

## Conscription referendums, 1916 and 1917

Australian voters were asked in October 1916, and again in December 1917, to vote on the issue of conscription. Universal military training for Australian men aged 18 to 60 had been compulsory since 1911. The referendums, if carried, would have extended this requirement to service overseas.

### **The 1916 referendum**

Australian troops fighting overseas in World War I enlisted voluntarily. As the enormity of Australian casualties on the Western Front became known in Australia and no quick end to the war seemed likely the number of men volunteering fell steadily. There was sustained British pressure on the Australian Government to ensure that its divisions were not depleted: in 1916 it was argued that Australia needed to provide reinforcements of 5500 men per month to maintain its forces overseas at operational level. With advertising campaigns not achieving recruiting targets, Prime Minister Hughes decided to ask the people in a referendum if they would agree to a proposal requiring men undergoing compulsory training to serve overseas. The referendum of 28 October 1916 asked Australians:

*Are you in favour of the Government having, in this grave emergency, the same compulsory powers over citizens in regard to requiring their military service, for the term of this War, outside the Commonwealth, as it now has in regard to military service within the Commonwealth?*

The referendum was defeated with 1,087,557 in favour and 1,160,033 against.

### **The 1917 referendum**

In 1917 Britain sought a sixth Australian division for active service. Australia had to provide 7000 men per month to meet this request. Volunteer recruitment continued to lag and on 20 December 1917 Prime Minister Hughes put a second referendum to the Australian people. The referendum asked:

*Are you in favour of the proposal of the Commonwealth Government for reinforcing the Commonwealth Forces overseas?'*

Hughes' proposal was that voluntary enlistment should continue, but that any shortfall would be met by compulsory reinforcements of single men, widowers, and divorcees without dependents between 20 and 44 years, who would be called up by ballot. The referendum was defeated with 1,015,159 in favour and 1,181,747 against.

The conscription referenda were divisive politically, socially and within religious circles. Newspapers and magazines of the time demonstrate the concerns, arguments, and the passion of Australians in debating this issue. The decisive defeat of the second referendum closed the issue of conscription for the remainder of the war.

## Records about the referenda held in Canberra

### The 1916 referendum

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>Military Service Referendum Act 1916</u>	1912–16	A2863, 1916/27
<u>Referendum 1916 on conscription – includes samples of ballot papers</u>	1916	A406, E1916/3585
<u>War – conscription</u>	1916	A11803, 1914/89/385
<u>Conscription referendum</u>	1916–17	A1, 1917/2131
<u>Book (duplicate copy) – Chapter 40 – Manpower, Conscription and the Split in the Labor Party 1916</u>	1970	A5954, 1269/3

### The 1917 referendum

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>Conscription referendum questions for voters: proceedings against Rev F Sinclair and Fraser and Jenkinson</u>	1908–20	A456, W26/199/418
<u>Military Service Referendum 1917 – forms, posters &amp; other printed matter relative to referendums 1917–19</u>	1916–18	A406, E1918/3755
<u>Reinforcements referendum</u>	1917	A3934, SC15/21
<u>Censorship – referendum campaign, 1917</u>	1917	A2939, SC147
<u>Conscription – compulsory service – referendum</u>	1917	A11803, 1917/89/965
<u>Conscription referendum – 20 December 1917</u>	1917–18	A11803, 1918/89/94
<u>Referendum 1917 – miscellaneous</u>	1917–18	A406, E1918/2092
<u>Military service referendum – general papers</u>	1917–18	A456, W26/217/8
<u>Book (duplicate copy) – Chapter 41 – Manpower and the Second Conscription Referendum (1917)</u>	1962–65	A5954, 1283/4

### Records about the opposition to conscription

Some examples of records about the opposition to conscription held in Canberra are listed below. A search for items on the RecordSearch database using the term 'anti conscription' will identify additional material, including records held in other offices.

## Collection references

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>Anti conscription</u>	1916	A11803, 1914/89/441
<u>Possibility of Federal intervention with regard to a controversy on conscription</u>	1916	A11803, 1914/89/357
<u>Rev Dr D Mannix – anti-conscription and anti-British utterances: Sinn Feiner</u>	1918–24	A8911, 240

### Why are these votes referred to as referendums not plebiscites?

The term referendum used throughout this fact sheet is based on the Commonwealth of Australia Act no 27 of 1916 – Military Service Referendum Act 1916, "an Act to submit to a Referendum a question in relation to Military Service Abroad".

It was a question posed to the people to change the current legislation of the Military Service Act, and not the Constitution. Therefore it should have been described and put forward as a plebiscite or a simple national vote. All of the historical documentation for both votes, 1916 and 1917, refer to it as a referendum.