

STUDENT HANDOUT

Direct Democracy in Saskatchewan Today

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a populist wave was crashing through Canadian politics. People were demanding more say in how they were governed. The Reform Party, an upstart western political party, picked up on these demands and promised to give citizens more say.

The quickrise of the Reform Party worried established political parties. The party's popularity was one reason why established political parties began to look at ways to better involve citizens in government.

In Saskatchewan, the ruling Progressive Conservative party was very unpopular. They were accused of being out-of-touch and ignoring the will of voters. In an effort to change this perception, they put into place plebiscite and referendum legislation that gave more democratic power to Saskatchewan's citizens.

The Referendum and Plebiscite Act

Saskatchewan's *Referendum and Plebiscite Act* came into effect in 1991. The Act sets out the rules for province-wide referendums and plebiscites.

Government-Initiated Referendums

If the provincial government calls a referendum, two thresholds must be met for the result to be binding:

- more than 60% of the ballots must be cast in support of the question, and
- voter turnout must be at least 50%.

These two requirements help ensure that a referendum only passes if there is a clear majority of people in favour.

Voter-Initiated Plebiscites

A second feature of Saskatchewan's new law was that it granted citizens the ability to prompt a province-wide plebiscite. Citizens first must circulate a petition that spells out the proposed plebiscite question. If at least 15% of voters sign the petition, the government must hold a vote.

A plebiscite will only be held if the question falls within the province's jurisdiction. For example, if 15% of voters demand a plebiscite on a radio broadcasting law, there would be no vote. Broadcasting laws are the constitutional responsibility of the federal government.

If the proposed question is unclear or confusing, the government can change its wording before the plebiscite is held. Any change to





MONEY TALKS?

The Referendum and Plebiscite Act puts almost no spending limits on referendum and plebiscite campaigns. This creates a risk that the people with the most money could have the most influence in a plebiscite or referendum campaign.



MUNICIPAL REFERENDUMS

Direct democratic powers also exist at the local level of government. Citizens can petition municipal governments for a binding referendum. The minimum number of signatures required in cities is voters representing at least 10% of the population. In all other municipalities, the signatures of 25 voters or voters representing at least 15% of the population must be collected, whichever is greater. The proposed referendum must demand something within the jurisdiction of the municipality, and cannot commit the municipality to create new taxes or spend money.

the question's wording must be approved by a court, to ensure the spirit and intent of the petition remain the same.

Recall that plebiscites are not binding. Nevertheless, they can be very useful. Plebiscites measure the public mood, and provide advice on how a government should proceed. As Gary Lane, then Saskatchewan's Minister of Justice, told the legislative committee examining the proposed *Referendum and Plebiscite Act*:

Plebiscites are certainly, as has been discussed, not binding. But I think they're very persuasive. It may well be that once we go through the process down the road that a future government will want to have binding public-initiated initiatives, if I can say that. But as a first walk down this new road, I think that we've gone a long way.

Minister Lane's belief that plebiscites are persuasive is a fair point. Any government that does not follow the will of the people must carefully explain their reasoning, or risk being thrown out of office in the next election.

Even though Saskatchewan citizens have had the right to initiate provincial plebiscites since 1991, not one has yet taken place.

THINK

1. Sometimes people do not care about a particular issue, so they do not vote. Other times people are undecided about an issue, so they do not vote.
 - a) What other reasons would people have for not voting?
 - b) When is it a good idea to not vote?
2. Voter turnout for Saskatchewan's 2011 and 2016 general elections was barely over 50%. Voter turnout in civic elections almost never reaches 50%. Nevertheless, we accept the results of these elections. Is it fair to require a minimum 50% voter turnout for a referendum result to be binding?
3. In a democracy, the majority rules. Yet a provincial referendum in Saskatchewan requires 60% voter approval to pass. Is this fair?
4. *The Referendum and Plebiscite Act* does not give citizens the power to force a binding referendum. Citizens can only petition for a non-binding plebiscite. Is this a reasonable limit on citizen power?
5. Why do you think there has never been a citizen-initiated provincial plebiscite in Saskatchewan?