

Getting the timing right: Cameron weighs up the pros and cons of a June 2016 referendum

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*The EU referendum could be held as soon as June – which leaves little time for David Cameron to negotiate the reforms he wants to make. On the other hand, says **Sara Hobolt**, the PM will be wary of delaying the vote and falling prey to a mid-term slump in popularity. Should he call the referendum as soon as possible – or give himself more time to win over his European peers?*



Timing is everything in a referendum. Given that public opinion tends to fluctuate greatly in the period leading up to a referendum, choosing the right date can make the difference between victory and defeat for the government of the day.

David Cameron has hinted that the referendum on British membership of the EU may be held as early as June 2016. He has pledged to hold the referendum by the end of 2017. What are the advantages of choosing an early referendum date?

Avoiding the mid-term slump

Cameron is wise to seek to avoid the mid-term slump in government popularity that usually occurs a few years after the election. Despite the unexpected Conservative triumph in the May 2015 elections of gaining enough seats to form a single-party government, Cameron only controls a slim majority in Parliament. His party is deeply split on Europe, and the recent announcement that Cabinet ministers are free to campaign against EU membership suggests that Cameron is vulnerable on this issue. Government popularity matters to vote choices in referendums. A strong and popular Prime Minister is much more likely to be able to persuade wavering voters that it is best to stay in the EU. Cameron thus wants to call a vote before his popularity declines and his position within the party and Parliament is further weakened.

External events are also likely to influence the vote. Another Eurozone or immigration crisis will undoubtedly boost the Leave side. Such events are notoriously difficult to predict. Yet experience tells us that the Mediterranean migration crisis is likely to worsen in the autumn months, which suggests that an early summer ballot is preferable. A vote in 2016 would also avoid a clash with the unpredictable French and German elections in 2017. Finally, the polls suggest the Remain side is still slightly ahead, and a drawn-out campaign with a weakened Prime Minister could change that.

Tight timetable



Timing is everything ... Big Ben is cleaned in 2014. Photo copyright [UK Parliament](#) via a [Creative Commons licence](#)

The problem for Cameron is that a vote as early as June 2016 gives him very little time to finalise the renegotiations with his European partners. It is essential that Cameron's key demands are met and that the reforms are perceived by the British public to be both substantial and lasting. Given that Cameron and his ministers have repeatedly argued that Britain should only stay in a "reformed EU" and have not ruled out campaigning for an exit if their demands are not met, the outcome of referendum will to a large extent depend on whether they can persuade the public of the merits of any reform deal. EU Treaty change cannot be achieved by the summer, so a European Council declaration or Protocol, legally binding on all Member States (and inserted into the Treaty in due course), is likely to be the best that Cameron can achieve in such short time. We know that a majority of British voters are in favour of Britain remaining in a "reformed" EU, where some powers are returned to Britain. The Leave camp will no doubt argue that any concessions that Cameron return with are too flimsy to make any real difference to Britain's relation to Europe. A June 2016 referendum gives Cameron very little time to make the case for why Britain should stay in the EU – a case which has so far not been made forcefully by the government.

Moreover, a weak Labour Party caught up in internal strife may seem like a New Year's gift to the Conservatives. However, in the context of a referendum on the EU, it could be a serious weakness since Cameron will need the Labour leadership to mobilise and persuade their supporters if he is to have any chance of winning the EU vote. Labour supporters are generally more favourably disposed towards the EU than Conservative supporters, but they are less likely to listen to a Conservative Prime Minister than to their own leadership.

Referendums are always perilous for governments, as a number of factors can conspire to make voters turn against the government's favoured outcome. The Brexit referendum is particularly unpredictable as external events will shape the outcome. Choosing the optimal date is therefore not an easy task for Cameron.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the BrexitVote blog, nor of the LSE.

*Sara Hobolt is Sutherland Chair in European Institutions at the LSE's European Institute. She holds an honorary professorship in political science at the University of Southern Denmark and she is associate member of Nuffield College, Oxford. She has published extensively on EU politics, elections and referendums. Her most recent book is *Blaming Europe? Responsibility without Accountability in the EU* (Oxford University Press, 2014, with James Tilley). She was awarded the Best Book prize by the European Union Studies Association in 2010 for her previous book *Europe in Question: Referendums on European Integration* (Oxford University Press, 2009). Sara Hobolt is Vice Chair of the European Election Studies (EES), an EU-wide project studying voters, parties, candidates and the media in European Parliamentary elections. She was the BBC television election expert in the 2009 and 2014 European elections.*

