

**1891**

first Constitutional Convention to draft a federal constitution

1893

first 'people's convention' at Corowa

1897

delegates elected to a representative Constitutional Convention

1898-1900

referendums on the Constitution held in all colonies

1901

1 January - inauguration of the Commonwealth of Australia

29-30 March - first federal election

9 May - opening of Commonwealth Parliament in Melbourne

1902

Commonwealth Franchise and Commonwealth Electoral Acts

1903

first federal election in accordance with Commonwealth law

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Education Section (02) 6271 4440.

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THE REFERENDUMS 1898-1900

Overview

A referendum is a vote on a political question referred by a government to the people. Electors vote by writing 'yes' or 'no' in the box opposite each question.

Referendums asking people to say 'yes' or 'no' to the proposed Australian Constitution were held in each of the Australian colonies between 1898 and 1900. This was one of the most important steps in the process of Federation. It was also the first time in the world that a national constitution had been submitted to the people's vote.

The 1891 Constitutional Convention agreed that before proceeding with Federation, the Constitution for governing the new nation should have 'the approval of the people'. The intention to seek this approval through referendums was established at the Corowa people's convention in 1893. The people's convention also resolved that there should be a new Constitutional Convention composed of popularly elected delegates.

In order to put the Corowa Plan into action, each colony was required to pass an Enabling Act to enable the elections and referendums to be held.

In 1897 elections for members of the new Constitutional Convention were held in all the colonies with the exception of Queensland, where Parliament could not agree on the enabling legislation, and Western Australia, where Parliament elected its own delegates. When the Convention completed its work on the Constitution in 1898, the referendum process began.

The referendum was a new idea at the time of Federation. It had been used in Switzerland and some of the American states, but had not yet been applied to a British system of Government. In Australia, it was used to ratify the Constitution and included in the Constitution (Section 128) as the means of making Constitutional alterations.

Yes or no to federation: the referendum campaigns

The Australian Constitution was put to voters as the Commonwealth Constitution Bill. Those who supported it were known as 'Billites', those who campaigned against it as 'anti-Billites'.

A strong argument in favour of Federation was the abolition of trade barriers between the colonies. Billites also argued that a federation of the colonies would provide a united approach to defence and immigration. Anti-billites were concerned about equal representation of the colonies and higher taxes. There was considerable concern in New South Wales that the colony would lose power and advantages.

At the time of Federation there were two growing political forces which had an impact on the referendums. One was the labour movement. There was only one labour leader at the Convention and many advocated a 'no' vote on the basis that the proposed Constitution was not democratic enough. The other was the campaign for women's right to vote. A number of women's suffragists felt that Federation would improve women's chances of winning the vote and supported the 'yes' campaign.

The results

In 1898 referendums on the Commonwealth Constitution Bill were held in New South Wales, South Australia, Tasmania, and Victoria. A majority of 'yes' votes was recorded in each colony but in New South Wales the enabling legislation required a quota of 80,000. This was not achieved.

1898	Yes	No
New South Wales	71,595	66,228
South Australia	35,800	17,320
Tasmania	11,797	2,716
Victoria	100,520	22,090

In 1899, as a result of amendments to the Constitution recommended by New South Wales, the colonies organised a second round of referendums. This time New South Wales required only a simple majority of 'yes' votes. Queensland also joined the process. Majorities were achieved in all colonies.

1899	Yes	No
New South Wales	107,420	82,741
Queensland	38,488	30,996
South Australia	65,990	17,053
Tasmania	13,437	791
Victoria	152,653	9,805

By 1900 Western Australia had still not taken steps to hold a referendum. In protest, residents of the Eastern Goldfields took steps to form a separate colony. Finally, on 31 July 1900, when the Commonwealth Constitution Bill had already been enacted by the British Parliament, a referendum was held in which a large majority voted in favour of Federation.

1899	Yes	No
Western Australia	44,800	19,691

Who were 'the people'?

Although a majority of voters said 'yes' to the Constitution for a federated Australia, this did not amount to a majority of the population of the colonies. At the time of Federation, voting was not compulsory. Many eligible people did not vote and a considerable number were not eligible at all. Only South Australian and Western Australian women voted in the referendums. Indigenous Australians, Asians, Africans and Pacific Islanders were not allowed to vote in Queensland or Western Australia unless they owned property. In several colonies poor people in receipt of public assistance could not vote and Tasmania required certain property qualifications. The Commonwealth legislation for voting in federal elections lifted some of these restrictions.