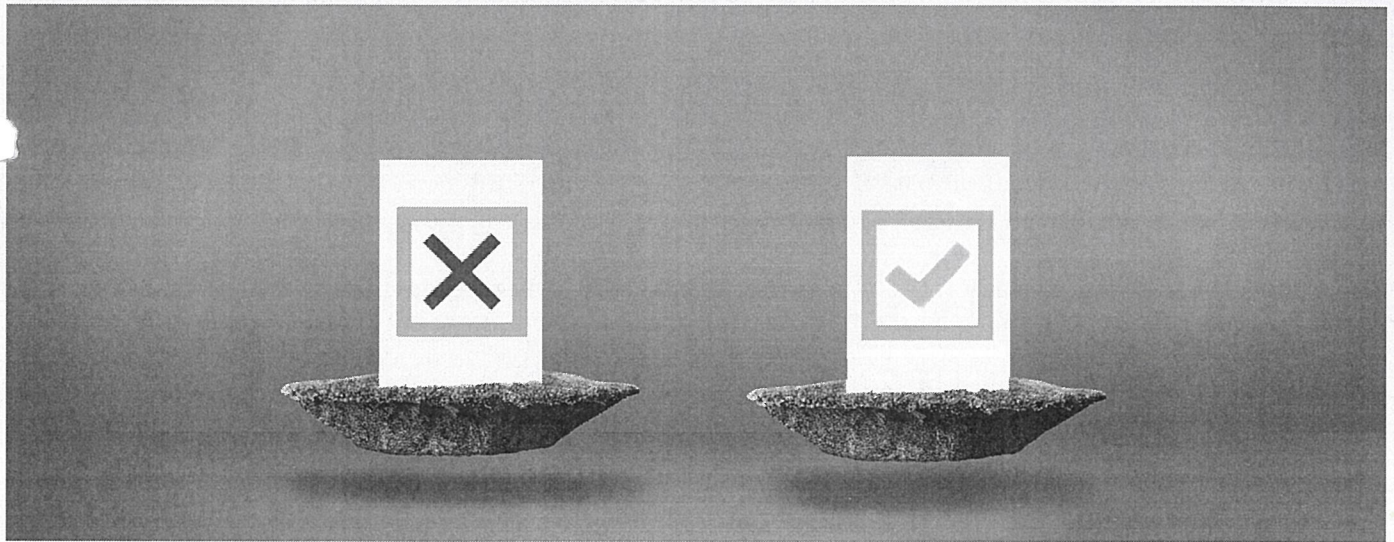
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Referenda

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Referendums are an important part of New Zealand's democracy, as they allow the public to have a direct say on changes to the law.



A referendum is a vote on a question

Source: Parliamentary Service

What is a referendum?

A referendum is a public vote on a question. Referendum questions usually have a "yes" or "no" answer, but can have more than two possible answers. Referendums can be held with an election, in a stand-alone poll, or by postal vote.

If you are enrolled to vote, you can vote in a referendum. **[Check, enrol, or update your details online now](https://vote.nz/enrol-to-vote/enrol-check-or-update/)** (<https://vote.nz/enrol-to-vote/enrol-check-or-update/>).

2020 referendums

In this year's general election on 17 October, the public can also vote on two referendums— one on the **[End of Life Choice Act 2019](http://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/2019/0067/latest/DLM7285905.html)** (<http://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/2019/0067/latest/DLM7285905.html>), and the other on whether to **[legalise the recreational use of cannabis](https://www.referendums.govt.nz/cannabis/summary.html)** (<https://www.referendums.govt.nz/cannabis/summary.html>).

Both referendums are Government-initiated. The End of Life Choice Act 2019 referendum is binding (the result decides whether the Act comes into force), while the cannabis referendum is non-binding (the Government doesn't have to implement it).

Read about what the End of Life Choice Act referendum is about. (<https://www.parliament.nz/mi/visit-and-learn/parliament-in-election-year/what-is-the-end-of-life-choice-act-referendum-about/>)

Learn about what happens after the cannabis referendum. (<https://www.parliament.nz/mi/visit-and-learn/parliament-in-election-year/what-happens-after-the-cannabis-referendum/>)

There are two types of referendums in New Zealand:

Citizens-initiated referendum

Any person in New Zealand can submit a proposal to the Clerk of the House of Representatives asking to promote their referendum petition. Then, the public is consulted on the proposed referendum question, which can take about four months.

Once the question's final wording is decided, the petition organiser has 12 months to gather enough signatures supporting holding this referendum—it can only go ahead if at least 10 percent of registered voters support it. For context, there were 3.3 million people enrolled to vote at the 2017 election, so a petition from that period would have needed over 330,000 valid signatures for it to proceed (as invalid signatures would be discounted, a petition would probably need closer to 400,000 signatures).

If the Clerk of the House is satisfied that enough valid signatures have been received, then the petition is presented to the House. At that point, a referendum is triggered, and the Government must arrange for the referendum to be held within the next 12 months.

These types of referendums are non-binding, which means the Government doesn't have to act on the result of the referendum.

Government-initiated referendum

These are referendums promoted by the Government. They can be used to bring legislation into law, or gauge how the public feel on a particular issue.

Before a referendum can be held Parliament passes a law to authorise it and to deal with related issues, such as limiting spending on referendum advertising.

These referendums can be non-binding (indicating the public's view to the Government without requiring action). A binding referendum is usually a question about whether a law, which has already been passed by Parliament, should come into force.

What issues have New Zealanders had their say on through referendums?

New Zealand's first referendum

In the 19th and early 20th century, no topic got New Zealanders more fired up than alcohol. Politicians were plagued with arguments from both sides of the debate, while the temperance movement (which aimed to limit the drinking of alcohol) held a lot of political sway.

Five referendums were held between 1894 and 1908 on liquor licenses, but these were not "national" referendums as people could only have their say on licenses in their own areas.

This changed in 1911, with New Zealand's first nationwide referendum asking voters to choose between national continuance or prohibition of alcohol sales. It wasn't the last though—by the end of the 20th century, two-thirds of the referendums held had been about alcohol.

Flag referendums

New Zealand's most recent referendum was a two-stage consultative one on the New Zealand flag. The 2015 referendum asked voters to rank five alternative flag designs from a shortlist of 40, which had been narrowed from over 10,000 designs submitted by New Zealanders. In the 2016 referendum, voters chose to keep the current flag instead of adopting the preferred alternative option.

This type of referendum is known as "consultative", as it is used by the Government to gauge the public mood on a particular topic. Others have included:

- if hotel bars should be able to stay open for longer (1949 and 1967)
- if military training should be compulsory (1949)
- if a compulsory retirement scheme should be introduced (1997)

Citizens-initiated referendums

There have been a number of these referendums held. Previous referendum questions include:

- Should the number of professional firefighters employed full time in the New Zealand Fire Service be reduced below the number employed on 1 January 1995?
- Should a smack as part of good parental correction be a criminal offence in New Zealand?
- Should the size of the House of Representatives should be reduced from 120 members to 99 members?

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NO



UNSURE