

PUBLIC POLICY BLOG

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Switzerland and U.K.

Does direct democracy make radical policy change easier or harder?

By Valeria Baldini

Master in Marketing Management (MiMM)

and Katharina Reidl

Master in Business Management (MUG)

Executive Summary

On the 31st of January 2020, Great Britain officially left the European Union. From the day on which the UK electorate went to the polls, many perspectives have changed, and many debates have taken place. The BREXIT case is a novelty in the history of the European Union and has sparked an outcry on the use of referendums on both sides. This policy brief compares the use of direct democracy tools in the United Kingdom and Switzerland, showing the potential for radical policy changes that such tools can provoke.

Democracy in Switzerland and UK

Currently, the Swiss federation represents a unique example of a “direct democracy”. Despite not qualifying entirely as a direct democracy, Switzerland foresees many tools for the population to be directly involved in politics. Swiss citizens can use three main instruments to influence the policy outcomes of their country. Mandatory referendums are used every time the Federal Assembly decides to revise the constitution, optional referendums represent the veto power that Swiss people have on new laws, and citizens' initiatives give citizens the opportunity to present their own initiatives regarding laws. On average, four referendums are held per year in Switzerland.ⁱ

In the United Kingdom, the use of nation-wide referendums does not have a long tradition. From the 1950s until 2017, voters in the UK were asked to go to the polling station only three times. While the first was an advisory vote in 1975, on whether to remain in the European Community, the second one entailed a vote in 2011 on keeping the “first-past-the-post”-vote system. Both times, the UKs citizens voted to stick to existing rules. The third national referendum was the BREXIT vote, initiated by Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron in 2016, with 72% of the electorate participating and 51,9% of voters wanting to leave the European Union.ⁱⁱ Despite at first being advisory, the Conservative government decided to respect the referendum’s outcome and, by doing so, initiated a drastic policy change through a direct democratic tool that had never been used in this manner before. The implications had possibly not been fully understood, as the current situation of political uncertainty shows.

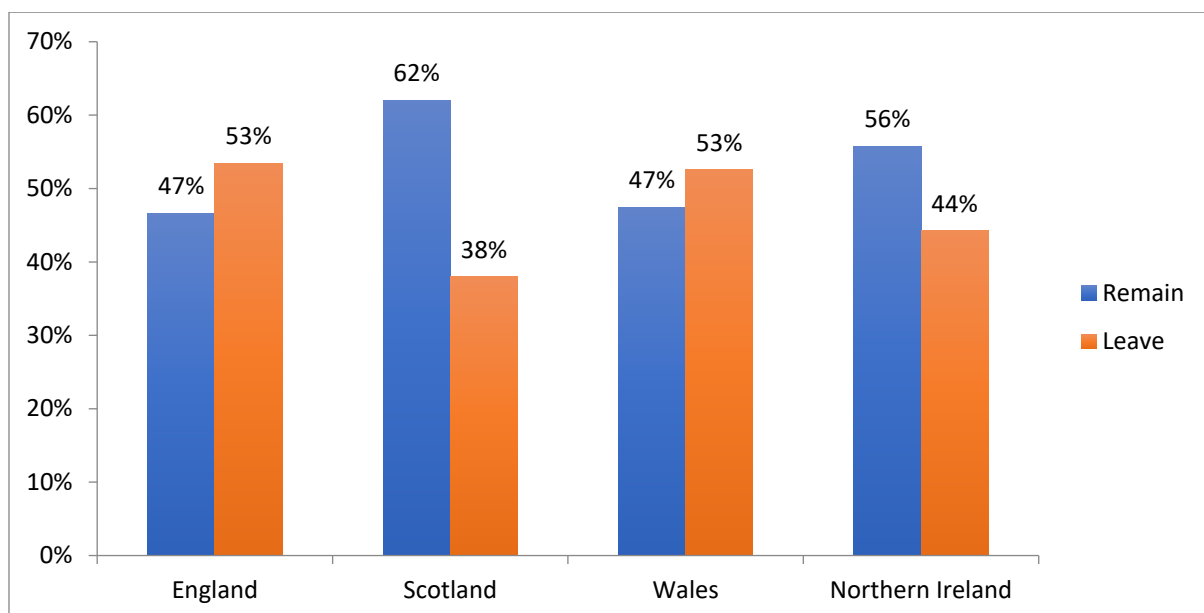


Figure 1: BREXIT referendum results in the UK Source: https://www.bbc.com/news/politics/eu_referendum/results

Even though Switzerland uses referendums on a regular basis, an equally drastic change such as BREXIT has never taken place over the last century. What can explain this radical difference?

Direct democracies are not necessarily more prone to radical policy changes

Many key features of the Swiss constitution have not changed in the last 150 years. From 1891 until 2016, only 22 out of 209 popular initiatives to change the constitution were accepted.ⁱⁱⁱ Swiss history and culture offer explanations, why referendums have not led to drastic policy changes.

Since its origins in 1291, Switzerland has always chosen and embraced direct democracy. In times when the rest of Europe was struggling with feudalism and oligarchies, Swiss citizens, especially from the German-speaking part, were highly involved in the political life of their communities.

Since that moment, direct democracy has been incorporated in Swiss culture. When France tried to invade Switzerland at the end of the 18th century, it attempted to switch Swiss federalism to a more centric and unified structure. The result were big protests, and, in the end, Switzerland got back on its path.

Therefore, historically, Swiss people are very prepared and disciplined when it comes to the usage of direct democracy's tools. Switzerland has always managed to on the one hand give people the power to change the system but, on the other, to never experience drastic divisions in its society. Swiss citizens are so acquainted with influencing their country's political life that they do not use these democratic opportunities to overwhelm the other party, to entirely reverse the system or to enforce their beliefs on others. This indicates the evolution of a culture of consensus around direct voting tools over the years.

In addition, from a cultural perspective, Switzerland has always been a genuinely multicultural society, highly committed to freedom. This diversity necessitates compromise and consensus, elements which have become part of Swiss political culture and identity.

The BREXIT – a historically dependent and socially constructed decision

BREXIT has changed the British political landscape drastically. After the Second World War, the United Kingdom faced an economic downturn and needed to reposition itself in the new world order. As the Commonwealth did not provide enough background to establish strong economic ties, the UK was confronted with the choice of either joining the newly established European Community and by doing so, having a direct influence on its policies or as an outsider getting indirectly affected by the EC's decisions. After being turned down twice, Britain succeeded and negotiated its membership's framework in order to secure its economy, to restore its political position and to affect future developments of Europe. This critical event in British-EU relations would set the direction of the British position in the EU for the years to come.

The UK under Margaret Thatcher significantly shaped the rules of the EU single market. While Thatcher was enthusiastic about establishing a free and deregulated market with tight budgetary measures, she still was opposed to further integration and sought to secure British sovereignty. When realising that the 1986 Single European Act would involve a power shift towards Brussels, sceptical voices in the Conservative Party grew louder.

Britain's tendency to take separate ways from the EU became evident during the financial crisis, when discussing a newly composed budget to keep the Euro-zone from a collapse. David Cameron became the first Prime Minister to veto an EU-wide treaty. This decision could

have been a last means to appease party members opposed to the EU, but many argued that it offered a further basis for Eurosceptics to build their criticism upon.

The UK's democracy mirrors the outcome of the BREXIT referendum. Strong party divisions are emphasised by class and economic separation in politics and society, thus shaping British citizens' identity and culture. Joining the EU led to a sudden mix of the UK's self-understanding of being an independent nation to one that gave away parts of its sovereignty. Britain's self-perception as a never fully integrated part of the European Union has shaped voters' views, since the consequences of entering the EU emphasized feelings for an independent Britain within British citizens. So even from a sociological perspective, the European Union membership has never been fully accepted by a large part of society.

Conclusion

Direct referendums can be used to shape policies drastically in both a positive and negative way. The examples of Switzerland and the United Kingdom show that the careful use of these democratic tools needs to be apprehended from the beginning of a states' establishment for citizens to grasp the outreach of their decision-making. Especially the case of BREXIT shows that the history of a nation can result in a vote with unprecedented consequences, affecting an entire nation's future. Thus, direct democracy can be a powerful tool to quickly shape a country's policies for the better, but only if voters are aware of the impact their votes hold and if politicians do not underestimate the potency of the latter.

ⁱ *The Local*. (2017, May 23). *How Switzerland's direct democracy system works*.
TheLocal.Ch. <https://www.thelocal.ch/20180523/how-switzerlands-direct-democracy-system-works>

ⁱⁱ *BBC*. (n.d.). *EU Referendum Results*. *Bbc.Com*. Retrieved October 20, 2020, from
https://www.bbc.com/news/politics/eu_referendum/results

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Local*. (2017, May 23). *How Switzerland's direct democracy system works*.
TheLocal.Ch. <https://www.thelocal.ch/20180523/how-switzerlands-direct-democracy-system-works>