

### Do Referendums strengthen Democracy

A referendum is a form of direct democracy and is defined by the government on their website [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk) (Source 3) as "a vote on a single issue". Rules for voting in a referendum change depending on the vote but you must be of recognised voting age, a British citizen and resident in the United Kingdom. A referendum normally consists of a question where you make a choice between two options. The use of referendums in the United Kingdom is rare. In 2011 a referendum on the Alternative vote was the first UK wide referendum in 36 years when in 1975, the public was asked to decide on whether to remain in the European Union. Referendums have been used more frequently at a regional level to make decisions on: independence in Scotland, the Good Friday agreement in Northern Ireland and a devolved assembly for North East England. Between 1975 and 2014 the Labour party have held 8 referendums, the Conservatives 2 and the Coalition Government 3. The use of referendums to make decisions has increased both in the UK and worldwide over recent years however has their use strengthened or weakened democracy

In 2010 the Select Committee on the Constitution in the House of Lords started an investigation into the use of referendum. This was seen as important because several parties had made commitments in their manifestos to hold a referendum. The Coalition Government had pledged a referendum on changing the election process and adopting the Alternative Vote (AV). The Conservatives had also promised a referendum on EU membership and there were likely to be proposals for referendums in Wales on increased devolved powers and on Independence on Scotland. The committee wished to investigate the use referendums as they had not been used often in the UK. They set out to look at the disadvantages and advantages involved, identify when they should be used and outline rules for their use (House of Lords Select Committee on the Constitution 2010).

The committee discussed many arguments both for and against referenda. Two arguments listed for using a referendum to decide an issue were: "Enhanced citizen engagement" and "referendums are popular with the voters". Arguments against referendums included: "Referendums can have a damaging effect on minority groups" and "are dominated by elite groups".

In 2014, the referendum on independence in Scotland took place. During the campaign there were television debates, countless newspaper articles and social media campaigns. The country was inspired by the process as they were taking part in directly in policy making. Stephen Tierney is Professor of Constitutional Theory in the School of Law, University of Edinburgh and he states that the referendum was the "catalyst" for unheard of engagement and interest in politics in Scotland. Previous elections had relatively poor turnouts (50% in Scottish parliament elections 2011 (source 2)), however 85% of Scotland voted in the referendum (source 1), the highest turnout in UK history. This shows that a basic yes or no question gets voters more involved in politics this is because there is less complicated choices to make compared to general elections when parties have many policies/promises that may be too complex for the less politically literate person.

(Source 4)

In the 2014 Scottish referendum the voting age was lowered to 16 for the first time in a Scottish vote. The report by the Electoral Commission on the referendum noted that "many teachers, youth workers and youth organisations across Scotland were also keen to support young people to develop their political literacy and participate in the referendum". (Source 5). Many schools held debates and ran mock referendum campaigns and votes. Research by The University of Edinburgh showed that pupils who had talked and learned about the referendum in school were more politically confident than pupils who had not. The lowering of the voting age allowed a higher turnout and showed that the next generation was ready to take part in the political discussion. The decision also allowed 16 and 17 year olds to make decisions based on what would be best for them since it would be them dealing with the decision, older people will also deal with the decision, however it will be 16/17 year olds who have to find jobs/university, houses and pay taxes under the results of the referendum.

The media from many countries from around the world came to Scotland to witness the referendum and Scotland was shown positively engaging in political debate. The number of referendums has increased throughout the world and it would seem that they are popular with voters. This might be because people feel politicians are out of touch and prefer the chance to be directly involved (Source 5). The House of Lords Select Committee on the constitution agreed saying that the voters turned out in high numbers during big referendums and wanted to take part. An article in the Guardian quotes Matt Qvortrup, professor of politics at Coventry University as saying that we are now more "individualist" and "We expect to be able to compile our own playlists, in politics too." (Source 6). The single choice of the referendum appeals to the voter. This makes referendums more democratic as more people are getting their voice heard showing that true democracy is taking place.

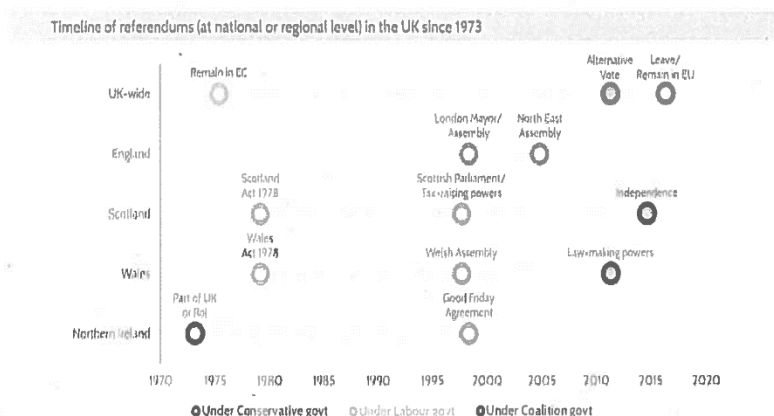
Just as there are positive experiences of referendums, there are also negative ones. A disadvantage listed by the House of Lords Select Committee was that referendums can disadvantage minority groups. The concern raised by the committee was that popular feelings can override the rights of minority groups. Every person has human rights that are upheld in law and these laws protect minority groups. Ireland held a referendum in 2015 asking the public to decide whether same sex marriage should be legal and voted in favour of this change to the law. An article in the Guardian questions the need for a referendum and points out that this was only the public's opinion on gay marriage and had nothing to do with the rights of gay people to get married (Source 8). The result of the 2015 referendum in Ireland could very easily have limited the rights of homosexual citizens. Ireland a deeply Catholic country could have voted with the same view that the Vatican had in 2015 that there was no need for same sex marriage (Source 9) thus limiting the rights of a minority group in Ireland. That situation is only hypothetical, in 2016 Hungary hosted a referendum on whether to limit the relocation of migrants following the European migrant crisis the result of this limited the rights of migrants to move freely throughout Europe.

A second criticism of referendums is that they can be influenced by elite groups such as the media. In the Independence referendum in 2014 there was a lot of criticism of the BBC for the way it reported events. Alex Salmond the leader of the SNP at the

time felt that "BBC bias was a significant factor" in the outcome of the Independence referendum. (Source 10).

Accusations were made that the BBC had been used by the government to scare the public about independence and that they had not been neutral as the national broadcaster. During the 2017 EU referendum the press used bold headlines about immigration and how it is damaging our NHS, taking jobs from British people and costing the nation a lot of money in benefits. Many people in the UK are struggling because of the recession and the papers were accused of using this and making the fears about immigration worse. They influenced the vote by demonising the immigrant and suggesting all the UK's problems could be solved if there were no immigrants. This weekend the democracy of a referendum as it is a one time vote that may influence the country for a long time, if a person is misinformed during this process they may make a decision they may come to regret.

Do referendums strengthen democracy? is a tough question to ask. on one side they are a basic form of decision making that if done right can make all feel included and more politically literate. On the other hand, referendums can be hijacked by the elite and twisted into a gain for them this can be seen through the brexit vote in 2016 the leave campaign have been complained about for lying during their campaign and have even been considered by the director of public prosecution for breaking electoral law. To conclude Referendums do increase democracy however it needs to be done fairly.



Source: Institute for Government analysis of parliament.uk, 'Referendums held in the UK; and original research.

source 1 Turnout 84.6% (<http://scotlandreferendum.info/>).

source 2 Turnout Scottish parliament elections 2011 50.6% (<http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/>)

Refs popular

Source 3 [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk) Types of election, referendums, and who can vote ( Def).

source 4 <http://www.icconnectblog.com/2014/09/and-the-winner-is-the-referendum-scottish-independence-and-the-deliberative-participation-of-citizens/>

Positive experience, large turnout, suggests politics has changed because of positive engagement in indey ref

Source 5 [http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0010/179812/Scottish-independence-referendum-report.pdf](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/179812/Scottish-independence-referendum-report.pdf)

lowering age of voting engaged younger. Schools using as lesson (debating).

Source 6 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-38002820>

Refs more popular, Politian's don't know what we want. World watched Scotland

Source 7 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/political-science/2016/oct/06/why-referendums-are-problematic-yet-more-popular-than-ever>

individualist....making own playlist like our music like to select individual issues.

Source 8 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/commentisfree/2015/may/22/a-referendum-is-not-the-way-to-go-when-it-comes-to-gay-rights-or-minority-issues>

Irish ref 2015. A right or popular opinion?

Source 9 [www.pinknews.co.uk/.../vatican-concludes-that-there-are-no-grounds-for-same-sex-m](http://www.pinknews.co.uk/.../vatican-concludes-that-there-are-no-grounds-for-same-sex-m).

Source 10 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/alex-salmond-bbc-bias-was-significant-factor-in-deciding-scottish-independence-referendum-10506491.htm>

Elite groups influence outcome.

Plan

Intro- what is ref. House of lords select group investigation.

Advantages- engagement+ popular

Disadvantages minority + elite groups. Conclusion—good but big issues only not replacing political system used along side