



Representation, political participation and referendums: discussing democratic change and political education in the UK

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‘Pass the buck back to where it belongs’ (‘Don’t Know Campaign’, 1975).

- 3 sections posed in the initial paper for this conference – whittling it down was a necessity.
 - Not focused now on MacIntyre as the original abstract title might suggest; though the focus on political participation and education remains.
 - Examples suggest a specific UK-focus, though the broader theoretical points around democracy and political engagement should apply more widely.
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Introduction

The first run of a referendum on ‘the European Question’ in Britain, back in 1975, produced a campaign group of which there was no noticeable replica in the 2016 repetition. That group were called the ‘Don’t Know Campaign’, and made the case that a decision on whether the UK should remain part of the E.E.C was the responsibility of the MPs who had been elected to represent the public 9 months earlier. The so-called ‘Don’t Knows’ argued that their representatives should have a more extensive knowledge of the subject because of the nature of their job (knowing legal detail of the Treaty of Rome etc.), and privileged access to confidential information which might better inform their decision (Webber, 2016).

The sentiments underpinning the argument put forward by the ‘Don’t Know Campaign’ run to the heart of current debates surrounding the fragile nature of liberal democracy in contemporary Western societies. In Britain, the creeping emergence of referenda as a mechanism through which policy decisions might be taken, whilst admittedly remaining restricted to ‘constitutional’ matters, seems to highlight something of a crisis of confidence in the role of political representatives – both throughout the public and, perhaps more tellingly, amongst politicians themselves. The resultant constitutional conflicts, exposed so emphatically by the conduct and aftermath of the EU referendum, raise fundamental questions about the nature and role of representative democracy, as well as the role of the British public as an emergent body in the UK legislature – a development scholars have referred to as a new ‘tri-cameral Parliament’ (Bogdanor, 2013).

Within this context, this paper aims to discuss the potential implications of referendums for political engagement and education within the British political system. Using examples from the Scottish independence referendum of 2014 and the nationwide EU referendum of 2016, it will argue that whilst these changes in governing practice may hold the potential for positive public engagement and political

education, an over-emphasis on ‘the will of the people’ in the decision-making process might heighten the propensity for politicians to deploy manipulative tactics.

1. Referendums, Political Participation and Education

One of the more prominent advocates for the extension of the referendum in Britain in recent years has been the pre-eminent scholar of British constitutional politics, Vernon Bogdanor. Amongst the points marshalled in favour, Bogdanor argues that referendums might play a crucial educative function. He suggests:

‘In a democracy it is important that the citizen identify himself with the public good, with the interests of the nation as a whole. The referendum brings the voter directly into contact with these interests; it requires him to pay attention to public issues if he is to be able to cast his vote intelligently, and it may encourage him to take an interest in the activities of Parliament. The voter may ask himself not – what is the good of the party, nor perhaps even what is for my own personal good, but rather – what is for the good of the country. It may, therefore, have a profoundly educative effect upon the electorate’ (1981: 84).

This argument is in many ways redolent of classical liberal conceptions of public education through political participation, often based on a more distributive and deliberative notion of representative democracy. Mill in particular emphasised the importance of making a demand upon every citizen to exercise some ‘social function’ (1998: 254). Indeed, he encouraged this function to be extended wherever practicable, in order to bestow educational and other benefits upon the citizenry.

The unique benefits that could potentially flow from a referendum as a *direct* democratic device, however, have also been discussed in relation to the shortcomings of representative systems. It has been argued that the restrictions placed upon participation by representative systems gradually increase and entrench the gulf between electorates and those who hold office. As a consequence, ‘...voters become less able to grasp the complexity of policy decision-making, understand the issues at stake, and *take responsibility* for their political decision’ (Topaloff, 2017: 135).

The notion of voter-responsibility in a referendum situation is perhaps a point for further discussion. It seems problematic within the context of a system that is ultimately representative, in that the public (without an effective ‘initiative’ system) do not choose the issues over which they get a say, or often exactly how a ‘public decision’ may be implemented. This holds the potential for the responsibility to be returned to government, further damaging levels of trust between the electors and the elected. The current political picture in Britain is illustrative here of how an administration might struggle to implement an indistinct policy couched in terms of ‘the will of the people’.

With these more general points in mind, I now turn to couple of recent examples to look at referendums within the British system, and what these examples might tell us about the effects of referendums on political engagement and education.

I. Scottish Independence Referendum, 2014

The 2014 referendum on Scottish Independence constitutes a good example of how a referendum might have a substantial and (somewhat) lasting effect on the political engagement of an electorate. The annual 'Audit of Political Engagement' produced by the Hansard Society recorded a marked upturn in the criteria of 'knowledge of politics', 'interest in politics', and 'certainty to vote', of around 10% points each in 2015, the year after the referendum was held. This increased again in 2016, particularly with regard to knowledge and interest in politics which started to significantly move away from Britain as a whole: knowledge of politics (Scot: 65% vs. UK: 55%); interest in politics (Scot: 74% vs. UK: 57%) (Hansard Society, 2016).

The Hansard Society dubbed this effect upon the population the 'referendum effect', declaring:

'The Scottish independence referendum on 18 September 2014 was a remarkable demonstration of political engagement: 97% of the population registered to vote; nearly 85% actually did so; 16 and 17 year olds participated for the first time; and there was a vibrant grassroots civil society campaign on both sides of the debate' (Hansard Society, 2015: 18).

Amongst the multitude of reasons mustered by scholars in an attempt to explain this apparent politicisation, one in particular stands out as pertinent to the referendum as an instrument. It has been suggested that, with regard to Scottish independence, the referendum was exceptional in that it was able to '...remove the hold political parties, political elites and mass media 'opinion leaders' have on politics which, in most cases, simply reinforce patterns of authority on political issues' (2015: 181).

Arguably in this case, discussion was unshackled from the stranglehold of opinion formers, permitting a much more open and honest debate the focused on substantive policy issues. This is one of the principal reasons underpinning Bogdanor's advocacy – as outlined above. A referendum might help to disconnect an issue from the dominating forces of day-to-day political debate (especially political parties), and reconnect the individual voter directly with the issues at hand and the implications for society at large.

Another potential explanation worthy of discussion must be the involvement and engagement of 16-17 year olds in the voting process. Studies have suggested that up to 25% of those below 18 that could vote in the referendum joined a political party as a result (Black, 2015), suggesting sustained rather than transient engagement. Might the potential for young people to see how they can have an effect upon political outcomes at a young age strengthen the impetus to provide effective civics education within the school environment? And a relevant case study through which to study, debate and engage with politics?

II. E.U. Referendum, 2016

One example that might provide evidence to the contrary, however, is the nationwide European Union referendum held in 2016. Given the larger scale of the vote, the subsequent capitulation of the government and massive political fallout, it is possible to see why early evidence suggests there was no similarly positive 'referendum effect' across the whole of the UK in the aftermath of 2016.

The 2017 Audit of Political Engagement recorded either no effect or a negative effect on levels of political engagement across the UK: ‘...on many of the key indicators of political engagement – particularly in relation to interest and knowledge, efficacy and satisfaction – public attitudes have either remained stable or have fallen back to pre-general election levels (2015)’ (2017: New divides along the lines of leaving or remaining in the European Union were apparent as well – with Leavers generally more disillusioned with the current political system, and more likely to support greater use of referendums to decide political issues (Leave: 74% - Remain: 47%).

A report produced in the aftermath by the Electoral Reform Society stated: ‘Above all, our analysis has demonstrated the need for a much greater level of citizen involvement and deliberation, not only during referendums themselves but throughout the workings of our wider democracy. An informed and engaged electorate is the first step towards a political system that can tolerate the divisive aspects of a binary referendum debate’ (Brett, 2016: 8-9).

The problem with this point, however, as the following example may demonstrate, is that this unshackling of political debate and decision-making is so transient that it may lead to further disillusionment with the stark reality that elites are the ultimate decision-makers. As Milbank and Pabst have highlighted in a wider critique of liberalism, ‘...if a government pretends not to decide, or not to have to decide, it will always, in reality, decide in a disguised way through the manipulation of opinion, or the following of the most debased mass opinion, or else of the course that it can *most easily get away with*’ (italics added, 2016: 196).

This returns us in many ways to traditional criticisms of the referendum, particularly with regard to how the tyranny of government might interact with the tyranny of the majority, if insufficient constitutional protections are in place. Most recently with regard to the 2016 example, this manifested in attempts by the May government to override those traditional mechanisms of representative and deliberative democracy already in place in the UK that might permit further debate and consideration of the decision. The debate around the extension of executive and ministerial powers that were deemed a necessary part of implementing the so-called ‘will of the people’ in leaving the European Union is a good example of this; something constitutional scholars in Britain initially branded the ‘May Doctrine’ (Blick, 2016).

Giving these quite concerning trends emerging in the aftermath of the 2016 example, then, it is important to reconsider any positives from the Scottish Independence vote, particularly with regard to political engagement and education, and whether there is any potential through the use of referendums as a democratic exercise, to ameliorate some of the broader malaise often reported in studies of contemporary trends in political participation.

2. Concluding Remarks

It may well be that the Scottish Independence referendum simply constitutes an anomalous example of specific contextual factors colliding to contribute to a boost in political engagement. Indeed, certain accounts suggest it was such a unique occurrence, as argued by Jim Crowther: ‘The cultural politics of

communities...engaged with the political culture of the state and the dialectic between the two generated educational experiences and opened up new political possibilities' (Crowther, 2015).

If we accept this as the case, this paper must be less of an argument for a more generalizable and considered inclusion of the referendum as a way of ameliorating some of the alienating forces of liberal representative democracy, and more a discussion of how the issue of Scottish Independence and the management of that particular referendum allowed a more engaging political culture to emerge.

Yet the so-called 'referendum effect' which the Scottish case seemed to engender seems quite remarkable in an era of such cynicism and reported political disaffection, and is thus worthy of further discussion. Of the many variables across these two cases, one it might be worthwhile to mention in conclusion is the engagement of younger voters in the Scottish case.

Recent trends in the political participation of younger voters seem to suggest that some of the longstanding concerns around political disengagement of younger demographics are changing (see Henn and Hart, 2017). However, the Scottish vote's inclusion of 16-18 year olds, and the integration of the topic into school discussion and education around citizenship and politics is a significant difference between the two examples featured (see Electoral Commission, 2013). In particular, the fact that views of those being taught would actually have an effect on a political outcome potentially provides an example of a model in which younger voters can play an active part in the political process, something which evidence from across a number of civic education and volunteering programmes has shown to be a vital part of developing social understanding (see Arthur *et al*, 2017). Although such a suggestion can only be very tentatively made on the grounds of the secondary evidence presented here, it is certainly an area worth further research and consideration given the problematic state of democracy in contemporary society.

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