

There are better ways than referendums to decide big issues

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They seem democratic, but referendums are flawed. If we want people involved in the political process, there are smarter ways to go about it, says **Niall Firth**



Who's unsure about the facts?

Emma Espejo/Getty

By Niall Firth

REFERENDUMS are “a splendid weapon for demagogues and dictators”, argued [Margaret Thatcher](#) in a debate over Britain’s place in the EU in 1975.

Was that anything more than a snappy sound bite? Do referendums appeal to the darker side of democracy? Referendums are the embodiment of direct democracy, which means every citizen gets a vote on an issue. That seems entirely fair, but one argument against them is that they oversimplify complex arguments. They usually frame things in the binary, which is rarely how people see an issue.

Some places have thrived under direct democracy for years. Swiss citizens have the right to call a referendum to make changes to the country’s constitution if enough people sign a petition. That sounds reasonable too, but it

has revealed another flaw of referendums – that decisions made by a majority are often made at the expense of the minority. For example, in 2009, Switzerland banned the building of Islamic minarets after 57 per cent voted for it. .

So, if we do want the public involved in big decisions, what’s the best way of going about it? One of the wackier ideas is [liquid democracy](#), in which every voter has a mandate they can exercise as they see fit. The mandate is transferable, so voters can pass theirs to someone they trust. The whole process happens online and at any point you can retrieve a vote you’ve allocated to someone else and use it yourself.

“Baking public involvement into the democratic process would better than referendums“

It puts [power directly](#) in the people’s hands, while making sure it’s not just a case of who shouts the loudest. But it too has flaws: individuals can garner a huge number of mandates and wield a disproportionate amount of power.

A more fundamental problem of such set-ups is political legitimacy. Any level of complexity, like the transfer of mandates, makes it harder to trace how a decision was made. Demagoguery it might be, but when the UK public votes on the country’s future in the EU, the choice is clear, even if the knock-on effects are not. A referendum makes voters feel as if they are directly influencing a situation.

Trouble is, most people don’t feel well equipped with facts, leaving a vacuum that is filled with endless spin and fearmongering, as we have seen so far in this campaign. Online tools such as [FullFact.org can help](#), which fact-check arguments made by both sides. [Online questionnaires can also be useful](#), letting you choose the issues you feel strongly about and then suggesting how you should vote.

But people still have to search for these tools. **A more satisfying option would be to bake public involvement into the democratic process.**

Enter “deliberative democracy”. This involves a group of citizens discussing issues and making suggestions to the electorate. One example is the [Citizens’ Initiative Review Commission](#) in Oregon, where **a panel of randomly selected people discusses issues before voting day**. After this, a “Citizens’ Statement” is included with each ballot paper, summarising the key points as decided by the voters’ peers .

It’s a bit late to get the electorate better informed for this referendum, but it won’t be long before another one looms. Doing it deliberatively next time, in a way that engages people with an issue, and with politics itself, is an opportunity the establishment should grasp.

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