

Beyond the binary: what might a multiple-choice EU referendum have looked like?

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*Voters in the EU referendum could choose only between leaving and remaining – with no say on whether to stay in the single market, renegotiate a different deal or even integrate more fully with the EU. **Lily Blake** argues a multiple-choice referendum of the kind held occasionally abroad would have been less divisive, set a clear path for the government and better reflected the nuances of public opinion.*

Vote only once by putting a cross <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> in the box next to your choice
Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?
Remain a member of the European Union <input type="checkbox"/>
Leave the European Union <input type="checkbox"/>

Image: Public domain

The EU referendum exposed several problems with the UK's approach to direct democracy – from the manner of the campaigning to the handling of the aftermath. Some problems were caused by political agendas, some by a lack of constitutional guidelines for referendums. The experience has prompted many to consider whether referendums themselves are inherently flawed and problematic.

Yet the dichotomous nature of the EU referendum, whereby the voter could only choose between two options, is responsible for many of the problems that arose. Holding a multiple choice referendum instead of a binary one could have pre-empted them.

In the UK, the notion of a multiple choice referendum is unusual: we have never held one. But the idea is certainly not inconceivable. Between 1931 and 2000, [19 multiple choice referendums](#) were held across the world. The issues ranged from deciding on a new national anthem (Australia, 1977) to prohibition (Finland 1931). A key challenge is the need to find a way of framing multiple choice questions in a way that avoids confusion and accusations of political bias. While introducing more answers adds a degree of complexity, [Peter Emerson](#) argues that multiple choice referendums lend themselves to more open questions than binary referendums. And open questions are easier to word in a neutral way.

Dichotomous referendums are divisive and extreme because binary choice discourages nuance. Most political

beliefs rest somewhere on a spectrum. A binary choice, however, cannot account for this spectrum, resulting in an invariably stark result. When the options are 'black' or 'white', there is no choice to vote for 'grey'. Emerson identifies binary decisions as being at the root of conflict, atrocity, and genocide throughout history. In 'Defining Democracy', he writes:

"Are you Catholic or Protestant? Serb or Croat? Hutu or Tutsi? These were all questions of war, as too was the choice during the Cold War: are you communist or capitalist?" (2012 [2002] p.17)

In other words, dichotomous referendums affect the public's perception of societal cohesion, emphasising disagreement over consensus. The dichotomous nature of the EU referendum is a potential explanation for [post-Brexit violence](#): those who thought themselves on the winning side still resorted to violence.

Any referendum question frames the remit of debate by outlining the acceptable options. The UK's [2011 referendum on the Alternative Vote \(AV\)](#) was treated as a referendum on proportional representation, but only gave voters the option to choose between AV or the current First Past the Post (FPTP) system. The referendum's result ought to have demonstrated that voters did not want a system of proportional representation, but the result merely demonstrated that the electorate were opposed to AV. Had the question included more options, the result might have been different.

A binary choice referendum provides very little information on a voter's stance. Many questions crucial to the UK and EU negotiations remained entirely unanswered by the EU referendum. Should the UK remain part of the single market or not? Should the UK leave by enacting Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty or repeal the 1972 European Communities Act? Should Brexit be 'hard' or 'soft'? A vote to 'leave' the EU provided very little information concerning the sort of post-EU society the voter would prefer.

A government's mandate to rule is derived from the electorate, making a direct referendum the most powerful mandate of all. Yet the lack of information gathered regarding the electorate's attitude towards Brexit puts the government in a difficult position when it tries to enact voters' wishes. Since referendums are an expression of public opinion, their success can be measured in terms of how much they enlighten politicians about the public's preferences.

Multiple choice referendums have the potential to make sense of public opinion in a way that dichotomous referendums currently fail to. For example, the [1992 New Zealand referendum on electoral reform](#) was able to discover not only if the electorate desired a new electoral system, but which one they would choose if the electoral system were to change – from a comprehensive list.

Another clear advantage (though it is often framed as a disadvantage) is that multiple choices make it harder to calculate a winning side.

The risk of voter fatigue and confusion

Some fear multiple choice referendums would be time consuming, lead to inconclusiveness and thereby cause referendums about referendums – leading to voter fatigue. These worries are reasonable, but misplaced. Several multiple choice referendum results have been decisive, including Finland's 1931 decision to abolish prohibition, [endorsed by 70.5% of voters](#). Because voters are offered more choice, a conclusive result has greater legitimacy attached to it.

Settling on a single question is also important: on a political conundrum such as EU membership, it would be possible to ask several questions on various areas of debate. A balance of public consultation on constitutional issues without resorting to excessive use of referendums is vital.

Arguably, New Zealand's electoral reform referendums in the 1990s failed in this respect. They had [another referendum on the same issue in 2011](#), barely 20 years after the first one. (Still, calls for a [second EU referendum](#) and the phenomenon of [voter regret](#) perhaps indicate that the dichotomous EU referendum of 2016 will be equally inconclusive.)

But Emerson argues that, in cases where multiple choice referendums would be inconclusive – such as constitutional questions in Ireland – binary referendums are even more problematic. For sensitive issues, the adversarial emphasis on 'winning' a binary referendum is dangerous, and resolving the issue without a referendum is vital in fostering social harmony.

A better EU referendum question

So (with some irony) while the merits of multiple choice referendums are open to debate – and the risks of apathy, fatigue, and confusion must be weighed against the divisive nature and limited scope of binary referendums – a multiple choice reworking of the EU referendum question might have better expressed the full spectrum of public opinion, from integration to separation. Consider this: on 23 June, would you rather have answered [the question that appeared on the ballot paper](#), or this one?

How should the UK's relationship with the EU proceed?

- Remain; further EU integration
- Remain; maintain current relations
- Remain; renegotiate a new deal within the EU
- Leave; join European Economic Area
- Leave; don't join European Economic Area

This post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit.

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