

Page 1. Representative democracy and referendums

New Zealand is a representative democracy, with a Parliament consisting of members who represent the voters that elected them. This is true of legislatures (parliaments) in all modern democracies. Generally speaking, voters' views are considered and acted on indirectly by their members of Parliament. A referendum – a poll of voters on a particular issue – sometimes gives voters an opportunity to express their views directly.

QED by the OED

The editors of a comparative study of referendums asked the editor of the *Oxford English dictionary* which word was correct for the plural of referendum – referendums or referenda? The *OED* editor replied: 'My own view is that *referendums* is logically preferable as a plural form meaning ballots on one issue (as a Latin gerund, *referendum* has no plural). The Latin plural gerundive *referenda*, meaning 'things to be referred', necessarily connotes a plurality of issues.'¹

The British attitude to referendums

New Zealand's system of representative democracy was modelled on that of Britain, where referendums were traditionally held in low regard. British politician Edmund Burke, speaking to the electors of Bristol in 1774, expressed the widely held idea that the views of representatives, rather than voters, should be followed in policy-making. Burke said, 'Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgement; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion.'²

The United Kingdom held its first national referendum as recently as 1975. By a majority of more than two to one, voters endorsed Britain's continued membership of the European Economic Community. A much closer referendum in 2016 had the opposite outcome, and in 2020 the UK left the European Union.

Referendums in former British colonies

In former British colonies there was less concern for Burke's principles of representative democracy and a greater willingness to experiment.

Citizens in New England towns and counties adopted the idea of town meetings almost as soon as they set foot on American soil. Many were dissenters (non-Anglican Christians) who had fled Britain in search of greater tolerance of their views.

In the early 20th century California's constitution was amended to include not only a provision for referendums, but also a means for voters to be able to initiate them.

In Australia the federal (national) constitution required referendums to be held before the constitution can be changed.

Referendums in New Zealand

Māori and referendums

Māori have only participated in New Zealand referendums since 1949, when Māori electoral rolls were introduced. The Licensing Amendment Act 1949 allowed Māori to participate in the regular prohibition referendums for the first time.

The Alcoholic Liquors Sale Control Act 1893 made referendums part of the New Zealand political landscape. These first referendums were held within single electorates. In 1911 the first nation-wide referendum, on whether there should be prohibition of the sale of alcohol, was held.

The subsequent nation-wide referendums that have been held in New Zealand have fallen into four categories:

- prohibition (liquor licensing) referendums
- consultative or indicative referendums
- constitutional referendums
- citizens-initiated referendums.

Footnotes:

1. David Butler, and Austin Ranney, eds, *Referendums: a comparative study of practice and theory*. Washington DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1978, p. 4.
2. Quoted in Philip Goodhart, *Referendum*. London: Tom Stacey, 1971, p. 19.

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