

# STUDENT HANDOUT

## What are Plebiscites and Referendums?

Direct democracy is a form of governance where the people directly vote on an issue. In Canada, direct democracy is practiced through plebiscites and referendums.

Even though plebiscites and referendums both ask people to vote on an issue, they are not the same. There is an important difference between the two:

- Plebiscites are not legally binding. The government is only required to consider the results of the vote.
- Referendums are legally binding. The government must do what the people decide.

## *Why Direct Democracy?*

There are many reasons why the government would want to have citizens vote on a particular issue.

Sometime an issue is so important, it can be difficult for the government to move forward without a mandate from the people. A good example is when amendments to Canada's constitution were proposed in 1992. Every major political party was in favour of the changes. However, the general feeling was that Canadians themselves should decide. A nation-wide referendum was held to ensure that our highest law would only change if a majority of Canadians approved.

Other times, an issue does not fit into party politics. For example, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century there were many public debates about prohibiting alcohol. Political parties were reluctant to take a firm stand, because no consensus on prohibition existed amongst party members or party supporters. To break the gridlock, the people were asked to decide. This helped keep political parties united, and ensured the majority would get its way.

Regardless of the reason for holding a plebiscite or referendum, they can be a useful decision-making tool.





# VOTE

## CONFIDENCE WHEN WE VOTE

Unlike many countries, Canadians are confident that our votes are accurately counted. In fact, a recent Elections Canada survey found that 95% of us trust the accuracy of election results. This confidence is due in part to the independent electoral agencies that oversee our provincial and federal voting systems. Further, if an election result is contested, checks such as official recounts and judicial reviews can take place. While these safeguards are important, they are seldom necessary: incidents of ballot-box fraud in Canada are *extremely* rare.

---

## THINK

1. Plebiscites are advisory. Their results do not have to become the law. Why would the government want to give people a say without guaranteeing the majority gets its way?
2. Referendums are binding. Their results must be acted upon. Why would the government give the final decision-making power to the people?