

After months of speculation, lawmakers on Monday passed amendments to the Referendum Act (公投法) to decouple referendums from national elections. Starting in 2021, referendums are to be held on the fourth Saturday of August once every two years.

The changes came after the 10 referendums that were held alongside local elections last year created a logistical nightmare, leading to people waiting in lines for hours to cast their votes, as well as delayed results.

After the amendments were passed, opposition lawmakers said “referendums are dead,” saying that the changes would make it nearly impossible for any referendum to pass. However, their reasoning is unclear. It seemed that voters last year were highly interested in the referendums, as discussions over referendum questions overshadowed those about the elections, especially among young people who claim political apathy, but still care about social issues.

However, choosing the nation’s leaders and lawmakers is more important and consequential than voting in referendums, and the two are better off held separately, so that enough attention is paid to both. Otherwise, referendums can easily become a tool for politicians and interest groups to further their agenda, use the issues to sway voters or influence their constituents.

Fortunately, the government dropped a clause from the amendments that would have required people to present photocopies of their national IDs when signing referendum petitions, as the cons outweigh the pros in this case. Taiwanese are generally leery of handing out their personal information, for good reason, and the requirement could have deterred people from participating in referendums, even though it would have prevented voter fraud.

In addition to not everyone carrying their IDs with them at all times, obtaining a photocopy might be easy in bigger cities like Taipei, but in rural areas people could give up signing a petition instead of walking to the nearest convenience store.

Most importantly, it seems like people need to be educated on the purpose of a referendum, as indicated by the misinformed reactions that were espoused even by politicians and media

## Education on referendums needed

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outlets when the nation legalized same-sex marriage last month.

The most prominent argument put forward by those opposed to marriage equality was that the majority of Taiwanese “rejected” same-sex marriage in a referendum last year and the government pushing it through was a “slap in the face” of public will.

Never mind that that was not even how the questions were worded; it is simply not how a democracy works. Every citizen’s rights are protected by the Constitution and no referendum can undermine that.

That many people still believe this kind of rhetoric raises the question of whether they even knew what they were voting for last year.

It is worrisome that referendums would continue to be used to further the agendas of certain political or interest groups under the guise of improving the nation in accordance with public will.

A lack of awareness is understandable, as barely any referendums were held before amendments to the act greatly lowered the threshold.

It would be two years before there is another referendum and if they are to become a regular occurrence in Taiwan, people will need to learn to discern what they are voting for and the implications of their vote, just like how it is increasingly important for people to differentiate fake news from facts.

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