

Why there should not be a General Election ‘about the EU’ – and why the UK isn’t a democracy

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2016/09/27/general-election-eu/

27/09/2016

There has been much talk about whether a general election will or should take place before 2020, the key arguments behind it being that Theresa May has no mandate to carry out her programme, while also having no mandate to negotiate the exact terms of Brexit. Calling an early election would therefore be a single-topic vote. [Yossi Nehushtan](#) argues that such an outcome would be anti-democratic.



Many have argued for a general election ‘about the EU’. The common assumptions are that an election will allow ‘the people’ to express their updated and informed views about the exact way to leave the EU; accord democratic legitimacy to the new PM; and shift the balance back from ‘direct democracy’ to ‘representative democracy’.

The truth is, however, that having a general election ‘about the EU’ is an exceptionally bad way of achieving the above. First, it is anti-democratic to have a general election about a single topic. Second, it is not at all clear what this single topic could be. Third, the result will not reflect the majority will because the first past the post system constantly fails to reflect the majority will.

A One-Topic General Election is Anti-Democratic

The main purpose of having democratic elections is (or should be) to allow ‘the people’ to express their political preferences by casting their vote to the candidate or party which is more likely to realize them. Political preferences are normally complex. Also, not all voters care about each issue to an equal extent. An [opinion poll](#) by YouGov showed, for example, that in three points in time during 2015, an average of no more than 25 per cent thought that ‘Europe’ was one of the three ‘most important issues facing the country at this time’.

It is true that we can expect a different answer today; it is also true that leaving the EU will affect other areas such as immigration and the economy. But this does not affect my main argument: general elections should not reduce the complex preferences of voters regarding numerous issues to one narrow question about one specific issue.

Many voters may prefer that the UK would leave the EU – but for many other valid reasons they may also prefer to vote for a political party that happens to support ‘Remain’. It will be unwise to assume that all those who would vote

for a party that supports 'Brexit', in fact support 'Brexit'. If it is made clear for voters that any vote for a party that supports 'Brexit' is in fact a vote for 'Brexit' and nothing more, voters may be forced to vote for parties which do not reflect any of their other preferences – or to vote for a party which does not represent their preference about the EU, rendering the election almost meaningless.

Forcing voters to ignore their political views and preferences, and perceiving these voters as one-dimensional political persons who only care about 'Leave' or 'Remain' diminishes their political personality and makes any such election anti-democratic.

A one-topic General Election – about what exactly?

A referendum is a dreadful way of making conclusive political decisions but it does put forward one agreed question. If we have a general election soon, we can reasonably assume that it will be 'about the EU'. But what does it mean? Will the election be about whether to Leave or Remain? About who has the authority to trigger Article 50? About the necessary conditions that must be met before we decide to leave the EU? Or perhaps about trusting Theresa May and Boris Johnson to make the right decision?

Having a general election about 'leaving the EU' without knowing what the election is *really* about is a recipe for confusion and superficial public debate. Ultimately, it will not solve any 'democratic legitimacy' problems and will add very little to the barely legitimate referendum's result. Since we can't really have an election about one specific and agreed issue, *any* other decision that will be made by the new elected government will be exposed to arguments regarding its own democratic legitimacy. And then what? A second referendum? Yet another PM resignation and a new general election?

We went through this unfortunate exercise before. We know that the referendum's result is not legally binding and we also know that we should accord the result limited political-moral weight. The current government – or better yet, Parliament – should make the decision and face harsh popular criticism for making it because that would be the case with or without more elections and referendums. And if there are doubts regarding the new PM's democratic legitimacy then nothing has changed: David Cameron was also not elected by the majority of voters. Twice. And he was still the PM. Twice.

A Bonus: Why the UK is Not a Democracy

Even if 'the people' were happy to have an election about a single issue; even if the 'question' was specific and clear; and even if all voters knew what they are voting for – the result will not reflect the majority will, because UK general elections almost never do.

Non-proportional voting systems, such as majoritarian voting systems, completely fail to reflect the majority will. In the UK, for example, in almost all cases in the 20th century in which one political party won more than 50 per cent of seats in parliament, this party did not receive more than 50 per cent of the people's votes.

In non-proportional voting systems there is normally no correlation between the percentage of votes a political party gets and the number of seats to which it is entitled. This has always been the case in the UK, but in the 2015 election, the gap between UK's self-perception as a representative democracy and the facts was truly astonishing. To take a few examples: the SNP got 4.7 per cent of votes and 56 seats. The Liberal-Democrats got 7.9 per cent of votes but only 8 seats. UKIP got 12.6 per cent of the votes but only 1 seat. The Conservative party got 36.9 per cent of votes and a majority of seats. Together we have 49.5% for center-right-wing parties. All other parties combined got 50.5 per cent of votes – parties that could have formed a center-left coalition government if the UK voting system made any attempt to reflect the majority will

Only an anti-democratic and unfair voting system as we have can take these results and transform them to the Conservative party having the majority of seats in Parliament.

In light of these facts, perceiving British democracy as a 'representative democracy' would be too much even for George Orwell to take. Here we should be careful not to equate free election and public legitimacy with democracy. Voters may be happy with the current system (as the 2011 AV referendum perhaps showed). The current system may enjoy public legitimacy – but it is not democratic in any meaningful sense. For a voting system to be democratic it is not sufficient for it to enjoy public legitimacy, but its results should also reflect as accurately as possible the genuine preferences of voters.

Also within the context of the EU debate, two different and insightful projections, by [Appelgate and Phillips](#) and [Hanretty](#), showed that because of the our electoral system, if the EU referendum was not a referendum but rather a 'one topic general election', pro-Brexit political parties would have won more than 65 per cent of seats in parliament. This means that it is very likely that a general election about the EU will result in yet another win for the 'Leave' camp even if most voters vote for 'Remain parties'.

So much for (representative) democracy.

Please read our comments policy before commenting.

Note: This article originally appeared at [LSE British Politics and Policy](#). It gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. Featured image: [CC0 Public Domain](#). The author would like to thank Adam Davidson for commenting on a previous version of this post.

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/2dyXpfl>

About the Author

[Yossi Nehushtan](#) is Senior Lecturer at the School of Law, Keele University.

-

