REFERENDUMS & PLEBISCITES

A how-to guide for students

Last Updated November 2013

Any student can create change in the Students’ Union by submitting a plebiscite or referendum question to appear on the next general election ballot. However, the bylaw that governs the process of getting that question on the ballot can be a bit confusing, so here is a breakdown of how referendum and plebiscite questions go from being from ideas to ballot questions.

1. Submit your idea to the Chief Returning Officer (CRO) of the SU

Send the following items to the CRO:

- The intent of the question
- Whether the question is a plebiscite or a referendum
- Your name, faculty, and student ID
- A twenty-five dollar ($25.00) deposit in the form of cash or a certified cheque or money order payable to the University of Alberta Students’ Union

Plebiscite or Referendum?

A referendum is legally binding for Students’ Council, and as such requires a valid petition bearing the names, signatures, and student ID numbers of at least 15% of the total membership of the Students’ Union.

A plebiscite is not legally binding for Students’ Council, and therefore requires a valid petition bearing the names, signatures, and student ID numbers of only 5% of the total membership of the Students’ Union.

If you are a Student Councilor, you can take the intent and type of question straight to Students’ Council and bypass the CRO. If you are taking your question to Council, you don’t have to include your personal information or the $25.00 deposit.

2. Bylaw Committee creates a petition question

The CRO will immediately forward the intent of the question to the Bylaw Committee, who will then turn it into a petition question which fully reflects the intent you submitted, and will not violate any Students’ Union bylaws or federal or provincial laws. There are additional rules to govern how the petition question must look if it intends to approve the collection of fees.

3. Students’ Council approves the petition question

The petition question will be sent to the next Students’ Council meeting for approval, provided it doesn’t create a breach in Council’s fiduciary responsibility to the Students’ Union.

Council might also send the question back to Bylaw Committee to be reworded, if necessary. This can extend the time it takes to approve a petition question by two to three weeks every time it is sent back.

What is Fiduciary Responsibility?

By virtue of being elected to an organization that collects mandatory dues, Student Councilors have been given powers by their constituents that they normally keep to exercise themselves. Because
they have power to exercise on behalf of others, Councilors have a responsibility to exercise it in their constituents’ best interests.

4. Signatures are collected

Now that you have a petition question, it’s time to start collecting signatures. You will need valid signatures from 15% of the total SU membership for a referendum question, and 5% for a plebiscite question.

A signature is considered valid if the given name and ID number matches up with the name and ID number of someone on the SU’s list of voting members. It’s a good idea to try to get a few more signatures than necessary, in case some of them are not valid.

Referendums/plebiscites created by Students’ Council can bypass this step.

5. The valid petition is submitted to the CRO

Once you have all the signatures you need, you can submit the petition to the CRO, who then has to validate it. From there, representatives for the yes and no sides of the question are selected, campaigning ensues, the question appears on the ballot, and students vote.

A petition is considered valid when it has been through the process described above, and received the appropriate percentage of valid signatures.

If the referendum/plebiscite was created and approved by Students’ Council, then Council will send the final wording of the question to the CRO instead of a valid petition.
Timeline

If you want your referendum or plebiscite question to appear on the next general election ballot, you will need to submit a valid petition to the CRO at least 31 days before that election is scheduled to take place. Executive and Board of Governors general elections always happen on the Thursday and Friday in the second week after the Winter Semester Reading Week.

This means you need to work out a timeline to get your question together, based off of when the next election is and how long you think it will take to get the appropriate amount of signatures.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action required</th>
<th>Amount of time it will take</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CRO receives the intent of the question</td>
<td>Forwards immediately to Bylaw Committee (may take one or two days)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bylaw Committee formulates and approves a petition question</td>
<td>Within 14 days</td>
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<tr>
<td>Council approves the petition question at the next Council meeting*</td>
<td>Within 14 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signatures are collected</td>
<td>How long do you expect this to take?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submit valid petition question to CRO</td>
<td>At least 31 days before the next general election, if the question is to appear in that election</td>
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*It may have to go back to Bylaw Committee to be reworded, and will then have to go back through Council for additional readings before being approved.

Basically, if you want a referendum or plebiscite question to appear on the next general election ballot, you will need to start the process a minimum of two months before that election, though you probably want a little more time than that to allow for additional Council readings and the collection of signatures.