Referendum module

AEC
Australian Electoral Commission

MODULE

Referendum

In this module, learners explore the process of changing the Australian Constitution through a referendum. Several results from past referendums are used to reinforce understanding. Students are asked to determine if an historic referendum was approved or rejected.

Learning outcomes

By the end of the first module, students will:

- Recognise the Australian Constitution is an important legal document that sets rules for how Australia is governed.
- Recall the purpose of a referendum.
- Identify how to vote in a referendum.
- Recall what is needed for a referendum to result in a change to the Australian Constitution.

Suggested extension application activities:

UNIT OF WORK: Changing the rules together – exploring referendums

- Students propose constitutional “amendments” relevant to school life.
- Conduct a classroom referendum using **Running a referendum - Guide for teachers**. Reflect on the outcome and the process including an analysis of the double majority.

Supplementary links with AEC resources

Links to other AEC education and information resources:

- Remote voting in a referendum - YouTube
- Completing a referendum ballot paper - YouTube
- How a referendum is passed – YouTube
- The double majority - YouTube

Key questions

1. What is the document that sets the rules for how Australia is governed?
   Answer: The Australian Constitution

2. What's the purpose of a referendum?
   Answer: In a referendum, the Australian people are asked to vote on a change to the Constitution.

3. Do voters get choice of candidates in a referendum, or do voters select yes or no?
   Answer: They select yes or no

4. What is needed for a referendum to 'pass' – for the change to be made?
   Answer: A 'double-majority' – more than half (a majority) the voters in Australia need to vote yes. And more than half the voters in more than half the states must vote yes.

UNIT OF WORK

Changing the rules together – exploring referendums and constitutional change in Australia

DEMOCRACITY MODULE
Referendums

KEY CONCEPT
Constitutional change

RELATED CONCEPTS

- **Public decision making**– Exercised through voting in referendums.
- **Participation**– Citizens' role in shaping national decision-making.
- **Processes** – Procedures governing change in democratic systems.

Overarching questions

How can citizens shape constitutional change in Australia? Why are informed participation and broad consensus important in this process?

Inquiry questions:

Factual – What is a referendum and how is a constitutional change proposed in Australia?

Conceptual – Why is a double majority required to change the Constitution?

Learning outcomes

By the end of the activities, students will:

- Explain the framework and procedures involved in Australian referendums.
- Investigate historical referendum outcomes and explain the role of the double majority.
- Communicate civic concepts through structured formats like debates, presentations and mock electoral activities.
- Evaluate the strengths and limitations of referendums as tools for democratic change.

Suggested extension learning experiences and activities:

- Investigate historical referendums and in small groups develop a summary of the topic, the result obtained and what you consider the effect it had on Australia.
- Students propose constitutional "amendments" relevant to school life: Proposing a change - referendum intro activity.

Section continues next page…

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- Conduct a school referendum using the guide provided. Reflect on the outcome and process including an analysis of the double majority.

Beyond the ballot box - Suggested assessment rubric

Criteria	Level 1-2	Level 3-4	Level 5-6	Level 7-8
Criterion A: Knowing and understanding Identifies procedures and terms related to referendums, the Constitution, and the double majority.	Demonstrates limited knowledge of civic structures and processes.	Demonstrates basic understanding with some relevant facts.	Demonstrates sound understanding with accurate terminology and clear connections.	Demonstrates thorough understanding with insightful explanations and connections across legal and historical contexts.
Criterion B: Investigating Researches historical referendums, eligibility requirements, and implications of the double majority.	Investigation lacks clarity; sources may be unclear or minimal.	Investigation uses some relevant sources; draws basic conclusions.	Investigation is structured and effective; uses reliable sources and thoughtful analysis.	Investigation is critical and comprehensive; synthesizes multiple perspectives and evaluates the impact of constitutional change.
Criterion C: Communicating Explains civic processes through mock campaigns, referendum guides, or presentations.	Communication is unclear; ideas may lack organisation or depth.	Communication shows basic organisation and appropriate format.	Communication is coherent and well-structured; conveys civic concepts effectively.	Communication is clear, engaging, and informative; demonstrates civic literacy and persuasive impact.
Criterion D: Thinking critically Evaluates the referendum process, including effectiveness, accessibility, and outcomes.	Offers limited evaluation or reflection.	Reflects with some insight; draws basic comparisons.	Reflects thoughtfully; evaluates strengths and limitations with reasoned judgement.	Evaluates critically and impartially; proposes informed recommendations and demonstrates nuanced civic reasoning.

ACTIVITY

Running a referendum – guide for teachers

This guide is to help support teachers conduct a referendum at their school. This can either be done after completing the activity ‘Proposing a change’ or by using the included example topic.

Materials:

- Floor set up map
- Ballot box
- Tally board (located under 'Classroom resources' on the DemocraCity website)
- Ballot papers (either blank to include your topic or ‘Blazer’)

Important to highlight — FOR STUDENTS

When sharing ideas and opinions it’s important to make sure we are all responding respectfully to each other. Differences in opinion make this more interesting so make sure you are respectful of the person with whom you’re speaking. Be sure to listen carefully and not just wait to speak.

Process

Select the example topic:

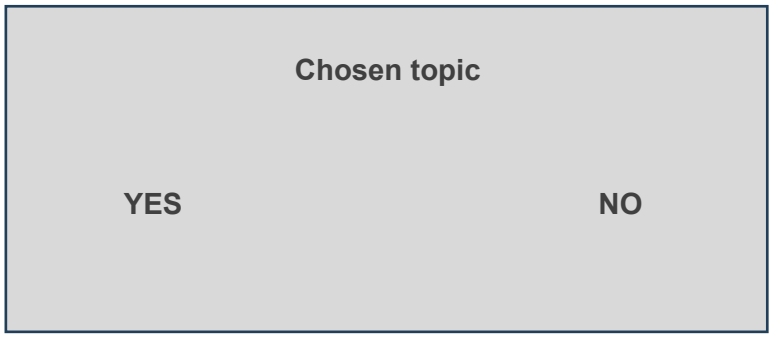
- **Either:** The proposed change we decided on in our ‘Proposing a change’ activity was _____.
- **Or:** The proposed change we will be voting on is whether students should wear blazers to and from school.

Important to highlight — FOR STUDENTS

Not everyone will feel the same way about this proposal. To vote in this referendum we will need to know the arguments for and against (or the YES and the NO arguments)

TEACHERS NOTE: You will know whether it’s best to let students choose their own side or to assign them to YES or NO.

On a whiteboard, write the chosen topic with YES and NO below as in the following diagram. Discuss the arguments and summarise below the appropriate 'side'.



Example diagram: Whiteboard for YES and NO arguments

Instructions for students **FOR STUDENTS**

Now that you understand the arguments, it's important to know how to complete the ballot paper correctly. For your vote to count in this referendum, you need to make sure that you follow the instructions.

If you agree with the change, you will write 'Yes'. If you disagree with the change, you will write 'No'.

Preparing to vote

Setting up the polling place:

- You will need a desk to distribute ballot papers, a place for students to vote in secret (voting screens) and a ballot box. You can choose student representatives to work as polling officials, or you can do this yourself. You will need officials to distribute ballot papers and one to guard your ballot box.

Instructions for students **FOR STUDENTS**

In a real referendum, the polling officials at the desk will ask you three questions:

- What is your name?
- What is your address? and
- Have you voted before in this referendum?

Today in our referendum, we will just be asking "Have you voted before in this referendum?".

Once the polling official gives you a ballot paper, you will take it to the voting screens where you will vote in private. After you have filled in your ballot paper, you will put it here in the ballot box.

Now you can direct students to vote, making sure each student receives only one ballot paper and that they all have the opportunity to vote in secret. When everyone has voted, you can proceed with the next step.

Instructions for students

FOR STUDENTS

Everyone has voted and the polls are closed. We now need to count the vote to find out if our proposal has been approved or not.

There are a couple of ways you may choose to complete this step.

- You can bring all classes together and complete the count, one class at a time and enter the results on the tally board.
- Teachers can count their own class results privately and share with other teachers to each complete the count with their own classes. If you choose this method, you will enter your YES and NO results on the tally board before entering the results of the other classes.
- Place the YES and NO signs on the floor behind which the ballot papers will be sorted. Ask a student polling official to sit behind each sign (facing the class). You can also have scrutineers stand behind them to watch the count.

Script for students

FOR STUDENTS

You probably remember from playing DemocraCity that for a referendum to be passed and the Constitution to be changed you need a double majority. A double majority is when at least four out of six states vote YES and more than half the voters in Australia also vote YES. We will need a double majority for our referendum to be passed, and our proposal acted upon. We have (number of classes) participating so we need at least (more than half) of the classes to vote YES.

Polling officials are now going to count the ballot papers for our referendum. Scrutineers, watch carefully and make sure the polling officials are not making any errors. You need to check each ballot paper and place the YES ballot papers behind the correct sign. If you see an informal ballot paper, give it to me and I'll put it aside to be counted separately. (Teacher note: we won't record these on the tally board however you can reference them in the analysis of results.)

Now that the sort is finished, polling officials pick up your ballot papers and count each one separately onto the floor in a pile in front of you. Make sure that the scrutineer can see and agrees with the total number of votes. If the scrutineer disagrees, they can say "Challenge", and I'll come and check.

[*Once the count is complete*]

YES

Polling official for the YES vote, how many ballot papers do you have?

Scrutineer, do you agree? (Write this number on the tally board in the YES column for your class.)

NO

Polling official for the NO vote, how many ballot papers do you have?

Scrutineer, do you agree?
[*Write this number on the tally board in the NO column for your class.*]

Is there a majority in favour for this class?
[*Write YES or NO as appropriate on the tally board.*]

Is there a majority of voters in a majority of classes in favour of the proposal? (For example, if you have 6 classes participating you need 4 to have voted in favour.)
[*Write YES or NO as appropriate on the tally board*.]

[*Tally 'School results'*]

Has a double majority been achieved? Has the proposal been approved?

INFORMAL VOTES: These votes, didn't follow the instructions and so couldn't be counted. These voters missed their opportunity to have their say in our referendum. Any informal votes could also impact the outcome of the referendum decision itself. For these reasons, it's so important to follow the instructions on your ballot papers.

Conclusion of voting

Depending on the result of your referendum, your classes will have either voted to approve the proposal or not. Take these results and action if you've decided to conduct a referendum on a topic relating to school life.

You can explain that this is the process required for altering the Australian Constitution by referendum. For a change to be made, a double majority is required, at least 4 out of 6 states, as well as a majority of Australians, need to vote Yes.

Referendum floor set up plan

Below is a guide on how to set up your classroom for counting during your classroom referendum.

TALLY BOARD

Set out YES/NO signs

Distribute the formal votes behind the YES or NO signs

YES

NO

SEATED PARTICIPANTS

ACTIVITY

Proposing a change

For teachers:

This activity provides an opportunity for students to consider the rules and choices experienced in their school life. ‘Proposing a change’ activity will take approximately 30 – 40 minutes. If you progress to running a referendum, you will need to commit an additional 90 minutes (approx.)

If choosing this activity, teachers must choose a change that can realistically be made. The results of the referendum must be binding and will be implemented. The question must be fair, easy to understand and have two choices where voters write ‘yes’ or ‘no’ on the ballot paper. Additionally, it’s important to choose a topic that will receive a variety of responses (i.e. not all geared towards ‘yes’) to ensure both sides of the topic can be debated.

Some suggestions for change include:

- an item for sale or special occasion choices at the canteen
- addition of 15 minutes reading time etc after lunch
- introducing student recycling/composting
- introduction of a ‘quiet zone’ or low stimulation areas in the school.

Given the requirement for a double majority, this activity is best run across a whole year level (or school). See this Double majority fact sheet for more information.

Once a proposal has been selected by leadership, divide classes into small proposal teams – teams for the ‘yes’ vote and teams for the ‘no’ vote

Learning outcomes

By the end of the activities, students will:

- Understand the referendum process and how decisions can be made through direct democracy.
- Explore stakeholder perspectives and equitable representation.
- Participate in planning, campaigning, voting, and reflecting on outcomes.

Going further: research and campaigning

- **Optional**: you could run a ‘research and campaigning’ period where students are required to investigate stakeholders (e.g. students, teachers, administrators) and prepare an argument either for or against the proposal.

WORKSHEET

Proposing a change

For students

In our democracy, **everyone's view matters** — and that includes you!

In this activity, you'll step into the role of changemakers by exploring real-world issues within our school community.

Together, we'll brainstorm potential improvements that affect student life, wellbeing, and learning. A shortlist of suggested changes will be taken to the leadership team for a proposed change. Then, just like in national referendums, you'll help shape the future by having your say in a school-wide vote.

This is your chance to reflect on what matters to you, consider diverse perspectives, and experience democracy in action — starting right here at school.

AEC Australian Electoral Commission

OFFICIAL USE ONLY

BALLOT PAPER

Referendum on proposed Constitutional alteration

DIRECTIONS TO VOTER

Write “YES” or “NO” in the space provided opposite the question set out below.

A PROPOSED LAW:

To alter the Constitution of the school to enforce the wearing of a school uniform blazer to and from school each day.

Do you approve this proposed alteration? ☐

WRITE “YES” OR “NO”

This referendum scenario has been developed for education purposes and does not reflect Commonwealth policy.

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SAMPLE

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