

Referendums

The people who wrote the Australian Constitution wanted to include a way for future generations to make changes, but they did not want its basic elements to be changed too easily. They solved the problem by adopting a system that had first been introduced in Switzerland, in which any change to the Constitution cannot be made by the Commonwealth Parliament, but must be approved by the citizens through a referendum.

How Referendums Work

A referendum is a direct vote of the people. It works like an election. The ballot paper has a question asking if the voter agrees with the proposed change, and the voter must write either 'Yes' or 'No' in a box. Voting in referendums is compulsory.

The proposed change is first passed by Parliament. The Australian Electoral Commission distributes information to all voters explaining the proposed changes. The cases for and against the proposal (prepared by Members of Parliament who voted for and against the proposal in Parliament) are also provided, so voters can make an informed decision.

For the Constitution to be changed, the proposal must be approved by what is called a double majority. This means it must be agreed to by a majority of voters across Australia, and also receive a majority in at least four out of the six states. If successful, the change must be implemented.

Low Success Rate

Between Federation (1901) and 2014, there have been 44 proposals to change the Constitution. Only eight have been successful. The highest 'Yes' vote in a referendum occurred in 1967, when over 90% of voters supported changes to the Constitution to allow Aboriginal people full citizenship rights.



This photo shows how the referendum results were displayed to the public after the federation referendum in Western Australia in 1900.

Referendums Between 1988 and 2014 (source: Australian Electoral Commission)

Subject/Proposal	Polling Day	Result	States in Favour	% in Favour
Parliamentary Terms: to provide for 4 year maximum terms for members of both Houses of the Commonwealth Parliament	3 Sept 1988	Not Carried	None	33%
Fair Elections: to provide for fair and democratic parliamentary elections throughout Australia	3 Sept 1988	Not Carried	None	38%
Local Government: to recognise local government in the Constitution	3 Sept 1988	Not Carried	None	34%
Rights and Freedoms: to extend the right to trial by jury, to extend freedom of religion, and to ensure fair terms for persons whose property is acquired by any government	3 Sept 1988	Not Carried	None	31%
Republic: To alter the Constitution to establish the Commonwealth of Australia as a republic with the Queen and Governor-General being replaced by a President appointed by a two-thirds majority of the members of the Commonwealth Parliament	6 Nov 1999	Not Carried	None	45%
Preamble: To alter the Constitution to insert a preamble	6 Nov 1999	Not Carried	None	39%