

# 5. What is a referendum?

Sometimes decisions are too big to leave up to politicians.  
 Referendums give the power back to every voter.

## People's choice



A referendum is an example of direct democracy. Citizens are asked to vote yes or no to a particular issue.



## Your say

Most decisions are made by parliament on behalf of the public. Referendums are often used to gauge public opinion on a major change (e.g. Scotland's vote on whether or not to become an independent country in 2014) or complex moral issues (e.g. euthanasia).



## Now or never



Some countries hold regular referendums. In others they are rare. The UK has only ever had three country-wide referendums. Meanwhile Switzerland has had more than 600!

© Freepik

## Final call



The government must follow the outcome of a mandatory referendum. But advisory referendums are more like an opinion poll. The government considers the result, but they are not legally bound by it.

© Freepik

## Behind Brexit

The UK's decision to leave the European Union (EU) is a recent example of a high-profile referendum. The result was a narrow victory for "Leave" (52%) over "Remain" (48%). The referendum was only advisory but the British government had promised to implement the result.



## The right to die

In 2020, New Zealand held a mandatory referendum on whether or not to legalise euthanasia (or assisted death). The result was clear. Nearly 66% of all voters said "yes".

