

# People taking part in making a constitution



# Easy Read



This is an Easy Read document. It uses simple language and pictures to make the information easier to understand.



Some words are **bold** and may be hard to understand. Don't worry, we will explain what they mean.



This booklet is written by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA).



International IDEA works with organizations around the world to support **democracy**.



**Democracy** is a system where people have the power to make choices about how their country is run.

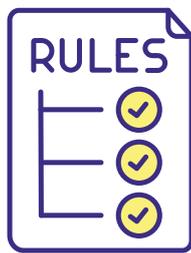
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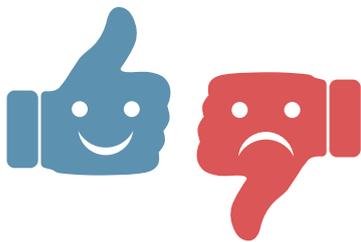
# What is public participation?



**Public participation** means people taking part in political decisions that affect them. These could be making laws and changing or writing a new **constitution**.



A **constitution** is a list of rules for how a country is run.



When people can take part in constitution-making, they can say what they do not like about the constitution and what changes they want.



In many countries, it is now more common for people to be able to take part in constitution-making.



When people can take part in constitution-making, they feel heard.

# Questions to think about



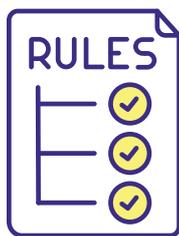
There are questions to think about before involving people in constitution-making. These questions are:



- Why do we need to make a constitution?



It can be to form a new country, to respond to protests or to move from conflict to peace.



- What rules are there already?



Most countries already have some rules that say how the constitution can be changed.



Those rules often say who can take part, how long it will take, and how people can have their say in making or changing the constitution.



- Who can take part?



It is important that everyone's views are heard, including **marginalized groups**.



**Marginalized groups** are people who find it hard to be heard, such as women, people with disabilities, youth, ethnic people and people who live in the countryside.



- Is it safe for people to take part?



When a country is moving from conflict to peace, it is important that people take part and have their say without being afraid.



- How can people take part easily?

Constitution-makers should make sure that there are no barriers to people taking part, such as online platforms or internet connection.



- How much do people trust government, leaders or constitution-makers?



When trust is low, people will think the constitution is a bad thing.



- What things are needed for people taking part?

It is important to have enough government staff, training, money, time and other things needed to plan for people taking part.

# What are the ways that people can take part in making a constitution?



People can take part in lots of different ways.



- In some countries people can start the process to change the constitution.
- People can ask to change the constitution by protesting.



- They can vote for members of a **constitution-making group**.



**A constitution-making group** is made up of people who have a duty to write a constitution.



- They can talk about their ideas or suggest ways to write or change the constitution.



- They can vote to approve the final constitution in a **referendum**.



A **referendum** is when people vote yes or no for an important issue, such as a new constitution or law.

# When can people take part?



It is important for people to take part at the right time. This often means that they like the constitution and it will be used for a long time.

Usually, there are four stages in the process of making a constitution.



- Starting



- Planning



- Writing, discussion and decision-making



- Approval

## Starting

Based on a country's background, some constitution-making processes begin as part of a peace process to end conflict.



In these cases, only certain groups can start the process.



Normally, constitution-making is started by **political elites**. Political elites are the small group of people who hold most of the power in a country.

But there are different ways people can start the constitution-making process.



- In some countries, constitutions let people make changes if they collect enough signatures.



- Sometimes, people can ask for changes by protesting.



## Planning

Planning means deciding how the constitution-making process will run and what changes will be made. This means thinking about:



- Who will lead discussions about the constitution?



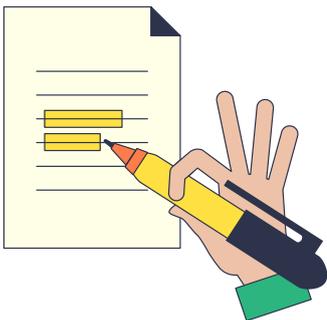
- Who will take part?



- What rules need to be followed?



- How long will it take?



- What parts of the constitution will change?



- What rules will be used for writing the constitution?

## Writing, discussion and decision-making



Constitutions are written or changed in this stage.



People can give their ideas and feedback on the text of the constitution at this stage.

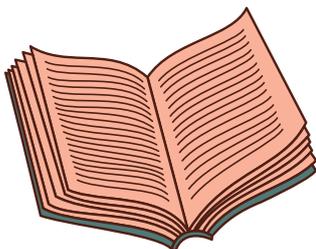


It is important for the government to think about how to use people's ideas and link them with political decisions.

## Approval



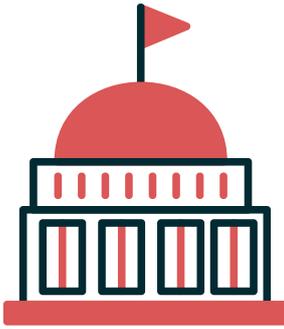
The final constitution is approved in this stage.



How it is approved depends on the rules that are already in place.



Usually, the final constitution is approved by a vote in **parliament** or by a referendum.



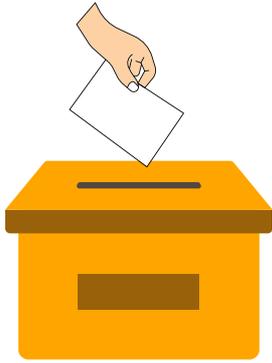
**Parliament** is an elected government body that makes or changes laws for a country.



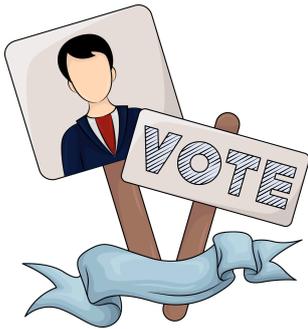
Sometimes, the decision to hold a referendum is made through political discussions.

# How can people take part?

Usually, people can take part in constitution-making in three ways. These are:



- Referendum



- Elections

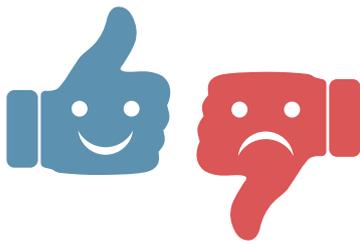


- Discussion

## Referendum



The most common way people can join in is a referendum to approve the final constitution. People can vote yes or no.



This means people can say whether they approve or reject the draft constitution.



## Elections

Another common way people can take part is by voting in elections.



People can help begin the constitution-making process by voting for political leaders or parties who promise to change the constitution.

People can also have their say by voting for members of constitution-making bodies.

## Discussion



Public discussions are another way for people to have their say. They let people discuss and voice their opinions about the constitution.

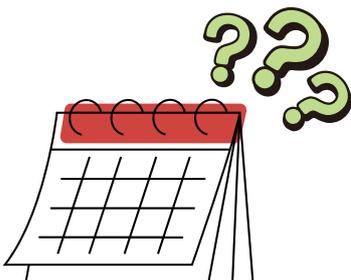
This can be done in different ways at different stages of the constitution-making process.



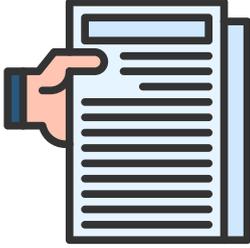
- Sometimes, people can have their say by voting yes or no on a certain constitutional issue at the planning stage.



- A constitution-making body can ask people to give their comments and ideas on the constitution.



Constitution-making bodies often decide how and when people can have their say.



Usually, people are asked to give their views during the planning or drafting stage.



People can write their comments online on the government's websites, Facebook or Twitter.



- Sometimes people are asked questions about the text of the constitution or the way it is being changed.



Constitution-making bodies decide what to ask, who to ask and how the answers will be used.



They can ask lots of people and also listen to the views of marginalized groups.



- People can discuss their views by meeting face-to-face with constitution-making bodies.

# Why have public participation?



Public participation can be good and bad.



When people take part, it helps them learn about the constitution and feel more involved in their community.



It also helps people support democracy and act in more democratic ways.



Letting people have their say can help leaders understand people's views better.



When a country moves from conflict to peace, a constitution-making process that allows people to take part can help bring peace.



It can also help a country to have democracy.



When people take part, constitutions tend to last longer and include more rights and democratic rules.



But there is no proof that public participation ensures that a constitution will have rights that protect everyone.



When too many groups take part, it can be difficult to come to an agreement.



When people are not listened to, it can lead to distrust between people and their leaders.



In weak systems, leaders or powerful groups can use the people's will as an excuse to control the country in ways that harm democracy.

# How to make public participation better



Leaders need to check the laws and rules that already exist, especially those about public participation.



Then they should make new laws to guide the constitution-making process.



Leaders should plan early and think about how people's opinions will be used in the constitution-making process.



It is important to decide when to involve people at different stages of constitution-making.



Constitution-makers should keep the process open.



This means that they should tell people about plans, how long it will take, how people can take part and how their views will be used.



Constitution-makers should report at the end of the process and explain how people's ideas were used and how decisions were made.



Public participation should include all groups of people such as people with disabilities, women, youth, people who live in the countryside and **minority groups**.



**Minority groups** are smaller groups of people, often different in race, culture or religion from most of the people around them.



Constitution-makers should also try to understand the things that stop some people taking part, such as speaking a different language.



The government should give training to help people take part in useful ways and to help them understand constitutional issues.

## Find out more



You can learn about International IDEA at our website: [www.idea.int](http://www.idea.int)

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