



AAP Image/Matt Turner

## The campaign pamphlets for the Voice don't offer new perspectives. Do they still serve a purpose?

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The Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) has published the “yes” and “no” pamphlets for the Voice to Parliament on its [website](#). The pamphlet will eventually be printed and must be delivered to every household around the country at least 14 days before the referendum.

The passage of the [Voice to Parliament constitutional amendment bill](#) triggered a 28-day period for written arguments for and against the proposed change to the Constitution.

Australian parliamentarians have provided their “yes” and “no” arguments for the Voice, which have been published online with no fact-checking by the AEC. Electoral Commissioner Tom Rogers has [said](#)

*each case will be published in separate, unedited and unformatted documents, exactly as they have been received by the deadline.*

The last “yes” and “no” pamphlets to be produced were for the 1999 referendum that asked Australians to replace the monarch as head of state with a republic system of government. With the “no” Voice pamphlet, we are seeing similar themes to the [republic “no” campaign](#) – sowing seeds of uncertainty and division in the community.

Professor of government John Higley and political scientist Ian McAllister argue the failure of the referendum in 1999 was due, in part, to the fact Australians generally had a lack of knowledge about the implications of change to our democratic institutions.

This raises the question why we are still using “yes” and “no” pamphlets. Is it time to give them up and move to a mode of communication that is not inherently subject to bias and unsupported claims?

## **History of the “yes” and “no” pamphlets**

In 1911, two questions were posed to the Australian public at a referendum separate to a general election.

The questions were whether to extend the Commonwealth’s powers over trade and commerce and give the Commonwealth the ability to make laws in respect to powerful corporations. Both returned a resounding “no” answer.

The government at the time believed the rejection of both proposals was due to the public being misinformed and the opposition party’s distortion of the key issues.

So, the following year, the government sought to send every elector a document that explained proposed constitutional changes from the “yes” and “no” sides.

Today, the AEC is required under section 11 of the Referendum (Machinery Provisions) Act 1984, to provide each elector with a pamphlet outlining arguments in favour and against proposed constitutional changes.

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***Read more: [Do governments know what to do with street art?](#)***

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## **The Voice to Parliament pamphlet – what is in it?**

### **“No” Pamphlet: “if you don’t know, vote no”**

The “no” pamphlet for the Voice to Parliament uses a lot of strong, emotion-invoking language and contains potential misinformation.

For instance, the pamphlet includes the recurring claim the Voice is “legally risky”, despite legal experts disproving this. There is also the repeated assertion of a lack of detail about how the Voice will work, despite this having been addressed by academics and the government.

Another claim that “a centralised Voice risks overlooking the needs of regional and remote communities” runs counter to the assertions of the “yes” campaign that the purpose of the Voice seeks to empower local voices to be heard at the national level.

The pamphlet also expresses concern the Voice will not replace institutions such as the National Indigenous Australians Agency, but will work alongside them, which the campaign thinks will be costly and add an extra level of bureaucracy to Indigenous affairs.

There is also the ongoing about the “unknown” nature of the Voice, who will be appointed to it and how representation will be ensured.

Lastly, there is a section entitled “there are better ways forward”, but it contains no examples of what these better ways could be.

### **“Yes” Pamphlet: “voting no means nothing will change”**

The “yes” pamphlet has reiterated a lot of key points already made by the campaign. One thing it does well is provide examples of where direct Indigenous involvement in decision-making has led to improved outcomes for Indigenous people. It also provides examples of how the Voice could work in practice.

The pamphlet argues past governments have invested billions in programs that don’t work. A Voice will help governments better listen to locals, find solutions and save money in the long run.

Some key details are missing, however. Although the pamphlet states that “members of the Voice will be chosen by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in their local area and serve for a fixed period,” the specifics of how this process will work are not addressed.

The pamphlet doesn’t say anything that hasn’t already been said in the “yes” campaign to date. And although it provides a bit more detail on these key points, it actually has less content than the “no” pamphlet.

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***Read more: [10 questions about the Voice to Parliament - answered by the experts](#)***

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## **Is it time to move away from “yes/no” pamphlets?**

Misinformation is a growing issue for discussions around the Voice.

In the past, concerns have been raised about the referendum pamphlet as a way of communicating with voters because it is not examined for accuracy. As UNSW constitutional law expert George Williams warns,

*Australians must be cautious when reading these pamphlets. In the past, they’ve often contained hyperbole and wild and exaggerated claims.*

The “yes/no” pamphlets have also been characterised by some as antiquated and redundant.

Indeed, many of the points made in the Voice to Parliament cases published today do not offer any new perspectives for the public to consider. Instead, they reiterate arguments for the “yes” and “no” sides by repeating what Australians have heard for the past 12 months.

There is always going to be a level of uncertainty associated with proposed changes to the Constitution. Today, with misinformation about the Voice being circulated on social media, wouldn't we be better off removing another way for unreliable information to be shared among the public?