

Don't be deceived: referenda seldom tell us much about national identity

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*Referenda on belonging are not a new phenomenon in modern European history. Neither is suspense about their outcomes. In a series of frontier plebiscites held in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, for example, voter sentiment often fluctuated dramatically. **Jim Bjork** writes that negative campaigning played a strikingly prominent role, raising the prospect that many voters were not affirming a positive national identity but rather voting against incorporation into states that they distrusted, due to past personal experience or fears of future developments. He argues that today too fluctuations and ambiguities in indicators of national, as well as European, identities, show that these provide neither clear nor stable signposts for predicting referenda results.*



In a [lecture](#) delivered at the Sorbonne in 1882, the French philosopher and historian Ernest Renan famously described a nation as a 'daily plebiscite'. His point was that national communities are not natural or eternal but rather depend on 'consent, the clearly expressed desire to continue a common life'. If that consent is not clear, if 'doubts arise' about whether some ostensible parts of the nation actually want to belong it, it is necessary to 'consult the populations in the areas under dispute.'

The recent referendum on Scottish independence would seem a perfect example of Renan's principles in action. A population apparently torn between primary allegiance to a Scottish nation or a broader British nation was explicitly asked to choose. Whether the upcoming UK referendum on membership in the European Union fits this same template is a much more difficult and contentious question. A sceptic might reasonably argue that *this* plebiscite does not raise the prospect of belonging to a European nation-state, a fully sovereign community for which citizens were asked to fight and die. And yet the European Union, while not ticking all of the boxes of a traditional nation-state, clearly has evolved into a community with some of the attributes of a sovereign nation, including shared legal norms and a directly elected common parliament. Belonging to Europe would also seem to involve some degree of what Renan highlighted as a crucial marker of nationhood: a sense of 'sharing, in the past, a glorious heritage and regrets, and of having, in the future, a programme to put into effect'.

Political scientists and other observers have studied the extent and nature of the relationship between support for membership in the EU on the one hand and a more general sense of European identity on the other. Opinion polling by [British Social Attitudes](#) has indicated that the former is a much more common phenomenon than the latter. Since the late 1990s, a consistently small minority of respondents—about one in seven—has chosen 'European' from a list of potential group identifications. An overwhelmingly proportion of this small group of self-identified Europeans have, not surprisingly, supported membership in the EU. But roughly half of 'non-Europeans' have also favoured Britain's membership. Such data seems to confirm the stereotype of a typical British voter who is open to the idea of getting a good deal *from* Europe but does not consider—and has never considered—her/himself as *being* European.

Is this a distinctively British phenomenon, reflecting the countries (in)famous insularity and sense of detachment from the continent? Comparison with similar polling data in other European countries raises doubts about a purely exceptionalist interpretation. One of the questions that the [World Values Survey](#) has posed in a number of countries over the past decade concerns identification with the European Union. The proportion of respondents expressing such an identification has been strikingly modest in what would ordinarily be considered the 'core' of the European Union: countries that were original members of the European Economic Community and original members of the eurozone. In Germany, for example, only 8.7% of respondents in a 2006 survey strongly agreed that they identified with the European Union, with a further 31.7% agreeing. By contrast, identification with the European Union was much stronger at the EU's geographic margins. In Poland, a 2005 survey (one year after Poland's entry into the EU)

found 21.8% strongly agreeing and a further 54.5% agreeing with the statement 'I feel myself to be a citizen of the EU'. Levels of identification with the EU were lower in a survey conducted in Romania the same year, with about 40% of respondents agreeing (12.6% of them strongly agreeing) that they felt themselves to be citizens of the EU. But this was still slightly higher than in Germany—quite extraordinary, considering that at the time Romania had not yet joined the EU!

These patterns—of relative Euro-enthusiasm among those at the threshold of the EU and relative Euro-indifference among longstanding members in its original core—suggest a more pessimistic take on Renan's vision of communities regularly reaffirming themselves through 'daily plebiscites'. What if, instead, communities sometimes exert their greatest force of attraction when they are abstract objects of longing, while familiarity with their day-to-day realities breeds contempt? This view could, of course, be framed as a critique of the specific institutional shortcomings of the European Union, with its notorious democratic deficit and unaccountable bureaucracy. But the phenomenon of discontent with particular regimes or forms of government undermining commitment to an underlying community is actually quite a common phenomenon in modern European history, even within the most seemingly robust of nation-states.

For British readers, the recent, rapid surge in Scottish separatist sentiment, fuelled in no small part by animosity toward a sitting Tory government, will be the most familiar example of such volatility. An earlier, broader and more dramatic episode, often glossed over in historical narratives, was the blossoming of separatist bids across much of Germany in the immediate aftermath of the First World War. In the autumn of 1918, subjects of the German Empire had just emerged from a gruelling four-year-long total war, demanding unprecedented levels of patriotic sacrifice for the fatherland. And yet despite—or perhaps partly because of?—this experience of shared sacrifice, a remarkably large and diverse group of Germans were now keen to abandon a German state altogether. This not only included politicians from peripheral and particularist regions such as Bavaria or the Rhineland, with their longstanding suspicions of domination by Protestant Prussia. Secession fever also extended to the Prussian elites themselves, many of whom now toyed with visions of a new eastern state or states that would be safely independent from a Germany they feared might succumb to Bolshevik revolution and/or be subject to ruinous war reparations. It was, ironically, the Western Allies, intent on keeping together a Germany that could be held responsible for the war, that helped to put the breaks on this rush to the exits.

According to the 'nationality principle' championed by the Allies (at least within Europe), new states and changes in frontiers were not to be the result of such impulsive and opportunistic agendas. Instead, they should reflect underlying cultural realities. In most cases, therefore, language statistics from censuses were seen as sufficient for determining what territory and which inhabitants belonged in which states. Only in a few especially contested regions, mostly along Germany's frontier with Poland, did the Allies follow Renan's injunction to 'consult the populations' and hold formal plebiscites. But the process and the results raised at least as many questions as they answered. In some cases, the 'consultation' produced an emphatic, albeit somewhat counterintuitive, response. The largely Polish-speaking population of southern East Prussia (Masuria), for example, voted almost unanimously to remain part of Germany. In the densely populated industrial region of [Upper Silesia](#), however, the frontier plebiscite proved a close-run thing. Most contemporary observers agreed that the sentiments of many voters fluctuated dramatically during the plebiscite campaign—it all depended on who got their ear last, as one exasperated *Times* correspondent reported—and that the relatively narrow German victory (59%) depended on contingencies such as the effectiveness of rival propaganda efforts and speculation about the relative economic prospects of Germany and Poland. In all of the frontier plebiscites held after the First World War, negative campaigning played a strikingly prominent role, raising the prospect that many voters were not affirming a positive national identity but rather voting *against* incorporation into states that they distrusted, due to past personal experience or fears of future developments.

This earlier heyday of sovereignty-related referendums, like the most recent and on-going wave, highlight the gap between the expectations attached to such votes and their reality. Because these referendums are so exceptional, having no predictable timing or trigger mechanism but often assumed to be once-in-a-generation, once-in-a-lifetime

or one-time-only events, it is troubling to think of them as subject to fickle moods or to the effectiveness of an advertising campaign. Hence the appeal of imagining that the results of these referendums can and should be anchored in something like 'identity', a continuous and predictable sense of 'who we are'. But fluctuations and ambiguities in indicators of national, as well as European, identities, show that these provide neither clear nor stable signposts. Renan may still have been correct to insist that, when doubts arise about belonging to a particular community, it is worthwhile to consult the population. But we should keep in mind that, after all of the votes have been counted, the doubts will still remain.

The article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE BrexitVote blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science. Image: [Plebiscite in Upper Silesia \(1921\) – Polish poster](#): "Vote for Poland: and you will be free".

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Plebiscite in Upper Silesia (1921) – Polish poster: "Vote for Poland and you will be free".