

FACT SHEET 5

What is the purpose of a referendum?

Let's hear from constitutional experts as to why a referendum is important:



The Australian Constitution has been central to the daily debates of Australian politics for more than a century. It continues to have a profound impact in all areas of policy, including economic management, environmental protection, and the delivery of services such as health and education. In these and other fields, the Constitution can promote good governance, as well as impose important limits and major obstacles...At issue is not only what the Constitution now says, but what it should say in the future. Should it state that the Commonwealth runs the nation's hospitals and bears full responsibility for the nation's rivers and the Murray-Darling basin?...Should there be fixed four-year terms for the federal Parliament? In Australia, these questions cannot be finally resolved by the government of the day, nor by any Parliament. They can only be answered by a direct vote of the Australian people cast at a referendum to change the Constitution."

– Professor George William & David Hume, *People Power: The History and Future of the Referendum in Australia*: 2010 (Chapter 1, p 1-2)

Since Federation in 1901, Australian governments have held 44 referendums on proposals such as:

- **1937:** One of two proposals sought to give the Commonwealth Parliament the power to make laws regarding air navigation and aircraft. (When the Constitution was written in 1901, there was no such thing as aeroplanes!) (Campaigning included wireless/radios)

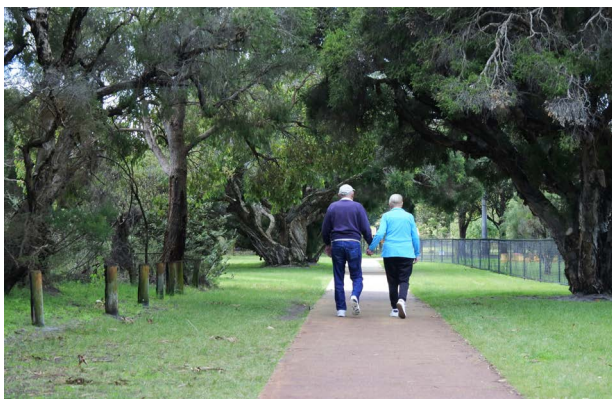


Goya Henry's scarlet plane
Source: National Library of Australia



Henry Goya Henry the pirate of the skies, who challenged the Commonwealth's aviation powers.
Source: National Library of Australia

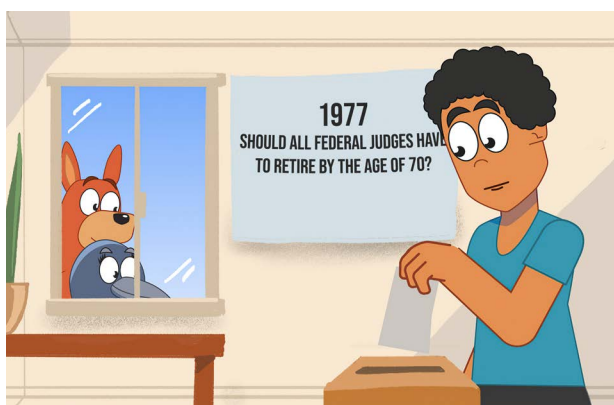
- **1946:** A proposal to give the Commonwealth Parliament the power to make laws regarding maternity allowances, widows' pensions, child endowment, unemployment, pharmaceutical, sickness and hospital benefits, medical and dental services (but not so as to authorise any form of civil conscription), benefits to students and family allowances. (Campaigning included wireless/radios)
- **2023:** In late 2023, all eligible Australians will vote on this next proposal to alter the Australian Constitution. The internet and social media will be important technology used in 2023 campaigning.



While the Constitution initially gave the Commonwealth power to make laws for old-age and invalid pensions, it did not expressly provide for unemployment benefits or health benefits- until the 1946 referendum was passed.

Source: iStock

- **1977:** One of four proposals set a compulsory maximum retirement age of 70 years for all federal judges. (Campaigning now included television)



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