

Referendums: arguments for and against



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What are the arguments for and against the holding of popular referendums? Under what circumstances, if any, should they be held?

The referendum has its origins in direct democracy, and can therefore be dated back to the 5th Century BC in the Greek city state of Athens. The concept of a referendum has changed and developed in line with democracy and can now be found in a number of differing forms throughout the developed world. A referendum is broadly defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “ a general vote by the electorate on a single political question”; however this definition fails to make distinctions between the many types of referendum which exist, or the modern day importance of referendums. In an initial classification there are three types of referendum as defined by the Britannica Concise Encyclopaedia. Obligatory referendums; which are required by law, optional referendums; which are put on the ballot when a sufficient number of voters sign a petition demanding that a law passed by the legislature be ratified by the people, and voluntary referendums; when legislatures submit to voters to decide an issue or to test public opinion.

There are a number of widely credited arguments both for and against the holding of popular referendums, however, there are only a few key ideas encapsulated in these arguments. Those in favour of referendums generally tend to point out that they; promote political participation and increase voter knowledge on issues as well as helping to strengthen democracy and further legitimate the government. Whilst arguments against referendums concentrate on ideas; that the public are ill equipped to make important political decisions, and that the information they do have is distorted through media influence, that referendums only provide an idea of public opinion at <https://assignbuster.com/referendums-arguments-for-and-against/>

that one point in time, and that referendums weaken and remove power from the representative institutions elected by the public. The holding of popular referendums is key in a democratic system where the people are becoming, not only disengaged but disinterested in the political process as a whole. The use of referendums can help to counter this affect, provided that clear guidelines are set for when a referendum should take place.

The word democracy comes from the Latin *demos* meaning the people and *kratos* meaning power or rule (OED); rule by the people. The practicalities of this literal definition, often referred to as direct democracy, are almost impossible in our world today, where in the UK in 2005 there were 44, 245, 939 people registered to vote ([www. idea. int](http://www.idea.int))[1]. However, representative democracy is a “ limited and indirect form of democracy” (Heywood 2007: 74) which relies on, in most cases, an electoral mandate for legitimacy. This electoral mandate has been called into question on a number of occasions in modern political history, most notably in the US presidential election of 2005 between George W Bush and Al Gore, and again in the UK General Election of 2005. Referendums could be seen in a modern political context as a stepping stone between direct and representative democracy. It is fair to say that in the majority of developed political societies people have the opportunity to vote into office representatives whom they believe to share policy views with. However, it would be impossible for any political party to represent all the views of its members and supporters, as a result parties may include certain policy promises in their manifestos that their voters do not want to see implemented (Caramani 2008: 254). This, along with the fact that people vote for parties for such a wide range of reasons, mean that it is not possible

to conclude that peoples policy preferences are the same as the party they vote for (Setala 1999: 14-16). Therefore, a referendum allows the public to show a direct opinion on a specific policy matter they would otherwise be impossible.

Linked to the idea that referendums strengthen democracy with regards to policy decisions, there is also the theory that they legitimate government between elections. The period between major governmental elections is, in many countries, several years. In this time period governments can, for the most part, make decisions without any public consultation. There is therefore a danger that although these officials are elected as representatives, it is only the opposition parties and the checks and balances outlined in constitutions that prevent them from deviating from their original promises. Referendums allow the government to not only gauge public opinion on policy but also to make clear that the decisions they are making are in line with public attitude on issues concerning them, therefore providing another check against the power of government.

Opponents to referendums argue that instead of strengthening democracy and legitimising government they in fact weaken the political system by removing power from elected bodies. Representative democracy is founded on the principle that elected officials represent the views of the people and make decisions on their behalf; therefore a referendum undermines this principle. Sir Patrick Nairne observed that “ if Members of Parliament are elected to settle national issues of major policy brought before them by the Government, is it right to throw such issues back to the voters to settle” (Qvotrup 2005: 23). This argument concerning the weakening of bodies is, <https://assignbuster.com/referendums-arguments-for-and-against/>

although worth acknowledging, very limited in its view on referendums. It concentrates for the most part on the idea that referendums remove decision making power from elected bodies and would therefore render them both less effective and less powerful. However, this is an extreme view that fails to recognise that referendums can be used to aid governments as well as the people, and provide a vital link between the two, as has already been argued.

In the majority of political systems across the world we are witnessing a worrying downward trend in voter turnout. This can be attributed to a number of causes including; partisan dealignment, disenchantment with the political system and indifference to politics. Referendums can be used to help promote political participation by enabling the electorate to become better educated and informed and therefore reduce the feeling of alienation (Heywood 2007: 250). By providing people with the opportunity to participate in referendums they are presented with the opportunity to educate and inform themselves on political issues. There is clearly a link between an informed electorate and higher levels of political participation, as Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) argue. This correlation arises from the fact that a more politically educated electorate is able understand the workings of government, and the issues affecting them; therefore seek to bring about change. Switzerland was one of the first countries to introduce referendums to make decisions on proposed legislation. Although turnout figures in Switzerland are not very high, around 45% (www. idea. int)[2], it can be argued that the Swiss people are more politically active than turnout figures show due to the fact that there is such a large number of

referendums not everyone votes in all of them, and also that they are more involved with political parties and in other ways than most other countries.

Aside from elections there are very few ways in which citizens can directly influence political decisions. There are provisions in most democratic countries for the electorate to have some personal contact with their representative, however for the most part people do not make use of this tool because they believe it to be ineffectual; issues raised in these arenas rarely have an effect on the outcome of policy. People are also able to join political parties yet; again, they are faced with the same problems of ineffectuality. A referendum therefore provides an answer to increasing ways for the electorate to positively participate in politics. A binding referendum permits the public to make the final decision on a specific policy, although these types of referendums are not widely used, it is rare for a government to go against the public even in a non-binding referendum. In 1975 the UK, both electorate and government, was divided over whether or not it should continue its membership in the European Economic Community. The overwhelming “ Yes” vote to stay in Europe was upheld by the Labour government of the time, although it was not a binding referendum, and was hailed as a “ historic decision” by Prime Minister Harold Wilson ([www. bbc. co. uk/news](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news))[3].

The counter arguments to increased political participation and voter knowledge through referendums are that; in fact, referendums can cause voter fatigue and decrease participation, and that the public are ill equipped to make important political decisions. The first of these arguments relies on the premise that the public would be able to vote on all or a large number of

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policies. However, this move back to direct democracy is not desirable for the public or the government; presenting the public with such a large number of opportunities to vote could indeed cause voting fatigue. There is a compromise to be found between allowing the public to vote on all policy and not allowing them to vote on it at all.

The latter of these criticisms on referendums concern voter knowledge. It is ignorant to assume that the electorate are either not informed, or are unable, to educate themselves on political issues put to them in referendums. If people are able to vote and presumably make an informed decision on which political party they wish to represent them they are equally able to do so in a referendum. Critics argue that information is distorted through the media prior to referendums, and this is a problem worth considering. During the first referendum on the Lisbon Treaty in Ireland two of Rupert Murdoch's biggest selling newspapers The Irish Sun and The Sunday Times were seen as going "hell for leather on a No vote" (www.guardian.co.uk)[4]; similarly the media coverage on the 1975 Common Market Referendum was heavily biased to the "Yes" campaign, it has been estimated that twenty times the amount of money was available to this campaign than to the "No" campaign (www.europeansinglecurrency.com/referendum)[5]. Although in these instances the media seemed to have an influence on the final outcome there are other, more fundamental, factors which influence peoples decisions, the American political scientist John Zaller encapsulates this idea; "Every opinion is a marriage of information and predisposition" (Zaller 1992: 6).

For referendums to be used effectively it is important that the circumstances in which they should be held are clearly defined and upheld by law. When considering this point one must take into account that referendums should not be used in a way that, as many opponents argue, undermines the authority of the elected bodies in a representative democracy. An answer to this is that referendums should only be used in matters of constitutional importance and not for other policy decisions. It is, after all, constitutions which safeguard the fundamental rights of the electorate as well as preventing the misuse of power by elected bodies (Dahl 2000: 124-127). However, only allowing people to vote on constitutional changes is very limiting, especially if the issue directly influences the way in which they live, and there may also be instances in which the government wishes to hold a referendum on another issue, therefore a wider definition for circumstances must be found. It would be almost impossible to define exactly which policy areas the electorate should be able to vote on in referendums. There are obviously issues on which it would be inappropriate to have a referendum, taxes are an obvious example; there are complex issues on which the public would probably not have the time or adequate resources to inform themselves on and which have no real affect on them, for example defence policies. Therefore the best course of action would probably be to allow the elected body to decide in these instances which policies it is sensible to put to a referendum. Australia, in fact follows these basic guidelines for holding referendums to great success. Compulsory national referendums are “ held to approve government-proposed changes to the Australian Constitution”, the constitution specifies this; furthermore the government can also conduct optional referendums or ‘ plebiscites’ to decide on matters outside of the

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constitution (www. wikipedia. org)[6]. This system of conducting referendums is ideal because the electorate are guaranteed a vote on constitutional issues as well as being given the opportunity, when appropriate, to vote on other policy matters.

Referendums provide a vital direct link between government and the electorate which is otherwise unseen in representative democracies. They can help to promote political participation as well as creating a better informed electorate; they also strengthen democracy in modern society. Yet referendums, despite all of this are often criticised for the way in which they weaken elected bodies and do not provide a true gauge on public opinion, largely due to media influence. However, as has been argued none of these arguments hold much weight, especially in the face of a system where the use of referendums have clear guidelines, as in Australia, to be used for constitutional amendments and wherever else is seen as fit by the elected bodies in power. Referendums are a tool which should be used more widely in today's political systems of democracy as they are a manageable and positive step towards a hybrid political system which effectively combines representative and direct democracy.

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