

# Referendum: Notes for UPSC Polity

Referendums are instruments of direct democracy where citizens get an opportunity to straightforwardly vote on a particular issue. They are perceived to be a better democratic instrument, especially in modern states where people have a better say in decision making.

## Definition of a Referendum

Some definitions of 'referendum' suggest it is a type of vote to change the constitution or government of a country. The word, 'referendum' is often used for both legislative referrals and initiatives. For example, Australia defines 'referendum' as a vote to change the constitution and 'plebiscite' as a vote which does not affect the constitution.

## What is the rationale behind a Referendum?

From a political perspective, referendums are an ultimate toll for the expression of a direct democracy, but in modern times, most referendums have to be understood in the perspective of a representative democracy. They tend to be used quite selectively, covering issues such as changes in voting systems, or even complete secession from a national union. There are times when a failure or a success of a referendum have led to a surge in autonomy movements.

There have been many instances where currently elected officials may not have the legitimacy or inclination to implement such changes brought about through a referendum.

## Criticism against Referendums

1. **Populist Aspect:** It has been argued that voters in a referendum are more likely to be driven by transient whims than by careful deliberation, or that they are not sufficiently informed to make decisions on complicated or technical issues. Also, voters might be swayed by propaganda, strong personalities, intimidation, and expensive advertising campaigns. An example of such instances are the rise of Adolf Hitler in Germany and Benito Mussolini in Italy.
2. **Closed questions and the separability problem:** Some critics of the referendum attack the use of closed questions. A difficulty called the separability problem can plague a referendum on two or more issues.
3. **Undue limitations on regular government power:** Several commentators have noted that the use of citizens' initiatives to amend constitutions has so tied the government to a jumble of popular demands as to render the government unworkable. A similar problem also arises when elected governments accumulate excessive debts. That can severely reduce the effective margin for later governments.

## **Questions related to Referendum**

### **How does the referendum work?**

Referendums give the power to citizens to vote on a question or particular topic. The procedure might vary within countries, though, the objective of the process remains the same.

Indian constitution does not allow referendums and there is no provision for it. But, a referendum on abolishing the monarchy was held in Sikkim and it resulted in the country becoming an Indian state.

### **Is a referendum legally binding?**

No, a referendum is not legally binding. The government can ignore the results. The final binding of the referendum is on Parliament.

### **What percentage do you need to win a referendum?**

The percentage of votes to win a referendum varies among countries. Usually, a 25-50% vote range in favour is required to win a referendum.