

If you don't know, vote No-rway

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A common argument against the Voice is that it is untried and untested elsewhere. The idea is central to the No campaign's slogan of 'If you don't know, vote no'.

Each time I hear it, I'm startled. In Norway, we've had an Indigenous Voice for 34 years. It's been tried and tested.

With the power to give advice to the parliament *and* executive on matters affecting Indigenous peoples, the Sami parliament or 'Norwegian Voice' is now part and parcel of a society that, for all its flaws, consistently tops democracy, rule of law, and development rankings.

Australian media outlets have highlighted various [foreign models](#) of a Voice, including those in the other [Scandinavian](#) states of Finland and Sweden. They do [exist](#)! But what has been less covered is independent research on how these institutions work in practice.

In this respect, the Norwegian Sami Parliament provides some valuable lessons for the Yes and No campaigns on how they can be relevant, effective, and non-divisive.

1. Relevance. Studies show consistently that the Norwegian Voice is viewed as [relevant](#) and [legitimate](#) by a clear majority of Indigenous Sami.

Birthered in the wake of what could be described as a combination of the Australian Mabo and Franklin Dam cases, the Sami Parliament was designed to ensure Sami voices were heard, and debilitating conflicts with the state avoided. In 1979, the proposed Alta dam, which would have disrupted reindeer herding and salmon fishing, triggered nationwide protests, civil disobedience, and a partially successful case in the Supreme Court.

Before its establishment, Norwegian politicians and journalists could just talk to a single Sami person and present a 'Sami view'. Sound familiar?

Needless to say, while the Sami Parliament attracts relatively broad Sami support, it has not always been smooth sailing. There are underlying tensions over the balance of representation amongst the 39 representatives.

For instance, there is [concern](#) that the reindeer herding community exercise too much [influence](#). And the overall levels of legitimacy of the Voice amongst Sami are slightly below those for the Norwegian parliament amongst all Norwegians.

However, after the 2021 election, this was partly addressed through better representation of so-called [urban Sami](#). And the legislation for the Sami parliament has been [tweaked twice](#) to improve representation.

Thus, like any political institution, a Voice will always be a work in progress.

2. Effectiveness. [Researchers](#) have credited the Norwegian Voice with solidifying recognition of Sami culture and helping advance traditional livelihoods. It is now recognised as a key partner on addressing issues around land and coastal resources in Northern Norway.

The parliament is also an interlocutor in current political disputes. Earlier this year, young female Sami activists, dressed in their traditional Kofta, and with [Greta Thunberg](#) in tow, barricaded the entrances to government departments. They were protesting against the non-implementation of a 500-day old Supreme Court order that the construction of windmills on reindeer herding lands was illegal. The president of the Sami parliament flew down to Oslo to help mediate between the protestors and the government.

At the same time, the Sami parliament has been critiqued by some Sami for focusing on too narrower range of Sami issues – culture and land. In an Australian context, this feels somewhat ironic. The Australian No campaigns' concern is the precise opposite.

Researchers and Sami representatives argue also that there is room for improvement. This includes greater engagement with civil society organisations working on a greater range different topics.

The Sami parliament has thus been fairly effective given its limited mandate, but it's certainly no magic bullet for solving all issues facing Sami.

3. A divided country? A major concern of the No campaign is that a Voice will divide the country. Is this the case in Norway?

The short answer is no. The Sami parliament is not a lightning rod for polarisation at the national level. Only one political party – far right Progress Party – is committed to [removing](#) the Sami Parliament – but it has only averaged 14% of the national vote in the last decade.

Nonetheless, there are some political divisions in Northern Norway over the Sami Parliament. It is here that the traditional homelands of the Sami can be found, and where Norwegian assimilation policies were especially prevalent. However, the crux of the tensions concern the transfer of almost all Crown land in the province to a joint land authority (like the Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park), rather than the parliament itself. Yet, even the land authority's legitimacy has [improved](#) over time as it has sought to balance Sami and non-Sami interests.

Likewise, not all Sami people are in agreement on the powers of the Sami parliament, just as in Australia. Some think the Sami parliament should have much [greater powers](#). Others less.

So, what can we learn from the Norwegian Voice? A lot. It can be relevant, effective, and not deeply divisive. But it is also not a panacea, and requires ongoing work. We can't say no, we 'don't know'. At the same, a yes vote is certainly not 'won and done'.

In any case, Norwegians seem to have adopted the Australian slogan of 'give it a go'.