



## Student resources:

### Activity 1a: 4 Essays to Rank Order

A

05

In contrast to other European nations, Britain does not have a history of many nationwide referendums. Referendums are a vote on a single issue, either advisory or binding, in which a simple majority of voters determines a winner, generally between two binary options for example 'leave' or 'remain' in the 2016 European Union membership referendum.

Referendums give the general populace a say on constitutional issues, and the clear majority of voters needed to accept or deny the proposal ensures that the result of any referendum is clear and decisive, even when it is close. They are also arguably positive for the health of democracy as they are an example of direct democracy in its present form.

Referendums also often give governments legitimacy to perform large constitutional reforms such as devolution. The post 1997 government of Tony Blair wanted to undertake a program of devolution which was accepted by Welsh voters in 1998 in a close 'Yes' vote, but sadly rejected by citizens of the North-East in a lower postal referendum.

However, as decisive as they may be, referendums are also invertible and divisive. The fact that most referendums are conducted on contentious issues in the UK, ensures that results are close (52% for leaving the EU, 55% against Scottish independence, approximately 50.2% for Welsh devolution), this produces a divisive and often bitter atmosphere around politics. Due to the typically close nature of results, the outcome may also be challenged, examples of which include the SNP calling for a second independence referendum, or overturned, as was the case with the 2016 European Union Membership Referendum, which overturned a prior vote in 1974.

Referendums have also been described as the tyranny of the majority since a small majority of voters dictate the direction of the entire country. One way to curb this effect is to mandate a turnout requirement, which ensures that a certain number of electors must vote for the result to be accepted.



Overall, while clear and decisive referendums create conflict and division, and arguably run contrary to the nature of representative democracy. There is a strong case to be made that a more proportionally representative voting system which would give voice to parties with minority views on constitutional questions, such as UKIP, may ultimately show as a more effective means of settling political issues in future.



**B**

C5

In recent times, there has been a growing debate about how effective referendums actually are in resolving political issues. On one hand, it could be argued that they are effective as they are a simple YES/NO vote and the side with the most votes wins. In addition, there are clear examples that help to support this view such as the devolution referendum held in Wales in 1997 and the voting system referendum held in 2011. However, some referendums can result in an unlikely result which may not be linked and can lead to calls for a second referendum such as the Brexit referendum. These referendums don't resolve the political issues as the result is not respected by all.

There is a clear argument to illustrate that referendums are effective in resolving political issues as it's a YES/NO vote where the plurality wins i.e. the side with the most votes wins. This creates a simple vote that everyone can understand and should respect the result of. Furthermore, there are clear examples of referendums that have helped to resolve political issues such as the Devolution in Wales's referendum that was held in 1997. This referendum gave the people of Wales a choice of whether they wanted a devolved assembly created in Wales, which would give the Assembly in Wales powers devolved from Westminster. These powers include being able to pass legislation in certain fields such as education, environment and transport. This referendum was held as a result of calls from Welsh MPs and the people of Wales to be given more power from Westminster. At the time of the referendum being held, the Labour government of Tony Blair had a majority of over 160 MPs, so they were very powerful inside parliament and this led to calls from some power to be given to Wales so the People of Wales interests could be better represented. 60% voted for devolution and as a result the Welsh Assembly opened in 1999. This example clearly highlights how referendums are effective in resolving political issues as the question of whether Wales should be given devolved powers at the time was a big question in Wales, and this referendum helped settle the issue once and for all.

Whilst there is an argument to show that referendums are effective in solving political issues, there's also a clear argument to support the view that they don't and there are clear examples of where referendums haven't necessarily solved the political issue in question. A key example of this would be the Brexit referendum held in June 2016 that was held to decide whether the UK would leave or remain in the EU.



One of the main reasons why it was called by the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, was because it was supposed to help right the Conservative Party, who was split on the issue of the EU, as well as the whole country. Despite the fact that the UK voted to leave the EU by 51% to 49% it could be argued that the referendum hasn't solved the political issues. This can be seen through the fact that the Conservative Party is still split, as well as the general public with there being calls for a second referendum to be held in order to reverse the result. This example shows how referendums aren't always effective in solving political issues.

To conclude, having looked at both sides of the argument as to whether referendums are effective in resolving political issues, I believe that they are. This is because, although there are examples where they have caused a split in the country, such as the Brexit referendum, the fact that it's a simple YES/NO vote where the plurality win coupled with key examples of referendums which have solved political issues such as Devolution in Wales referendum held in 1997.

C C5

A referendum is when parliament cannot make a clear judgement on a particular issue, usually a decision that will follow huge consequences on the public, so instead of voting on the issue parliament they put on the issue parliament they put the issue to the electorate to decide. They are an example of direct democracy in its purist form. Referendums are usually used for YES or NO questions so that it is straight forward for the public.

Referendums are the purist form of democracy. This means that nobody can argue the outcome because it is what the majority voted for. For example, in 2015 the UK held a referendum to decide on it is membership to the EU. The country voted roughly 52% to leave, meaning that Britain will now leave the EU because that is what the majority voted for. They are effective in settling political disputes because no matter the argument against the political system, it simply does not matter and it is decided by the will of the entire electorate.

However, because of the nature of the issues that referendums are used for, it means that the argument for each side is usually very close and so the outcome of referendums are usually by very small majority. For example, in the EU referendums the split was around 48% voted to remain and 52% voted leave. This means that although the majority voted leave, still almost half of the population voted remain which can potentially cause divisions within Society and also huge divisions within political parties which can confuse voters and weakness governments.

In conclusion, there is no doubt in the effectiveness of referendums. They simply are the purist form of democracy; however, they do have the potential to have collateral and create more political issues. On the whole, referendums are extremely effective in resolving the single political issue they are used for.

**D**

C5

It is debateable as to whether or not referendums are effective at resolving political issues. They have both their advocates and detractors, and thus a number of matters must be considered before making an overall judgement.

On the one hand, many would argue that referendums do in fact help to solve political issues. This is due to the fact that they put important questions directly to the electorate. This is direct democracy, arguably the purest form of democracy. This means that voters are fully able to voice an opinion on matters of significance thus ensuring a concrete, firm result. For example, the EU referendum 2016 and the Irish Abort Law referendum 2018, both gave clear results which then could be acted upon. Therefore, referendums resolve political issues as the verdict of a nation can't be disregarded lightly.

Conversely, it has been argued that referendums are ineffective as misleading and/or inaccurate information can be disseminated. This means that an issue may become even less clear than it was before, thus impeding the democratic process as both sides of the campaign produce heavily questionable arguments that do not carry much weight in reality. For example, the UK's 2016 EU Referendum produced questionable claims on both sides. The Leave Campaign presented a misleading promise of £350 million per year in additional NHS funding, while the Remain Campaign inaccurately predicted economic disaster and a potential European war. Therefore, if anything referendums may actually worsen political issues as opposed to resolving them.

A point in favour of referendums is that they can resolve divisions within governing parties. This means that significant political issues which have been developed with the government itself can be resolved, as a verdict from the electorate is generally regarded as the ultimate decision. Namely, in both the 1975 EEC Referendum and the 2016 EU vote, issues were present regarding splits in the governing parties, Labour and Conservative respectively. The votes effectively silenced a dissenting wing of each party. This means that referendums can be effective as they give governments and parties alike a more singular, united direction.

On the other hand, referendums can be ineffective when the question posed is particularly complex.



This is because certain issues are virtual impossible to put a simple 'yes' or 'no' vote, as they may have various facets and features which must be considered in detail on their own merits. Again, returning to the 2016 EU referendum, the vote failed to resolve the question of the UK's future relationship with the European Union; advocates of 'Hard Brexit' and 'Soft Brexit' have waged an increasingly bitter war due to this confusion. Thus, referendums can be ineffective as they do not resolve all facets of complicated issues; they represent a starting point yet cannot ensure every stage is properly fulfilled.

Referendums are praised for helping to resolve a particular issue; that of political participation. This means that by presenting a binary choice on a single issue, voters may be more inclined to turn out; it cuts across usual partisan politics and presents an image of great national importance. Specifically, the EU referendum produced a turnout of 72.1%, the highest in many years. Thus, referendums can help to resolve declining participation by appealing directly to the public.

On the other hand, biased and/or misleading questions may render referendums ineffective. This means that if the choice presented to voters is skewed in any way, it creates political issues all of its own and is viewed as undermining the democratic process. Namely, in the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum, the Scottish Government was ruled as biased by the electoral commission, with the proposed question changed as it appeared to encourage the electorate to vote 'yes'. As a result of this, referendums are simply unable to resolve political issues if the basis and context upon which they are held is intrinsically flawed.

In overall summation, it is clear to see that referendums do have a certain place within the political atmosphere. While certainly possessing a number of flaws such as bias and/or complication, they can be of value by settling important constitutional questions with a democratic vote, allowing the people the ultimate say in national affairs.