

The Referendum Conundrum: Referenda or Referendums?

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ABSTRACT Scholars often use *referenda* as the plural for *referendum*. This choice is a hypercorrection—it may sound like proper Latin, but it is not. *Referendums* is always the correct choice. However, we maintain that there is value in using *referendums* for multiple events and *referenda* for multiple propositions.

The pluralization of *referendum* is a perpetual orthographic conundrum. Should we use *referenda* or *referendums*? Potentially, the plural in English of *referendum* could be either *referendums* or *referenda*. In practice, political science prefers *referenda*. We estimate that political scientists are three times as likely to use *referenda* than *referendums* (see table 1). In the journals we examined, seven of 10 articles chose to use *referenda* over *referendums*. In the field of journalism, the pattern is much different (see table 2), with the standard practice in major media outlets being to use only *referendums*. Journalism, it seems, has arrived at a different answer to this conundrum than has political science.

By choosing *referendums* over *referenda*, journalists (and a minority of scholars) are selecting a pluralization that is always correct. *Referendum* is derived from the Latin *refero* (“to bring back”). The use of *referendum* in modern politics originates with the Switzerland Confederation of the nineteenth century. The Swiss adopted *referendum* from *ad referendum* (“for bringing it back”), a phrase used when a delegate is sent to make decisions that are subject to the approval of a principle. In the early federal diets, delegates from the cantons were sent *ad referendum*, meaning that they needed the approval of the cantons for their decisions to be ratified (Adams and Cunningham 1889; Oberholtzer 1891).

As a term drawn from *ad referendum*, *referendum* is the gerund of *refero* (“to bring back”). As a gerund, *referendum* is best

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Table 1

Use of Referendums and Referenda in Political Science Journals, 1986–2006

JOURNAL	ONLY REFERENDUMS	ONLY REFERENDA
<i>American Journal of Political Science</i>	25.5% (12)	59.6% (28)
<i>American Political Science Review</i>	8.1% (5)	80.7% (50)
<i>Comparative Politics</i>	22.2% (4)	77.8% (14)
<i>Journal of Politics</i>	18.0% (9)	64.0% (32)
<i>Political Behavior</i>	8.7% (2)	78.3% (18)
<i>Political Research Quarterly</i>	15.2% (7)	73.9% (34)
<i>PS: Political Science and Politics</i>	28.9% (15)	65.4% (34)
Average	18.1% (54)	70.5% (210)

Note. Number of articles in parentheses. Percentages indicate proportion of articles using either *referendums* or *referenda*; excluded percentages represent those articles that used both terms. Data based on a Boolean search of JSTOR archive.

translated as “a referring.” The Latin gerund has no plural form. In pluralizing *referendum*, we are no longer using Latin but an anglicization, which should follow the rules of English pluralization. It is for this reason that some scholars advocate for *referendums* as the only proper choice (cf. Butler and Ranney 1978; Butler and Ranney 1994; DuVivier 2007; Lacy and Niou 2000). Butler and Ranney, for example, quote a personal note from the editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (O.E.D.) reading, “by preferring Referendums as your title you have the angels of Rome and the O.E.D. on your side” (1978, 5).

By choosing *referenda* over *referendums*, writers are using a hypercorrection, or a construction that mistakenly uses a grammatical rule in an effort to be correct. Hypercorrection often occurs when a speaker wants to use a rule that is commonly used by individuals with more power, education, or prestige. Writers who use *referenda* are employing hypercorrection by using a pluralization that follows a rule applied to similar words (e.g., *agenda* and

Table 2
Use of Referendums and Referenda in News Outlets (2008–2009)

NEWS OUTLET	ONLY REFERENDUMS	ONLY REFERENDA
<i>New York Times</i>	99.1% (905)	0.4% (4)
<i>Washington Post</i>	99.1% (902)	0.2% (2)
<i>Newsweek</i>	100.0% (63)	0.0% (0)
<i>CNN.com</i>	98.9% (260)	0.4% (1)

Note. Number of articles in parentheses. Percentages indicate proportion of articles using either *referendums* or *referenda*; excluded percentages represent those articles that used both terms. Data based on a Boolean search of LexisNexis online archive.

memoranda) but is in fact incorrect, because the rule does not apply to gerunds. Even if a scholar chooses the term *referendums*, he or she may encounter a reviewer or editor who hypercorrects the author’s grammar.

The hypercorrection stems, in part, from the possibility that *referendum* may also be the gerundive of *refero*. English (and many other modern languages) do not have this part of speech. In English, a gerundive is best translated as “the thing needing/fit to be done.” *Referendum*, then, would be “the thing to be referred.” Unlike the gerund, the gerundive in Latin can be pluralized (“the things needing/fit to be done”). The plural of the gerundive *referendum* is *referenda*. In this form, *referendum* is similar to *agendum* (“the thing to be done”), *memorandum* (“the thing to be called to mind”), and *addendum* (“the thing to be added”), which have as their plural forms *agenda*, *memoranda*, and *addenda*, respectively. *Referenda* would thus be the appropriate form for the gerundive

referendum. By choosing *referenda*, most scholars are using a rule that is appropriate for gerundives and could even be applied to *referendum* in Latin.

Even though pluralizing *referendum* as *referendums* is always appropriate in English, one can make a case for the selective use of *referenda*. If chosen carefully, the plural of *referendum* could be used to signify the form of referendum being discussed. By using *referenda* (gerundive), one can signal that the grammatical subject is the issue being referred to the voters. One would then use *referenda* when discussing multiple referenda (gerundive) that are to be decided by voters during a single referendum (gerund). For example, in 2004, over two dozen states held referendums (gerund) on over one hundred referenda (gerundive). Scholars may still use *referendums* for both the gerund and gerundive forms, but the use of different plurals would clarify what was being discussed. ■

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