

Top 5 Underestimated Issues in the UK's EU Referendum Debate

by Ulrike Theuerkauf*

Let me begin with a few disclaimers: I am not an EU expert. I am not a British citizen nor do I fulfil any of the other [criteria to be allowed to vote in the upcoming EU referendum](#). I am very pleased that I may express my opinion about the referendum in this alternative forum (an online blog) and thus get a voice in the referendum debate despite not having a voting right on 23rd June. This creates an interesting contrast to [colleagues who](#) do have a voting right in the referendum but use alternative forums to explain why they will not make use of this right.

As my own “area of expertise” lies not with the [dynamics and consequences of the EU](#) but rather with issues of democracy and political violence, I would like to use the voice I was given to discuss five points that I regard as fundamental but underestimated aspects of the EU referendum debate in the UK.

The first two points focus on the referendum as a political institution, the next two on the content of the referendum on 23rd June, and the last one is a brief speculation of what may happen if the Leavers win.

Referendums *can* serve pro-democratic functions, by creating additional spaces of [representation and accountability](#). This, however, does not mean that they are an intrinsically democratic institution, as they can and have been used for non-democratic purposes in a number of hybrid and autocratic regimes, including e.g. [Venezuela](#) and [Egypt](#) in recent years, and, a bit longer ago, [Germany and Italy under fascist dictatorship](#).

Even if they are performed under a liberal democratic framework, referendums do not necessarily enhance the legitimacy of political decisions or levels of vertical accountability in a political system either, as shown e.g. by [on-going discussions](#) about the ability of political elites and special interest groups to dominate referendum campaigns in Switzerland. Looking at the use of referendums under David Cameron’s prime ministership on AV (2011), Scotland (2014) and the EU (2016), [their main intention](#) was likely about bolstering the government’s power by ending inconvenient discussions rather than giving power to the people.

Related to the previous point is the exclusionary nature of the referendum as a political institution. To be precise: Under a liberal democratic framework, referendums can make the political system more inclusive by creating [additional opportunities](#) for the electorate to express their interests freely and fairly.

Yet referendums are still exclusionary in the sense that they are based on a [zero-sum game](#) whereby political gains are absolute and there is no compensation for the losers: On 23rd June, voters are asked to make a Yes-No choice and whatever the 50%+ majority of voters on that day decide will be the outcome of that referendum, while the interests of those who voted differently, who did not vote at all or who would have preferred a more nuanced choice will not be represented.

The aforementioned two points underpin and exacerbate discussions about the actual content of the EU referendum on 23rd June. The first content-related point that I regard as fundamental but greatly underestimated are the normative roots of the EU, i.e. its origins as a reaction to the two World Wars, intended to [avoid future violence and strengthen democracy](#) in Europe.

Of course this was not the only motivation for the founding of the [EU and its predecessor organisations](#), nor are “peace” and “democracy” among the [most frequently mentioned items that respondents in the UK associate with the EU](#). This latter point, however, becomes problematic, as voters on 23rd June should be aware that the normative element is an inevitable and inseparable part of the EU’s history.

Hence, the choice on 23rd June is a normative one not just about current UK-EU relations but also about the EU as a project of peace and democracy ([see also Jamie Pickering’s very insightful analysis of the peacebuilding ability and potential of the European Union](#)).

The preceding point becomes even more relevant in light of the recent strengthening of [far right political parties in a number of European countries](#). In the UK, the debates leading up to the EU referendum seem to have contributed to and been shaped by this wave of far right sentiment, with which I specifically mean anti-immigration and defensive nationalist views.

Whatever the outcome of the EU referendum on 23rd June, it will have shifted the balance of power between centre right and far right wingers in the UK in favour of the latter, hopefully only temporarily and hopefully not too considerably. But it will have shifted in one form or another: If the UK leaves the EU, this will have considerable implications for the already tense relationship between pro- and anti-EU forces within the Conservative party as well as between the Conservatives and UKIP.

Even if the UK does not leave the EU, the debates surrounding the referendum have helped to make anti-immigration and defensive nationalist discourse [more socially acceptable](#). This trend of normalising and thus giving strength to certain far right views is worrying news about British political culture.

The final point is based on pure speculation, should the Leavers win on 23rd June. If they do and there is a chance of [at least a short-term economic downturn after the Brexit](#), this can have serious implications for social stability in the UK: By now, it has become a truism in the academic literature that there is a correlation between poor economic performance (including [economic deprivation](#) and [low economic growth rates](#)) and the risk of political violence.

Of course correlation is not the same as causation and political violence is a multi-faceted as well as multi-causal phenomenon that is influenced by more than just economic factors. A risk, however, remains a risk and thus worth bearing in mind.

If you have the right to vote in the referendum on 23rd June, it will be down to you to decide what you will vote or whether you will vote at all. As it is your choice, I'll refrain from concluding by recommending one choice or the other. If I may, however, I would advise only this: A voting right is a powerful tool. Think about it well and choose wisely.

* *Ulrike Theuerkauf is a Lecturer in Politics and International Development at UEA.*