

People's vote: what would a serious Brexit referendum look like?



*A number of things were wrong with the 2016 referendum, including the disenfranchisement of key stakeholders and the extent of misinformation by both sides. Given that referendums should be informed exercises in democratic decision-making, **Bruce Ackerman** (Yale) and **Sir Julian Le Grand** (LSE) explain how a referendum on the deal should look like.*

We are moving to a world where the decisions of elected representatives are increasingly supplemented, or actually displaced, by referenda. Many deplore this trend and try to fight it. It would be better to welcome referenda, but to make sure they are done properly.

What was wrong with the 2016 EU referendum

There were three things wrong with the Brexit vote. The first was an absence of genuine information, creating a gap for actual misinformation by both sides. The notorious message promising a bonanza for the NHS on the Leave bus; the Remainers predicting economic catastrophe the day after a Leave vote; the benefits of immigration exaggerated by Remainers, the costs by Leavers.

The second was the over-simple choice: in or out. We now know that there are a number of alternatives to a hard Brexit at one end and Remain at the other. Not only is there the Norway (European Economic Area) option, but some form of softer deal may yet emerge from the negotiations between Theresa May and Michel Barnier.

The third was the exclusion from voting of key groups, such as Britons living for more than fifteen years in other EU countries, and the 1.5 million citizens who will be most affected by the long-run consequences of the decision: 16 and 17 year-olds.

What a referendum on second referendum should look like

So what would a serious Brexit referendum look like? First, the electorate would include 16- and 17 year-olds, and all Britons living in the EU. Second, it would offer people a manageable set of real choices. Practically speaking, three options will emerge: remain; the government's negotiated deal; or no-deal. The referendum should ask people to select the one that makes the most sense. If none attain a majority, then the third-place choice would be eliminated and a second round would be held between the top two.

Third, the government should take affirmative steps to fill the information gap. The best way forward is suggested by social science experiments, including an early one held in Britain. In 1994, Channel Four organised an intensive discussion amongst ordinary citizens on whether the UK should become more or less engaged with Europe. The scientifically selected sample of 238 participants went to Manchester for a weekend to engage in a series of small group exchanges with competing experts for Yes and No, as well as representatives from the three major parties. At the end of the weekend, support for Britain's increased integration into the EU rose from 45% to 60%. In contrast, support for the Euro did not rise above 35%. Before-and-after questionnaires established that participants became more knowledgeable.

Twenty years onward, majority opinion might well move in a very different direction. But there can be no doubt that the British people are thoroughly capable of a sophisticated discussion of the crucial issues. The only serious question is whether the government would be willing to take the steps required to organise a nation-wide conversation on the key issues defining the nation's future.



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On this approach, it would declare a new national holiday, Deliberation Day, that will take place two weeks before a referendum is put to the vote. D-day would begin with a televised debate between leading politicians representing the three Brexit options. After the national television show, local citizens could engage the main issues in small discussion groups at neighbourhood schools or community centres to hear their questions answered by local spokespeople for the three choices. By the end of the day, they will achieve a bottom-up understanding of the choices. D-day discussion will continue during the run-up to referendum day, drawing millions of non-attenders into the escalating national dialogue.

A Brexit referendum conducted along these lines would *not* be a rerun of the original. It would be quite different: a deliberative, informed exercise in democratic decision-making, one involving all those who will benefit from or suffer the consequences of the outcome. This is what twenty-first century democracy should be all about.

This article originally appeared at our sister site, [British Politics and Policy](#). It gives the views of the authors, and not the position of LSE Brexit, nor the LSE.

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