



U.K. referendum: Just when should the majority rule?

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The Brexit referendum has raised a question for many people on the losing side: How democratic do we want to be?

The polls had barely closed in the United Kingdom's Brexit referendum when people on the losing side were calling for a revote. So far some four million people have signed petitions to hold another poll.

It's unlikely. Prime Minister David Cameron declared that while he was disappointed in the result, he accepted it: "I'm a democrat."

Yet he will be out of office soon. And Westminster will remain dominated by parties that favor continued membership in the European Union.

Which means a new government could find any old excuse — perhaps a newfound willingness of the "Eurocrats" to negotiate concessions for Britain — for another vote. In which case a bare majority again would rule, though perhaps for the other side.

But should a simple majority be enough to trigger such a dramatic change in policy? What if the victory margin out of nearly 34 million votes cast had been 13,000 instead of 1.3 million?

There's also the issue of turnout. The Brexit question brought 72.2 percent of the electorate to the polls, seemingly a solid turnout. Should a vote drawing far less people, say under 50 percent, be seen as equally valid? In fact, the petitioners proposed requiring a 60 percent majority and 75 percent turnout.

The last British vote on "joining" Europe was in 1975, with 67.2 percent in favor of participating in the European Economic Community, or Common Market, a precursor to the EU. Should a simple majority be able to sunder what a super-majority put together? (Turnout in 1975 was a bit lower, at 64.5 percent.)

On the other hand, four decades ago the British people were debating membership in a far different form of European organization. In succeeding years they were not consulted as the British Parliament approved treaties creating a continental government most notable for its labyrinthine bureaucracy, regulatory intrusiveness and lack of democratic accountability.

The regional distribution of votes also brought criticism. The English voted strongly in favor of leaving, the Scots even more strongly in favor of staying. By lesser margins the Welsh voted to go and the Northern Irish to remain. Should a majority in every area have to say yes?

Of course, driving the latest criticism of democracy is the outcome. Harvard economist Kenneth Rogoff called for a much tougher requirement for “irreversible, nation-defining” decisions. He proposed requiring a supermajority and victory in two successive votes a couple years apart.

That’s fine in principle, but obviously reflected his conclusion that the moronic British public had no idea what it was doing and had recklessly loosed all sorts of horror upon the rest of mankind. Because of the consequences, he explained, “it is time to rethink the rules of the game.”

“Big” issues properly go to the electorate — such as whether to subordinate one’s national government to a supra-national organization in return for access to a large regional market.

There is no objectively correct answer to that question. Thus, there’s nothing irrational in how a majority British electorate voted in the referendum. They obviously don’t like being governed by other people in another land. That’s a pretty common preference around the world. U.K. voters also didn’t like being lied to. The EU routinely ignored past promises and legal commitments. The organization’s lack of respect for the rule of law is ongoing.

Finally, the economic anxieties underlying many voters were real. Tearing down the structure isn’t a particularly constructive answer, but if they believed they weren’t being listened to otherwise they might have viewed it as the only tactic possible.

Irrespective of the merits of Brexit, the controversy warrants rethinking our voting procedures. Important issues with profound impact should be decided by something other than a wafer-thin, potentially evanescent majority.

Moreover, what electoral restrictions should be imposed? A supermajority ensures that most voters agree on the change. Adding a turnout requirement ensure that most people agree. Holding successive votes ensures that the sentiment endures. Together the three create a significant bar to change.

Yet setting the standard too high would create frustration and encourage action via other means. It would be dangerous to make change almost impossible.

Britain’s Brexit vote may have killed the Eurocrats’ campaign to build a superstate by stealth. The reaction against that vote in the U.K. may help spark a global rethink of the rules over how to make radical policy and political changes. Just how democratic do we want to be?

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