

The problem with referendums

Written by Ian Inkster ☐☐☐

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By now most people will have at least absorbed the basic results of the Dec. 18 referendums. There is bound to be a continued and heated debate as to what they mean and how they will affect politics in the new year and well beyond. Whatever the questions, referendums always suffer from an absence of useful and reliable knowledge.

The bigger the issue, the greater the importance of good information and understanding, but there is less likelihood of voters obtaining such knowledge. This might explain the low turnout. Only 3.7 million people voted in favor of the questions, with 4.1 million voters deciding against the proposals.

The margin was quite slim with a low turnout, so important questions were seemingly settled by a majority of only about 400,000 voters; in the Jan. 11, 2020, legislative elections, more than 19 million votes were cast.

Knowledge is required to respond to any political imperative, whether it is an emergency such as COVID-19, the regular workings of democratic institutions such as elections or the special calling-up of civil society through national referendums.

However, it is clear that referendums can cause the greatest problems relating to knowledge availability, because the issues are in stark black and white, and “yes” or “no” decisions must be made on complex issues, often involving scientific, technical and environmental matters of uncertainty and debate.

The problem of where such knowledge might come from has hardly been discussed in the wealth of comments made on the referendum results. Most comments concern the Democratic Progressive Party’s victory, a win that was at least partly paved by its campaign firmly demanding that voters say “no” to all four questions.

Yet to have major issues — ones that reflect or even determine the direction of policymaking on fundamental matters — decided so swiftly and with so much influence from the government threatens democracy rather than enhances it. This is of course a matter lying well beyond Taiwan — the British malaise and perplexity over Brexit is a huge case in point, which

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reverberates throughout British politics and the economy.

There are two strong elements in why referendums tend to reflect partisan party politics, as was clearly the case on Dec. 18. First, there is only a “yes” or “no” answer possible, with none of the compromise that should permeate the policy development of government and opposition parties in all democracies. Second, three substantive issues were indeed complex, in their underlying character and in their possible effects upon the economy and society.

Encouraging the formation of useful and reliable political knowledge has been a crucial problem for all democracies since the early 19th century. In the UK, which rightly boasts of being an early exemplar of the democratic model, the first solution was to drastically limit the franchise, or the right to participate in democratic politics, by excluding most of the electorate, the working class of the new industrial system, from voting.

In the system developing in the US, the problem was ignored — the US constitution gives all sorts of rights to citizens, but these do not include any right to trustworthy knowledge.

Since then, governments in nations with any pretense at developing civil societies have been criticized for attempting to encourage the growing power of the media in instilling political instruction. Such “official news” could only be rejected as ultimately autocratic, and good intentions could result in disasters — such as in the 1920s and 1930s, when the terrible failure of so-called democracies allowed mass media to take over the production of useful and reliable knowledge. Many might think of the persecution of European Jews as centered in Nazi Germany, but Adolph Hitler and his cronies simply picked up the attack on Jews where most European nations left off.

The British solution was to hope that one part of the electorate would properly and over time “educate” new voters brought in by further franchise reforms, by showing them examples of good political behavior based on an ill-defined process of education. The workers would not ruin democracy if they were tutored by the gentle-folk of the middle class.

During the extension of the right to vote prior to the 1867 Reform Act, the editor of the Economist, Walter Bagehot, argued in his *The English Constitution* that the new “lower-class” voters would vote sensibly, judiciously and democratically because they would be led to good,

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mild sense by the better-informed and supposedly more intelligent middle class, their social betters and guides.

Good knowledge would be generated during the course of democracy itself. Civil society would evolve its own useful and reliable civil knowledge, enough to produce safe and predictable electoral results every few years and to feed the demands of the wealth of newspapers and the radio commentaries that would henceforth surround all major political events.

Crucially, this notion of the self-education of the electorate did not envisage the contemporary culture of referendums. Only in 1975, 2011 and 2016 has Britain held national referendums, and the increasing complexity of the issues concerned has tended to increase confusion rather than enlighten the democratic process.

In the US, from the late 19th century more faith was put in the formal education system to generate the knowledge required to run democracy from the bottom up, resulting in the long and continued emphasis in schools and universities on broadly liberal “civics” classes and programs. They were not designed to address the growing complexity of referendums, and their political results did not prevent the rise of former US president Donald Trump.

The history of European referendums is complex, and many have allowed for multiple choices of answers to specific questions. Their origins do not — or could not — presume the complexity and technicality of modern democratic decisionmaking.

The three main questions posed in the Dec. 18 referendum involved specialist knowledge never contemplated by democrats of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Nuclear power brings out the contradictions inherent in today’s environmentalism — less mineral-based energy usage is good, but nuclear accidents or acts of terrorism are not wanted and bad. In addition, the Taiwan question has an immediate and more local context: The nation lies in a seismically active zone, which means that nuclear power is an endemic political problem, and not merely one that could wither on the vine as the years pass.

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Additionally, nuclear power provides only about 8 percent of total power usage, a proportion that could be replaced by relatively modest technological innovations, or which could even be substituted with imported fossil fuels.

Export revenues outweigh imports, and Taiwan imports about 90 percent of its energy. Furthermore, importing energy can be halted or reduced without undue disturbance of the domestic workforce or even of port facilities in a growing economy highly dependent on foreign trade anyway, with exports and imports totaling 120 percent of GDP last year.

Environmentalism proponents of the rejection of an additional nuclear power plant could argue that it can either be dismissed because of the high likelihood of modest technological innovation (better use of all power in existing production systems through institutional improvements), or that existing alternative technologies of a more radical kind could be introduced at relatively low cost.

Defenders of adding nuclear capacity might argue that this represents cleaner technology replacing fossil fuels, a contribution to the global reduction of greenhouse gases, and that the statistical risk of disturbance from natural disasters is low. Those of the opposite view can point to problems in earthquake zones, and add that a longer history of nuclear power is bound to increase the number of such incidents.

Thus, any voter at the referendum who pondered their tick in a box, not being allowed further comment or qualification, might well have been stymied, and this represents a quandary built of information uncertainty, a casting into troubled doubt at the basis of Taiwanese competitive democracy.

Irish politician John Bruton somewhat whimsically argued in 1995 that “all governments are unpopular. Given the chance, people would vote against them in a referendum. Therefore, avoid referendums.” This might not be the best critique of the referendum concept.

In Taiwan, the slightness of the overall referendum vote combined with the relative slimness of the majority “no” hardly reflects a commanding political conclusion. It would surely engender further political quarrels. As long as referendums ask the citizens of democratic nations to vote on complex, often highly technical matters of public concern, the more likely is it that results will

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be based on snap decisions by a small number of the electorate who are not in a prime position to make decisive judgements.

Unless there is some change in the character of public debate in democracies, then referendums are in the process of becoming a danger to the spirit of democracy and to the chances of good government. Perhaps better results would be obtained from a return to the original intention of periodic national elections based on real party-political choice, which foster a more continuous production of useful and reliable knowledge. We might dream on.

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