

Should the UK government introduce more referendums to make our political system more democratic?

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How laws are passed varies from country to country. Some governments turn to their people for every decision they consider, while others choose to take the reins on decision-making. The UK sits somewhere in the middle, having had ten referendums to date.⁽¹⁾ A country on the most democratic end of this scale is Switzerland. The UK and Switzerland are two well-developed, influential countries, with different governing styles. In this essay we will discuss the advantages and disadvantages of having more referendums in the UK.

One could argue that the UK should hold more referendums because they work well in other countries. Switzerland had 13 referendums in 2021 alone,⁽²⁾ which presented many advantages for the country. They provide a direct link between the making of laws and the will of the people. Ordinary citizens like to feel that they have a say in decisions directly affecting them. In Switzerland, since everyone has a say in what is voted on, and what the outcome may be, citizens are less likely to feel unhappy with their government, and said government is unlikely to gain a bad reputation among the population. It was found, in early 2020, that 75% of Swiss citizens were happy with Swiss democracy,⁽³⁾ while in late 2019, only 40% of British citizens were satisfied with UK democracy.⁽⁴⁾ We have seen signs of government instability due to public dissatisfaction manifest itself through recent events, such as Boris Johnson's forced resignation from the role of Prime Minister. Perhaps, with more referendums, we could see a change in UK public attitude, increased happiness with our political system, and a more stable government.

The introduction of more referendums could give the government a further idea of public opinion and ensure that they stay closely in line with this in their policy-making. The UK's representative democracy system makes it easy for the desires of the ordinary population to be forgotten by politicians. By increasing elements of direct democracy, the UK government will be able to gain a prevalent understanding of the views of those they serve and consider this more closely as they pass legislation.

The UK introducing more referendums, however, could have its drawbacks, one of which is the cost of referendums. It was reported in 2019 that Switzerland spends the equivalent of around £200m annually on elections and referendums.⁽⁵⁾ If the UK were to hold more referendums for increased democracy, they would have to introduce popular initiative and facultative referendums,⁽⁶⁾ where citizens propose or oppose laws via referendum, ensuring the people's voices are heard. This could backfire, as it would make initiating a public referendum as easy as starting a petition. In the age of social media, where gaining widespread support is easier than ever before, this system allows for the public to potentially waste taxpayers' money and government resources, consequently limiting resources for contestably more important things, like the NHS or education.⁽⁷⁾ One could argue that the UK is already democratic enough: MPs are voted in by their constituency, and citizens can also propose to have their issues debated in parliament, via petition, which allows for qualified politicians to make these decisions.

It could be argued that it is not worth the monetary loss to have many referendums if the outcomes aren't accurate or necessarily best. After great expenditure, a country could make a ruling that is not truly representative of the public view, or right for it. People's opinions can be easily swayed by misinformation, advertisements designed to evoke emotion, or social media. This issue was well-illustrated in the recent EU referendum. In the days before the vote, the internet, media, and streets of the UK were plastered with overexaggerated 'facts' and figures designed to manipulate the

underinformed mind of the common citizen. For instance, this bus, in the centre of London, urged the thousands who saw it to vote to leave the EU:



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It is evident that this is a one-sided figure, which does not make the average passer-by aware of the potential value the UK may have gained from EU membership. In their eyes, it seems obvious that they should vote leave, and encourage those around them to do the same. It was later revealed that this figure was considerably overstated, by 40%, and that the UK actually paid £250 million weekly to the EU, once the rebate was accounted for.⁽⁹⁾ If this figure was so inaccurate, it is likely there were many other advertisements made in the same way, in the run up to voting day, which may have skewed the results. A decision as big as leaving an international organisation perhaps shouldn't be left to the easily swayed public, while qualified politicians, knowledgeable of each potential outcome, are not listened to. Britain follows representative democracy, meaning if citizens are unhappy with the politicians debating their issues in parliament, they can choose to vote their MPs in or out, rather than attempting to make the big decisions themselves. Contrary to the centuries old saying, *Vox Populi, Vox Dei* ('the voice of the people is the voice of God'), what is considered popular is not always what is right. Holding referendums for constitutional issues that require extensive knowledge and understanding that most do not have, could be detrimental to the success of the UK.

The evidence seen in this essay leads to the conclusion that there are simply too many difficulties in having an increased number of referendums, and it would be best for the UK government not to introduce more. According to the Democracy Index, the UK is already considered a 'Full Democracy' and is the 18th most democratic country globally.⁽¹⁰⁾ Considering this, it is not worth the downfalls, from public indecisiveness to the money spent, to introduce more referendums, especially because the UK holds referendums focused on constitutional issues, as opposed to ethical ones. The presence of a strong political opposition ensures issues are robustly debated before policies are made, abolishing the need for many referendums.

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