

Risk-takers and referendums: what happens when voters are better-informed?

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*Voting for change in a referendum is the riskier option. People who voted for Brexit were more likely to be risk-takers. But when people have more information at their disposal, are they more or less likely to stick with the status quo? **Davide Morisi** found that when voters were making up their minds about how to vote in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, the better-informed were more likely to choose Yes. But in a similar study conducted in the run-up to the EU referendum, more information made natural risk-takers slightly less inclined to vote Leave. Depending on their natural inclinations, voters can react very differently to the same arguments.*



Signs by a road in South Corriegills, Scotland, May 2014. Photo: [Cams](#) via a [CC-BY-NC 2.0 licence](#)

Although they offer voters a simple binary choice, referendums imply substantially different decisions. On the one hand, voters can choose a “Yes” for a change, such as the introduction a new policy or a constitutional change. On the other, they can say “No” to such proposals and vote to maintain the status quo. Although maintaining the status quo is not necessarily the best solution, it generally represents the safest choice compared to the risks related to a change. The current uncertainties related to the UK’s future relationship with the EU clearly show that “Brexit is riskier than Bremain”, as Timothy Garton Ash [put it](#).

This imbalance in terms of risks and uncertainties means the status quo option has an intrinsic advantage. A recent [analysis](#) of 268 referendums from democratic countries since 1990 (excluding Switzerland) shows that the change option won only in 40% of the cases, after accounting for the presence of turnout thresholds in some countries. The fundamental imbalance in direct democracy means that information is crucial when voters are making up their minds. In referendum campaigns, the arguments from both sides play a crucial role – not only because political parties play a weaker role than they do in general elections, but also because of the uncertainties related to referendum proposals.

The Scottish independence referendum

In my [study “Voting under uncertainty: the effect of information in the Scottish independence referendum”](#), I explored how information affected voting intentions in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum campaign. The study was conducted at BLUE Lab, University of Edinburgh, and involved a pool of around 180 participants who read a set of arguments in favour of and against independence under different conditions. The reading material came only from publicly available sources and was presented in a completely ‘naked’ format – i.e. without mentioning any politicians, political parties or organisations of any kind.

The results of the study show that **information does influence voting decisions, but this effect crucially depends on two elements: the share of undecided voters, and the imbalance between a riskier Yes for change and a safer No for the status quo**. In the specific case of Scotland, the combination between a substantial level of indecision among the electorate and the uncertainties related to leaving the UK determined a one-sided persuasion effect of information – meaning that it was support for independence that significantly increased after exposure to a mixed set of arguments.

Risk propensity and voting for a change

Further research that I conducted both in Scotland and during the recent campaign for the EU referendum highlights the importance of another intriguing factor: the individual disposition towards generally taking risks, also known as risk propensity. Analysis based on panel data from the [British Election Study](#) reveals that among Scottish voters those who were more inclined to take risks were also more likely to vote for independence than those who were less risk-acceptant. The same pattern occurred during the EU referendum: analysis in a forthcoming study reveals that risk-takers were more likely to vote Leave, after controlling for numerous factors, including age, gender, education, income, British identity and support for parties.

Risk propensity, however, affected also how voters responded to campaign arguments. The experimental data that I collected in Scotland reveals that **information increased support for independence, especially among those who were less likely to take risks**. The explanation for this finding lies in the fact that information reduces the uncertainties related to the change option (in this case, voting Yes to independence) especially for those who are more sensitive towards uncertainty, such as risk-averse voters.

The EU referendum

Inspired by these findings, in June 2016 I carried out another experimental study during the last weeks of the campaign for the EU referendum. The study was supported by the European Union Democracy Observatory (EU DO) at the European University Institute and was conducted online in collaboration with the Centre for Experimental Social Sciences (CESS) at Nuffield College, Oxford. In the experiment, a pool of 259 participants read a balanced set of pro and anti-EU arguments that were carefully selected from publicly available sources of information.

Data analysis shows that in the EU referendum, too, campaign arguments affected support for a change, depending on an individual’s disposition to take risks. After reading a balanced set of pro- and anti-EU arguments, support for leaving the EU increased among those who were more risk-averse compared to a condition of no information. However, in this case, the data also indicates an **opposite pattern among risk-takers, since information slightly reduced support for leaving the EU** within this group of participants. This pattern can be explained by the fact that among these voters, information actually increased awareness of the risks related to leaving the EU – a type of risk they did not consider in their voting calculation, due to their natural predispositions.

The implications for referendum and election campaigns

The implications of these findings extend beyond direct democracy to any electoral competition in which there is a significant imbalance in the electoral options in terms of risk and uncertainty. While in low-stake referendum

campaigns or in elections in which two mainstream parties compete against each other risk calculations might play a minor role in voters' final decisions, when the risks involved are higher – an independence referendum, or leaving the EU after more than 40 years – voters' willingness to take risks plays an important role in the campaign. In addition, these results indicate that referendum campaigners should keep in mind that **different voters might react very differently to the same campaign arguments**. Reducing the uncertainties related to changing the status quo can prove crucial in attracting risk-averse voters to the 'change side' of a referendum campaign, and ultimately secure their support on voting day.

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

Daide Morisi is currently a postdoctoral research assistant at the European University Institute. His research focuses on political behaviour and public opinion, with a specific emphasis on political psychology. In particular, he studies how citizens process information and how campaign messages affect voting behaviour in election and referendum campaigns.

