The real reasons referendums have become so common – and so scary

By Democratic Audit UK   2016-6-20

*As 23 June nears there has been increasing frustration around the quality of the debate, and the fact that such a complex constitutional issue is being decided by a binary referendum. **Harry Farmer** considers why referendums are becoming increasingly popular in Western democracies, and why anxieties around votes on single issues reflect deeper worries about the weaknesses of 21st century democratic systems.*

Credit: Sonali Campion

As the EU referendum looms closer, and the level of anxiety about the potential result mounts, many people's exasperation has shifted from the debate itself to the very fact we are having it.

Taking Brexit as its centerpiece, a recent article in the Economist bemoaned the increasing frequency of referendums in Europe, complaining that they make it harder to set transnational agreements, lead to incoherent policies, jeopardise the rights of minorities and often fail to make for better engagement with politics.

Commenting more directly on the EU referendum, Richard Dawkins recently described as an outrage the fact that people 'as ignorant as [him]' are being asked to vote on such a complex and important matter, and pointed out that we live in a representative democracy, not a plebiscitary one.

Leaving aside some of the more practical grievances, there seem to be two related ideas underpinning these kinds of complaints. One is that governments should have the self-assurance to govern in their country's best interests, rather than delegating hard questions to the electorate. The other is that there are some questions that are simply too important and complex to be left up to the public.

While it's easy to sympathise with these ideas, you don't have to subject them to too much pressure to see that they apply more widely than to referendums, and that they take you in a worryingly paternalistic direction. But for exactly that reason, it's interesting to consider what it is that tempts (presumably) otherwise committed democrats to

espouse them. When you scratch beneath the surface, it becomes clear that these anxieties about referendums are really expressions of deeper (more implicit) worries about 21st century democracy.

It's similarly interesting to ask why referendums are becoming more common. Rather than blaming the phenomenon on a crisis of weak leadership, considering why governments are finding referendums an increasingly appealing means of settling tough questions draws attention to a problem that our political system needs to address.

Once we see referendums, and our anxiety about them, as consequence of, rather than a cause of, the flaws in our political system, we're in a much better position to do something about it.

Referendums and new political narratives

Referendums are on the rise across Europe, with an average of three a year in the 1970s having risen to eight today. In the UK, we will have soon had three major referendums since 2010.

Considering the changes in the political landscape between now and then hints at the reasons for this. For most of the 20th century, the choice presented to voters has been that of left or right wing economic and social policy, with political parties positioning themselves at various points on the spectrum of left to right. Following the 2008 financial crisis, however, a new political divide has emerged, this time between cosmopolitan and populist responses to globalisation – with the former embracing globalisation's free flows of people, finance and culture, and the latter seeking greater restrictions on these things.

Representative democracy is fairly good at allowing voters to choose a position on a single spectrum of related issues, but is generally fairly bad at coherently reflecting voters' preferences on ideas that don't fit straightforwardly on such a spectrum.

Problematically, because both populism and cosmopolitanism are superficially compatible with both left and right wing thinking, our current political system is unable to accurately reflect voters' preferences along this increasingly important political spectrum. Established political parties, whose identities are bound up with questions of left and right, are rarely explicit or consistent in their views on cosmopolitanism versus populism, and the opinions of their members are rarely homogenous.

This phenomenon also means that there is a risk of discussions of these kinds of questions going unheard. Just as political parties with geographically dispersed support do worse under first past the post (FPTP), views that are spread across the spectrum of left and right often fail to get attention, as they fail to constitute the majority in any individual party.

The increasing relevance of the cosmopolitan/populist divide, and the inability of our current political system to deal with it, is a recipe for both voter disenfranchisement and divided political parties. In these circumstances, it's easy to see how a government might reasonably question its own mandate on such issues, and as such, be tempted to put them to referendums. Equally, it's easy to see how a government might want to use a referendum to appease its own rebellious ranks.

The Brexit debate is the perfect example of a choice between cosmopolitan and populist visions for a country that has for years been marginalized by these features of the political system. While both the Conservatives and Labour are split (albeit to differing degrees) on the issue, both have been nominally in favour of continued membership. Add to this the fact that UKIP – the only UK party whose identity is framed around the cosmopolitan/populist dichotomy – is kept artificially small by FPTP, and it's hard to see how British voters could have had a say on the EU had it not been for the referendum. Regardless of the (small 'p') political reasons for promising a referendum, EU membership was clearly an important issue that lots of voters cared about, that they couldn't have influenced through the UK's normal political processes.

It may well be that as political parties adapt in response to the growing importance of the cosmopolitan/ populist

divide, the temptation to call referendums diminishes.

If this does happen, it is unlikely to come about, as some have suggested, as a result of political parties fragmenting into smaller, more ideologically homogenous groups. As the continental European experience suggests, coalitions of smaller, more cohesive parties are struggling to deal with the cosmopolitan/populist divide every bit as much as ideologically diverse single party governments.

Instead, if a viable solution to the problem is to be found within the context of representative democracy, it will be through establishing a connection between left and right wing, and cosmopolitan and populist ideas, such that four options become two. This is a task that the left in particular has been struggling with since the eighties, but that's not to say that it can't be done. Late 20th and early 21st century history is an example of how the left right spectrums of economic and social policy was reduced to a single spectrum, with social democracy on one end and conservatism on the other (authoritarian and libertarian positions having been all but abandoned).

Another option is to shift towards more participatory democratic structures. Referendums are not the only alternative to representative democratic structures, and are by no means the most conducive to nuanced reflection of public opinion and thinking.

Still, until our political system can adapt, referendums will continue to offer an imperfect, stopgap solution to its inability to reflect an increasingly relevant counter-narrative.

Deeper worries about democracy

Criticisms of referendums also often say more about our anxieties about 21st century democracy than about referendums themselves.

Richard Dawkins' response (echoing many others), that it is irresponsible to give someone as ignorant as him power over a decision as important as EU membership, is particularly revealing.

When you cut through the context, Dawkins worry doesn't seem to be about referendums at all. Instead, it's indicative of a deeper seated skepticism about the power of modern democratic processes to produce good decisions.

This becomes clear when you consider why Dawkins thinks that his political ignorance is problematic in the case of the EU referendum, but not in other cases. If Dawkins is not qualified to make a decision about a specific, important policy, then presumably he is equally unqualified to make a decision about the numerous policies at stake when voting in a general election. Likewise, in terms of a tendency towards superficial, poorly informed debate, the referendum campaign is no different to any general election campaign.

Given this, the most plausible reason that figures like Dawkins are willing to tolerate poor quality discourse in elections but not in the EU referendum is that, deep down, they don't believe elections make a serious, irreversible difference to people's lives.

This prevalence of this thought, that some things are too important to be determined by democratic processes, should be deeply unsettling to those committed to democracy. But it is also a fairly conservative, fatalistic response to democracy's failings, premised on the idea that the only options are for public power be severely limited or dangerously out of control.

Rather than resigning ourselves to either one of these options, it is possible to take steps to improve the quality of public debate, and the means by which public opinion is translated into policy decisions. Political education, allowing people to conceive of the theoretical underpinnings of policies and parties and better understand the workings on the political system, would do a huge amount to improve the quality of public debate. Likewise, more participatory approaches to democracy, such as deliberative engagement, offer a means for the public to influence policy in an

informed, considered manner.

For various practical reasons, referendums are not a good long term solution to the pressures felt by Western politicians. But rather than dismissing them as the products of weak leadership, it is important to see that they are playing a role in an imperfect system, and will continue to do so until a better mechanism is found. At the same time, instead of seeing them as inherently dangerous, we need to think hard about why the prospect of trusting the public to decide important questions scares us so much, and what needs to change for it to be less frightening.

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