

Discussing Brexit – could we do better?

Paper submitted for the *Political Quarterly* special issue *Brexit Two Years On: Where are we now?*

NOTE: THIS IS THE FINAL TYPESCRIPT VERSION OF THE ARTICLE AS SUBMITTED TO THE JOURNAL

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Abstract

It is widely recognized – by both Remainers and Leavers – that the quality of public debate in the lead-up to the UK’s 2016 referendum on EU membership was dismal. That was partly because of the nature of the referendum itself: it was on a broad proposal rather than a specific law; the government that called it did not support the change on the ballot paper and refused to prepare for the possibility of a vote for leaving the EU. It was also influenced by the nature of the campaign: both sides propagated misinformation; key issues were barely discussed; the public were often left dissatisfied and bewildered. This paper sets out evidence on these points and then analyses whether anything could be done to address them. Drawing on recent comparative research into referendums, it explores the importance of preparing for the decision to call a referendum. It then examines three possible approaches to improving political discourse during the campaign itself: exposing misinformation; providing high-quality information; and promoting citizen deliberation. It finally considers how these could be applied to possible referendums on the issue of the UK’s EU membership.

Key words: Brexit, citizens’ assembly, discourse, referendum

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Referendums now form an important part of the democratic system in the UK, as in increasingly many countries around the world. But the UK does not conduct referendums well: recent ballots – not least that on Brexit in 2016 – have given rise to deep concerns about the quality of debate preceding the vote. In the case of the Brexit referendum, these concerns have continued after polling day too: the government was not remotely prepared for the result that voters delivered, and the democratic system as a whole has been convulsed ever since by doubts over how to respond.

This article examines what could be done to conduct referendums better. It begins by examining the process of the Brexit referendum and identifying the key problems that arose. Drawing on recent comparative research, it then considers possible solutions. We examine two points in particular. First, the process of a referendum should not begin with the announcement that it will take place: important preparatory work needs to be done first on what the issues and options are and how a choice should best be made. Second, discourse during the campaign period could be improved, but only through institutions that are well designed and trusted. The final section considers implications for any possible future referendum on the EU membership issue.

Problems in the process of the Brexit referendum

This article takes no view on whether the result of the Brexit referendum was the right one for the UK's (or the EU's) future. Rather, we seek to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the referendum as a process. It is inevitable that critics of the referendum have been most voluble among Remain supporters: the losers in a referendum are always likely to be more dissatisfied than the victors. The pro-Remain author Robert Harris, for example, tweeted at the time, 'How foul this referendum is. The most depressing, divisive, duplicitous political event of my lifetime. May there never be another.'¹ But it is notable that there have been critics on the winning side too. Gisela Stuart, who chaired the Vote Leave campaign group, has said, 'The way he [David Cameron] called that referendum was an abuse of democratic processes'; she also criticised the campaigners' lack of accountability.² We believe it is important to learn lessons irrespective of our view of the outcome.

Gisela Stuart's words illustrate the importance of examining the referendum process from its inception. We can take the start date as 23 January 2013, when, speaking at the London offices of the Bloomberg news agency, then Prime Minister David Cameron announced that a Conservative government, if elected in 2015, would seek 'to negotiate a new settlement with our European partners' and then 'give the British people a referendum with a very simple in or out choice'.³ The 2015 Conservative Party election manifesto reiterated that pledge.⁴ This commitment did not come from a careful analysis that examined what the referendum would involve or what would ensue in the event that the electorate voted to leave the EU. Rather, it was based on a short-term political calculation that promising a referendum would calm dissenters on Cameron's backbenches and help the Conservatives win the next general election by 'spiking the guns of the UK Independence Party'.⁵ Indeed, some say that Cameron expected not to have to deliver on his commitment: that the Conservatives would have to form a coalition after the 2015 election, and that the referendum would be sacrificed in the negotiations.⁶

The House of Commons Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (PACAC), chaired by leading Brexit supporter Bernard Jenkin, has since called the vote a ‘bluff-call’ referendum, in which the government sought not to promote a change that it believed in, but ‘to close down unwelcome debate on an issue’.⁷ The trouble with such a referendum is that the government has no incentive to develop the change option. If the government wanted the change on the ballot paper, it would likely spend considerable time working out what form the change should best take and assessing what the process of change would involve. But the UK government did not do that: it was not interested in whether leaving the EU was really the best response to voters’ concerns or what form post-Brexit Britain’s relationship with the EU might take or how the process of leaving the EU would unfold. Rather, it intended – and expected – simply to close down debate on such matters and confirm the UK’s position in the EU. This meant there was no clarity for voters on what kind of Brexit deal the government might seek.

It was in this low-information context that the referendum campaign itself took place. The quality of the debate during that campaign has been widely criticised. One problem was the prevalence of misinformation: the House of Commons Treasury Committee, for example, whose members included MPs from both sides of the referendum divide, warned that ‘the public debate is being poorly served by inconsistent, unqualified and, in some cases, misleading claims and counter-claims. Members of both the “leave” and “remain” camps are making such claims’.⁸ While Vote Leave’s spurious claim that the UK was contributing £350 million a week to the EU has achieved notoriety, there were deep problems on the Remain side too. For example, Full Fact, the country’s leading independent fact-checker, said of the Treasury’s claim that families would be £4,300 worse off if the UK left the EU, ‘At best that’s a red herring’.⁹ Another problem was that many important issues – such as the future of the Irish border and how Brexit would be negotiated – were barely discussed.

Reflecting these weaknesses, many voters were dissatisfied. In survey research conducted for the Electoral Commission shortly after the vote, only 34 per cent of respondents agreed that the campaign had been conducted in a ‘fair and balanced’ way, while 52 per cent disagreed – 34 per cent ‘strongly’. Among respondents who disagreed, the most common reasons for doing so – each chosen by 31 per cent – were that the campaign had been one-sided, unbalanced, biased or partial, and that the information provided was inaccurate or misleading.¹⁰

Such patterns should concern anyone, irrespective of their position on Brexit. First, democracy demands that voters be able to make a free choice, implying that trustworthy information should be readily available to them. If voters cannot find the information they want or are misled into choices that will not in fact serve their preferences, this undermines their capacity to exercise control. Second, the legitimacy of a referendum result is undermined if those on the losing side feel the victors won unfairly. Immediately following the Brexit referendum, over 4 million people signed a petition saying the vote should be rerun.¹¹ That so many people feel this way harms the cause of those who believe the outcome was the right one.

Meanwhile, the consequences of holding a referendum on an unspecific proposal without planning for what would happen if voters chose that option have been seen ever since the referendum vote. Though in law the result of the referendum was only advisory, the UK government and parliament have accepted that they are bound politically to implement it. But what they must implement has remained unclear, leading to intractable disputes about the form that Brexit should take, and repeated accusations that those opposing a hardline conception of Brexit have ‘betrayed’ voters’ will. Many MPs have found themselves conflicted between doing what they believe to be in their constituents’ interests and doing what their constituents (or the country as a whole) voted for. This is not a healthy state for the democratic system to be left in.

Embedding referendums

The preceding section identified two sets of problems in the Brexit referendum process. First, the referendum was triggered as a political ‘quick fix’, not as part of a process of carefully considered policy-making. As a result, no prior consideration was given to the details of the change proposal or how it might be implemented. Second, the referendum campaign left many voters dissatisfied or bewildered, with many believing the result had been secured unfairly. In this section and the section that follows, we consider how each of these problems could be addressed.

In doing so, we draw on extensive research into referendum practice in democracies around the world. Many countries have more experience than the UK in running referendums, and many of these have considered carefully how best to conduct them. There are therefore worthwhile lessons to be learnt. Some of our research was conducted on behalf of the Independent Commission on Referendums, a body of twelve distinguished individuals with diverse experience of referendums, who examined all aspects of the role and conduct of referendums and reported in July.¹² The analyses offered here are, however, our own: we do not speak here for the Commission. There is much overlap between our conclusions and theirs, but that is because the evidence often points in clear directions.

With regard to the first set of problems, the early stages in a referendum process should be designed as carefully as the later stages. A referendum is a mechanism for deciding between two (or, very occasionally, more than two) options. It is not in itself a mechanism through which the form of those options can be developed. Effective policy-making processes involve detailed consideration of what the problems are and then of what solutions might best address those problems. Options should be developed through discussion and compromise to devise options that may deliver as effectively and widely as possible. If a referendum is to enable a clear, cogent choice, all of this should happen before the referendum is called and the options on the ballot paper are set.

There are two main mechanisms for doing this in democracies around the world. First, in most democracies, referendums serve as a supplement to, rather than a substitute for, normal processes of parliamentary deliberation and scrutiny. The executive and legislature develop and carefully scrutinize proposals; only if the legislature passes these do they then go to a referendum. Many legislatures are bicameral, requiring dual scrutiny processes to be completed before a referendum is held. In some countries within unicameral legislatures, such as Denmark and Iceland, decisions on key constitutional questions must pass through the legislature twice on either side of a general election. Even in countries that allow citizen-initiated referendums, these are sometimes, as in Italy and Slovenia, only ‘abrogative’, meaning that voters have a veto power over decisions that have gone through the legislature, but cannot make their own proposals. New Zealand does allow citizens to initiate referendums on any topic, but these are genuinely advisory, and governments have opted to ignore some results despite overwhelming votes for change. Switzerland is a rare democracy allowing binding public votes at the national level on initiatives that lack parliamentary support. But even here, the Federal Assembly scrutinizes and gives its view on the proposals before the referendum takes place. Thus, in almost all democracies, referendums are embedded in – and take place towards the end of – lengthy processes of discussion and debate within representative democratic institutions.

Second, increasing numbers of democracies are experimenting with new forms of democratic discussion that engage ordinary voters directly in processes of detailed deliberation over complex policy questions. That is best exemplified by the recent Irish Citizens’ Assembly, which preceded the referendum of May 2018 on removing restrictions on abortion from the constitution. The Citizens’

Assembly comprised ninety-nine people who were randomly selected to reflect the make-up of the Irish population. They met for five weekends in late 2016 and early 2017 to learn about and discuss the issues with experts, campaigners, and people with relevant experience, and then engage in detailed deliberations among themselves before reaching conclusions. Their report, published in June 2017, fed into further detailed examination by a parliamentary committee. Only after all of this did the government and parliament agree a constitutional amendment to be submitted to referendum. This was the second referendum in Ireland to build on such deliberative underpinnings. As one commentator noted, ‘the process has proven, with both same sex marriage and abortion, that it is an effective way of preparing the ground for wider public debate on contentious issues’.¹³

The Citizens’ Assembly on Brexit – which took place over two weekends in autumn 2017, and which the Constitution Unit helped to organize – demonstrates that the citizens’ assembly model is feasible in the UK too. It also shows that, even in the context of the highly polarized Brexit debate, it is possible to engage voters in high-quality discussion if they are given appropriate time and support.¹⁴ Interest in such mechanisms is growing in the UK, as exemplified by the recent Citizens’ Assembly on Social Care, which was convened by two House of Commons select committees.¹⁵

While proper preparation for a referendum, ensuring that a clear choice can be put to voters, is desirable, there are evident difficulties on a topic such as Brexit, where it is generally agreed a referendum must precede the negotiations on the detailed proposal. Clarity before June 2016 on what Brexit would look like would not have been possible. Even so, the government could have examined carefully what Brexit would involve; and extensive discussions could have taken place on what people’s concerns were, whether leaving the EU was the best response to them, and, if so, what kind of Brexit would be sought.

Improving campaign discourse

The second set of problems identified above related to the campaign itself. Voters should be able to access reliable information on the issues that matter to them in a referendum campaign. But voters in the Brexit referendum had to wade through torrents of misinformation, and trustworthy material was often difficult to find.

Our research identifies three broad approaches to improving information and discourse during referendum campaigns: confronting misinformation; providing high-quality information; and promoting deliberation.

In its mild form, the first of these approaches simply involves identifying misinformation and exposing it as such. This is traditionally a task for the media. In the UK, the requirement for ‘due impartiality’ in broadcasting combines with the public service obligations of the BBC and other terrestrial broadcasters to ensure that much quality scrutiny of campaigners’ claims does take place. By contrast, many print and online media outlets are effectively campaigners themselves, and do not always show the same attachment to advancing truth. In recent years, traditional broadcast journalism has been supplemented by a new breed of ‘fact-checking’, providing rigorous, impartial assessment of claims made. The BBC and Channel 4 News have developed their own fact-checking strands, and Full Fact is the UK’s leading independent fact-checker. The 2016 referendum was the most fact-checked referendum ever.¹⁶

A stronger form of this first approach to improving discourse not only exposes misinformation, but also intervenes directly to stop it. The UK has no provisions seeking to prevent misinformation: no

official body is charged with such a role, and the Advertising Standards Authority, which enforces accuracy in most advertising, does not deal with advertising for elections or referendums. An early day motion signed by fifty MPs in the wake of the 2016 referendum called for the establishment of an 'Office of Electoral Integrity' to 'verify the truthfulness of claims made during political campaigns, with powers to issue clarifications and fines where appropriate'.¹⁷ But the Electoral Commission – the most obvious body to perform such a function – has said firmly that it does not want it.¹⁸

The democratic polity that goes furthest in this direction is South Australia: its Electoral Commission can require campaigners to withdraw claims in election advertisements that it deems to be 'inaccurate and misleading to a material extent' and oblige them to issue a retraction. It uses these powers: in 2014 (the latest election for which full data are available), it sought a withdrawal and/or retraction in eleven cases.¹⁹ Our research suggests this mechanism is supported almost universally in South Australia. While the UK Electoral Commission is concerned that taking on such a role could open it to unwarranted accusations of bias and thereby undermine its other functions, we found almost no such concerns in South Australia. Nevertheless, we also find that this success depends on a relatively forgiving media environment that does not exist in the UK. Furthermore, the impact of the provision on campaign discourse in general is limited: South Australia's Electoral Commission intervenes only against egregiously false claims; it is possible to frame most claims so as not to meet this threshold, while still leaving the intended impression. Mechanisms for confronting misinformation could play no more than a marginal role in any attempt to improve campaign discourse in referendums in the UK.

The second approach to pursuing that end is to provide high-quality information. We define 'high-quality information' as information that is accurate, impartial, accessible to as many people as possible, and relevant to people's concerns. In the UK, the Electoral Commission provides basic information on what the options are and how to vote. In the 2011 referendum on the voting system, it also provided descriptions of the two electoral systems that voters could choose between, but it did not repeat this in 2016. In some other countries, voters receive much more information. In Switzerland, a booklet sent to every voter sets out the options and arguments. In Ireland, a Referendum Commission is established at each referendum, which conducts a neutral information campaign explaining the legal effect of the proposed change.

The country that has taken this approach furthest is New Zealand. Like the UK, it held a referendum on the voting system in 2011. The New Zealand Electoral Commission ran an information campaign designed to help voters through every stage of the decision process. As in the UK, it sought to raise awareness of the ballot and explain how to vote. Beyond this, it also gave detailed descriptions of the options (of which there were five), set out a range of criteria that people might use in evaluating the options, and indicated how each option measured up against the criteria. What it did not do was tell voters what weight (if any) they should attach to these criteria: this was a matter of personal choice. But it provided an online 'toolkit' through which voters could indicate their own priorities and receive guidance as to how the systems performed relative to these priorities.

This information campaign was successful in New Zealand and helped to frame an informed debate around the options. Our analysis finds that markedly fewer false campaign claims were made than in the UK's voting system referendum the same year, and, while the information campaign was not the only factor in that, it appears that it did play a part.²⁰

Nevertheless, there are again concerns about whether an approach such as this could work within the UK's media climate. It may be difficult for an official body to take on such a role, and it may therefore be preferable – at least for so long as the current media climate prevails – for broadcasters, researchers, and other independent actors to seek to work together to develop and raise the profile

of impartial information materials. That was done to some degree in the Brexit referendum by the UK in a Changing Europe programme, led by Professor Anand Menon at King's College London. It would be valuable to consider what lessons can be learnt from this exercise and how to build on it further.

The third and final approach to improving campaign discourse focuses on engaging citizens in active deliberation. Here, the goal is not that voters should be passive recipients of information passed down from above. Rather, they should be active in creating knowledge and discussing the issues.

We saw above the use of deliberative mechanisms before a referendum is called, where they can help consider issues and develop options. Similar mechanisms can also be used to facilitate discussion of the alternatives during the campaign. In Oregon, for example, a randomly selected citizens' panel meets for up to five days in the early stages of a campaign. It hears from experts and campaigners, deliberates, and produces a one-page report, which is included in the information pack that is sent to all voters ahead of polling day. High-quality mass deliberation might be the ideal, but is very difficult to achieve given the need for careful facilitation. The Oregon process helps to overcome this: facilitated deliberation takes place within only a small group of voters; but the insights gained are available to all.

Such small-scale deliberative exercises might be used in other ways too. For example, they could help determine the issues that are addressed in any public information campaign, ensuring these materials relate directly to people's concerns. They could help set the agenda for televised debates and other high-profile campaign events. All such mechanisms have the advantage over the top-down approaches set out above that they do not rely to the same extent on trust in 'experts' or institutions of the 'establishment'. Rather, they enable the voices of regular voters to be heard. There is clear evidence that voters trust their peers more than politicians: in the 2018 Irish abortion referendum, for example, an exit poll found that 70 per cent of respondents who had heard of the Citizens' Assembly said they trusted it above the mid-point on a 0–11 scale, compared to 31 per cent who trusted politicians.²¹

Lessons for a referendum on the UK's EU membership

We have set out some of the key problems associated with the process of the Brexit referendum: inadequate preparation before the vote was called; and poor information and discourse during the campaign. We have also considered possible solutions: embedding any referendum in prior deliberation among both elected representatives and ordinary citizens; and fostering high-quality information and discussion during the campaign. At the same time, we have also noted some difficulties in the context of a referendum on Brexit, where the need to hold a referendum before negotiations necessarily weakens the information environment. In this section we consider in further detail what could best be done to improve discussion in the context of a referendum specifically on the UK's EU membership.

Three broad types of such referendum can be distinguished. First, we can rerun in our minds the Brexit referendum of 2016: what could have been done better then? Second, we can consider a possible further referendum now: some are calling for a referendum on the Brexit deal once it has been negotiated, so how would such a referendum best be designed? Third, assuming Brexit does take place, we can imagine a future referendum on whether the UK should seek re-entry to the EU.

The first and third types are similar in form, so we can consider them together: in each case, a referendum is needed on whether to open negotiations; it can therefore seek endorsement only for

a broad proposal, not a specific agreed package. As we argued above, extensive deliberations are both possible and desirable before calling such a referendum, despite its preliminary nature. Provision of extensive information materials during the campaign would also be feasible: while it is sometimes suggested that there are few important ‘facts’ in the context of a campaign where major lines of contestation relate either to values and identities or to differing future projections, it is still possible to provide information setting out the issues that could be affected by the decision, what is knowable, and what is uncertain. Helping voters deal with uncertainty would, indeed, be an important objective.

Still, a referendum on a broad principle undoubtedly creates problems. The government’s negotiating position can be clarified, but not pinned down in every detail. Politicians may face a difficult task in interpreting voters’ wishes, particularly if they cannot secure what was initially promised. Voters must choose a side before knowing what is on offer. All of this speaks strongly in favour of a further stage in the decision-making process: a second referendum, this time on the deal itself. In the case of Brexit, there are legitimate worries that this could weaken the UK’s negotiating position: if the EU knew the government required voters’ approval for the final deal, it might insist on a bad deal to encourage its rejection. But if democratic control is to be maintained throughout the process, some form of approval for the deal is needed. If that does not come from voters in a referendum, it must come from parliament, where the same argument applies. To avoid the perception of conflict between parliament and voters, and to enable voters to make the clearest possible choice, a double-referendum process is preferable.

We do not take a view on whether a referendum should now be held on the Brexit deal: while we advocate a double-referendum process, this ought to be set out in advance of the first referendum, not decided ad hoc in midstream. But there are many supporters of such a referendum – a referendum of our second type – so it is important to consider what form it should take.

Two aspects of such a referendum deserve particular attention: the time it would take; and the question it would ask. Some suggest that a second referendum could happen very quickly: little else but Brexit has been discussed in British politics for over two years, so familiarity is already high. But the need for high-quality information and deliberation during the campaign itself should not be underestimated: the deal on Brexit and the framework for future UK–EU relations will be complex, and many voters will want time to absorb them; many people have tuned out of the details of Brexit since the first referendum. In any case, referendums take time to organize. Not least, a decision would be needed on what options are to be put to voters and how the question would be worded. Given such pressures, a procedurally robust further referendum is very unlikely to be possible before the two-year Article 50 window closes on 29 March 2019. A second vote would therefore be feasible only if all twenty-seven remaining member states agreed to extend the negotiating period.

Conclusion

Referendums will continue to play a role in democracy in the UK. Whether the next such vote is on EU membership or on some other issue, there are important lessons to be learnt from the 2016 EU referendum for how referendums might best be conducted. If voters are to be given a clear choice and allowed freely to make up their minds, two key changes to established practice in the UK are needed. First, much more attention should be given to the processes of preparing for a referendum. Wherever possible, voters should decide between options that have already been set down in legislation that has passed through parliament; processes of citizen deliberation should also be fostered at these early stages to engage voters as deeply as possible in the policy debate. Second,

information should be strengthened during campaigns themselves. While there are legitimate concerns about whether a central, state-sponsored public information campaign could be effective in the UK, much can be done: independent actors should be involved; crucially, deliberation among ordinary citizens should again play a central role. We need to find ways to engage the public in ongoing debate, not simply ask them to make a binary choice between options decided by others.

These proposals apply to referendums on any topic, not just EU membership: a further referendum at some point on Scottish independence is a strong possibility, and politicians might decide a reference to the people is the best (or easiest) approach on other issues too. Some may doubt that politicians would want to diminish their control over the process by introducing such reforms. But to call a referendum is in itself to give up control. If politicians want to legitimize a decision through a referendum – particularly one on a contentious question such as Brexit or Scottish independence – they have good reason to want a referendum process that is unimpeachable. The UK already has some general rules for referendums, set out in the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000. The proposals set out here would update and extend this approach to reflect two further decades of political development and learning.

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⁷ House of Commons Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, *Lessons Learned from the EU Referendum* (Twelfth Report of Session 2016–17), HC 496 (London: House of Commons, 2017), p. 55.

⁸ House of Commons Treasury Committee (2016) *The economic and financial costs and benefits of the UK's EU membership*, HC 112, 2016-17, p. 4.

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¹¹ <https://petition.parliament.uk/archived/petitions/131215>

¹² [Reference to be added when available.]

¹³ F. Kelly, 'Abortion Referendum: The Political Winners and Losers', *Irish Times*, 26 May 2018, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/abortion-referendum-the-political-winners-and-losers-1.3509893> (accessed 29 May 2018).

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¹⁵ Involve and House of Commons, *Citizens' Assembly on Social Care: Recommendations for Funding Adult Social Care*, London: Involve and House of Commons, 2018, https://www.involve.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/attachemnt/Citizens%27%20Assembly%20on%20Social%20Care%20-%20Recommendations%20for%20funding%20social%20care_0.pdf, accessed 2 July 2018.

¹⁶ Z. Goss and A. Renwick, 'Fact-checking and the EU referendum', *Constitution Unit blog*, 23 August 2016, <https://constitution-unit.com/2016/08/23/fact-checking-and-the-eu-referendum/>, (accessed 31 May 2018).

¹⁷ Early Day Motion 278: Office of Electoral Integrity, session 2016–17, <https://www.parliament.uk/edm/2016-17/278> (accessed 26 April 2018).

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¹⁹ Electoral Commission South Australia, *State Election 2014: Election Report*, Adelaide: Electoral Commission South Australia, 2015, p. 56.

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