

A better way with referendums

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Published: June 17 2008 12:52 | Last updated: June 17 2008 12:52

The Irish No provides Europe with an opportunity to rethink its approach to referendums. Ever since Napoleon initiated the modern practice two centuries ago, referendums have been one-shot affairs – the people going to the polls to say Yes or No without taking preliminary steps to deliberate together on the choices facing the nation.

This populist method is unworthy of a modern democracy. If an issue is important enough to warrant decision by the people as a whole, it is important enough to require a more deliberate approach to decision-making. If the Irish return to the polls next year to rethink their vote, they should be encouraged to engage in a more deliberative exercise. Two weeks before the next referendum, Ireland should hold a special national day of deliberation at which ordinary citizens discuss the key issues at community centres throughout the country.

Suppose, for example, that deliberation day begins with a familiar sort of televised debate between the leading spokesman for the Yes and No sides. After the television show, local citizens take charge as they engage in the main issues in small discussion groups of 15 and larger plenary assemblies. The small groups begin where the televised debate leaves off. Each group spends an hour defining questions that the national spokesmen left unanswered. Everybody then proceeds to a plenary assembly to hear their questions answered by local representatives of the Yes and No sides.

After lunch, participants repeat the morning procedure. By the end of the day, they will have moved far beyond the top-down television debate of the morning. Through a deliberative process of question-and-answer, they will achieve a bottom-up understanding of the issue confronting the nation. Discussions begun on deliberation day will continue during the run-up to referendum day, drawing those who did not attend into the escalating national dialogue.

Our proposal is based on more than 30 social science experiments we have conducted throughout the world. They involve “deliberative polling”, a new form of public consultation. We invite a scientific random sample of citizens to spend a weekend deliberating on big issues of public policy. Participants greatly increase their understanding of the issues and often change their minds on the best course of action. Swings of 10 percentage points or more are very common. No less important, people leave with a more confident sense of their ability as citizens to contribute constructively to political life.

Perhaps the deliberative poll conducted in Australia is most suggestive, because it was held in conjunction with a constitutional referendum on whether the country should become a republic. A random sample of 347 Australians assembled in Canberra, where they heard leaders of the Yes and No sides respond to repeated rounds of questions that had been worked out in small group discussions.

As the participants became more informed, they increasingly favoured an indirect model for selecting a president – the same option favoured by a majority of the constitutional convention that had initiated the referendum. In contrast, our separate survey of the mass public revealed that the rest of the country gained much less information from the referendum campaign than our deliberators gained from the experiment.

Although the informed voters in our microcosm moved to a strong yes, the mass of poorly informed voters moved to a no. If the mass of Australians had had a chance to engage in something like a deliberative poll through deliberation day, the result of the referendum might well have been different.

Deliberative polls conducted in Britain also suggest that collective deliberation generates important changes. A 1994 poll on Europe led to a marked shift from the group’s initial intuitive reactions. Those believing Britain was “a lot better off in the EU than out of it” went from a minority (45 per cent) to a majority (60 per cent). Opposition to the single currency also abated. Participants throughout the world have demonstrated a similar sophistication. In countries ranging from Bulgaria to the US, the data systematically establish that deliberation makes a difference. About two-thirds of the attitudes measured in these experiments change significantly after participants think and talk about the issues. Moreover, the process is very democratic. Voters from all classes learn and change their opinions – not just the more educated.

A national day of deliberation would require a lot of careful preparation. Citizens must obtain reservations at local centres; centres must be prepared for use; centre supervisors must be recruited from school staff and volunteer organisations; and so forth. But all this is perfectly doable, as we have established in our intensive study of the bureaucratic mechanics.

All in all, deliberation day would be a big undertaking – but so is the idea of popular sovereignty. The European project is seen as elite-driven, and to that extent, undemocratic. But traditional referendums offer only a crude populist response to the democracy deficit. Deliberation day offers a third way – allowing ordinary citizens to take charge in a fashion that is worthy of genuine respect.

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