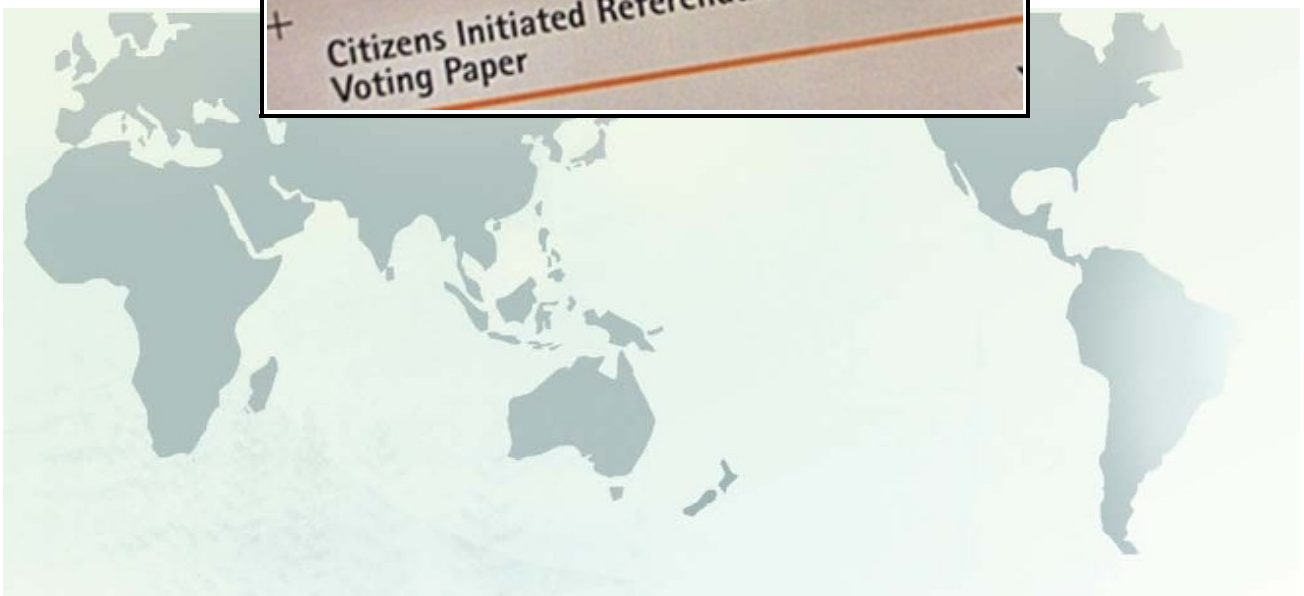


NEW ZEALAND: AN INTRODUCTION TO BINDING INITIATIVES AND REFERENDUMS



"Many of the arguments against binding referenda are demeaning. They assume people always vote for things which are popular, which carry benefits without acknowledging the costs. These arguments have been largely discredited by the experience overseas."



David Lange
Former Prime Minister

"In the last resort, the arguments against the referendum are also arguments against democracy, while acceptance of the referendum is but the logical consequence of accepting the democratic form of government."



Professor Vernon Bogdanor

“WHAT DOES DEMOCRACY MEAN TO YOU?”

For many people, democracy only means voting once every three years at a general election. While New Zealand is indeed a wonderful place to live and certainly far more democratic than most countries, it can always become better. Binding Initiatives and Referendums make it possible for New Zealanders to make political decisions that directly affect their lives in between elections. This is a political tool that many New Zealanders have probably never considered, yet for over one hundred and thirty years this is exactly what the Swiss people have been doing through the Veto referendum, Recall referendum and the Citizens Initiated referendum. All of which are binding on the government.

New Zealand does in fact have a referendum mechanism. Under the Citizens Initiated Referenda Act 1993, any citizen can trigger a nationwide referendum by collecting the signatures of at least 10% of those registered on the electoral role. The trouble is, in New Zealand, unlike Switzerland, referendums are not binding on the New Zealand government. They can, and have been ignored by past and present governments. So much for democracy.

Binding Initiatives and Referendums provide another check and balance on government so citizens can have a true exchange of communications between the elected and the electorate, not just one day of democracy every three years.

There have been many controversial and polarizing issues in New Zealand's short history which have directly affected the lives of all New Zealanders. Many of these issues have had laws passed, or ignored, by the government. Many of these decisions appeared not to represent the wishes of the majority of citizens. The latest being the smacking Initiative in 2009, but there were many prior to that including prostitution, abortion, voluntary euthanasia, lowering the drinking age, civil unions, removing the right to appeal to the Privy Council, genetic engineering, immigration or even sending troops to Vietnam all those years ago..

Many politicians seem to believe they are elected to do a job and make all the hard decisions on behalf of citizens. They argue they are far better informed than the general public on important issues. Well to a certain extent many New Zealanders might agree with that, in many cases New Zealanders are happy to elect politicians to make the difficult decisions a government must make on a daily basis. However, there does come a time

when governments become out of touch with the will of the people. The trouble is citizens have no way of bringing about change until the next election. The only alternative then, is to remove the current government and replace it with another government who to all intensive purposes will not be any more responsive to the wishes of the people.

Of major concern is the ever decreasing participation rates at elections (97.6% in 1946 down to 72.5% in 2002). Political parties are now representing less and less citizens. Wanganui Mayor Michael Laws and his City Council have led the way with direct democracy by giving voters more say in how their money is spent, and participation has increased. Voter participation for referendums in Wanganui have actually been higher than the local body elections themselves. Professor John Matsusaka from the University of California has even produced empirical evidence to prove that those US States with the power of referendums actually reduce government spending by up to 19%. Surely data to wet the appetite of every ratepayer in New Zealand.

The weakness of our current political system is that once a government is elected there are few checks and balances between elections. Voters must accept whatever the government or coalition of the day wants. This it often does without a popular mandate or majority support of New Zealanders and much of which is introduced by a List MP who is not responsible to an electorate. Neither can these List MPs be thrown out at the next election as some would have us believe. This is a good argument for having the Recall referendum system as was used to elect Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger in California. The proportional representation system which was introduced in 1996 was an improvement of the extremely undemocratic first past the post system, but it has not given citizens the control many New Zealanders expected and it has exposed problems like list MPs not being answerable to anyone.

Better Democracy NZ believes citizens should be able to make more decisions other than just once every three years at a general election. The mechanism for doing this is the Citizens Initiated Referendum which has operated extremely well for over 140 years in Switzerland, several European countries and many US States. Binding Initiatives and Referendums are not a replacement for the current system of representative democracy, they are simply an adjunct to it, a check and balance, the next step forward from MMP toward real democracy.

It is a very simple process where on perhaps one day a year, New Zealanders would get to

vote on issues important to them. They would be able to make decisions that directly effect them so long as the required number of signatures have been collected to trigger a referendum on that subject, a nationwide referendum would then ensue. A referendum may be to veto any new legislation, initiate new legislation or recall a Member of Parliament who in the opinion of voters is no longer wanted. At present the required number of signatures is 10% of those registered on the Electoral Roll. This is approximately 300,000 signatures, a figure that would seem extremely high given the Swiss only have to collect 50,000 signatures with a population almost twice that of New Zealand. Even with such a low requirement the Swiss only average three to four Citizens Initiatives per year. It only takes 5% of the vote at election time to put a party into parliament so Better Democracy NZ believes this would suffice to trigger any referendum.

It would seem logical, in a modern, well informed society like New Zealand, that citizens would want, and have a democratic right to make decisions on issues that directly affect them through binding Initiatives and Referendums. People are no longer prepared to accept that those in positions of authority always know what is best for them. It is time for change but for that to happen there needs to be a groundswell of grass-roots support from the majority of New Zealanders.

Join us by visiting our website and registering your support so we can keep you informed. From there you can also email MPs and newspapers with our automated email system.

