

Is the Brexit debate respecting democratic principles?

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4 Jan 2019. Poll results updated 7/1 and 18/1. Comments & responses added (p.3 below) 19/1

I recently compiled this graphic from some polling data that I found particularly interesting, because it asked a simple, clear and reflective question:

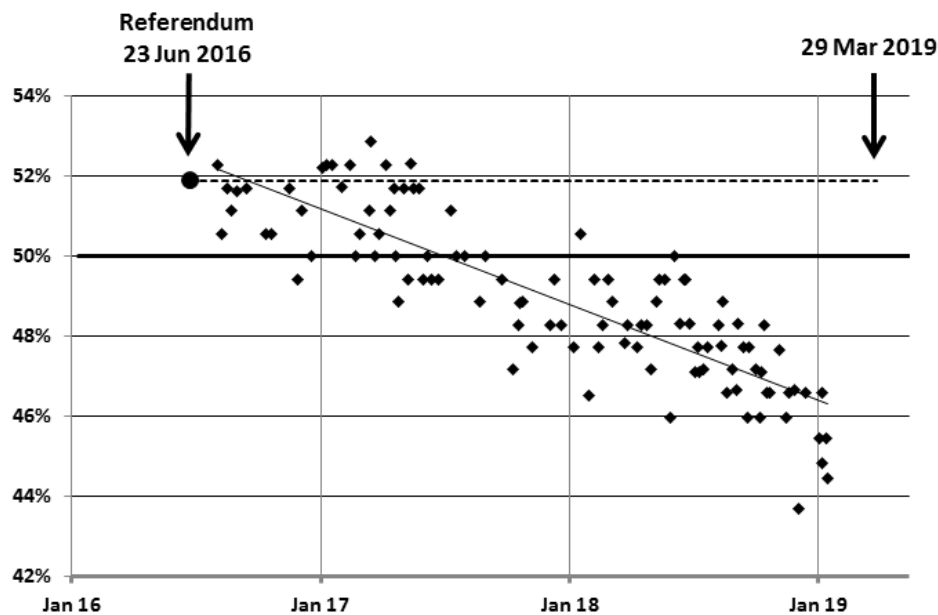
"In hindsight, do you think Britain was right or wrong to vote to leave the EU?"

The data (mostly from YouGov polls) is at <https://whatukthinks.org/eu/opinion-polls/uk-poll-results/> . Maybe the data is flawed or biased in some degree. I can't be sure. But it has presumably been obtained in fairly consistent ways over the 2.5 years since the referendum, is consistent with the referendum at the start, and shows a clear reversal of the majority opinion, as polled. How should a democracy respond to this?

Results of 106 polls up to 16 Jan 2019, asking:

"In hindsight, do you think Britain was right or wrong to vote to leave the EU?"

Points show the % of those giving a definite answer, who answered "right". ("Don't know" = 11.9% ± 1.2% s.d.)



The evidence suggests that:

Continuing to push for any kind of Brexit is *prima facie* contrary to the democratic will of the people.

Data from: <https://whatukthinks.org/eu/opinion-polls/uk-poll-results/>

I put this issue at Christmas to some family members and relatives, who responded (not surprisingly, given the atmosphere in the UK) mostly about views on Brexit itself rather than about the principles of democracy that I wanted to bring to the fore. I have tried to expand below my own views about how democratic principles should impact the debate, and the crucial importance, in my view, of holding a second referendum.

A cousin (the distinguished Canadian politician, commentator and Human Rights activist, David Kilgour) had published views about the Brexit situation 18 months ago, which I refer to below:

https://www.theepochtimes.com/brexit-brings-a-post-uk-election-2_2259933.html .

My Views

There has been a fascinating set of BBC (Radio 4) programmes this week by Neil Macgregor on views of Brexit and the UK from abroad (Germany, Greece, Nigeria, Canada & India). Without going into the detail of Brexit, they discuss how it colours the UK's reputation as a balanced and forward looking democracy:

Audio: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0001t91/episodes/player>

A Review: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/dec/28/bbc-radio-4-series-as-others-see-us-neil-macgregor-brexit-views>

The point I raised in my original email was really about democracy, not about brexit. Brexit is clearly a complex issue with almost everyone seeing both positive and negative sides to any decision. For individuals, a preference is about how you perceive these and weigh them up against each other. For the nation, decisions have to be about how you weigh those individual preferences - and in a democracy (Churchill's "*worst* form of government, except for all the others") we are more or less committed to weigh them all equally, regardless of how knowledgeable and certain each individual is, or how large is their perceived imbalance of likely outcomes. In a referendum this is especially stark, because in ordinary elections votes at least go to electing and employing people expected to become properly informed before they make decisions on our behalf.

Cameron (& May) lost the referendum in 2016 and May - once PM, and thoroughly commendably - put her back into trying to find an acceptable and good brexit deal. It would have undermined her negotiating position to suggest this deal would ultimately be put to voters in a 2nd referendum. That suggestion would have provided EU negotiators with a motive to insist on a bad deal (for both UK and EU) or no deal - in the expectation this outcome would be rejected by the people. So far, so good! But now that negotiation seems over, I am appalled at those who continue to assert that it would be *undemocratic* to have a 2nd referendum to confirm a negotiated plan. I think such confirmation would have been advisable even if the polls favoured a deal in front of parliament, given the animosities around. But I was really struck by the clear message of the data I illustrated above

(https://tmedwin.net/docs/brexit_polls.png) with an unusually straightforward polling question, showing a statistically convincing shift towards a majority twice that of the referendum, but the other way round. As people have said, this shift is probably due partly to the diminishing population of brexit-biassed elderlies, but the reason doesn't really matter. I asked if anyone could construct any coherent argument for the position still held by May and other MPs, that the People's Vote campaign for a second referendum is somehow undemocratic.

My own view is that (whatever the referendum result) a 2nd referendum is the *only* way to retain Britain's well-respected democratic reputation - both amongst its own people and amongst those in the rest of Europe and the world. One half-hearted argument I have heard - fear of possible violence - is hardly sufficient reason not to take the risk, and indeed maybe if violence got out of hand would deservedly merit our loss of reputation as a civilised nation. Does anyone sense a taste for violence? I certainly didn't amongst the families marching in June and October for the sake of their children's future. If there was a 'brexit' outcome, this would be seen to have been well established. If 'remain', the atmosphere would encourage serious EU negotiations to improve the way the EU works and is perceived by all its people, stimulated by a sobering but constructive peer into a network of possible abysses. This is I think what my cousin David Kilgour (https://www.theepochtimes.com/brexit-brings-a-post-uk-election-2_2259933.html) wanted as a conclusion, though he was suggesting that the UK might negotiate to stay in the EU without a 2nd referendum, which I rather doubt. A discussion of recent polls in the Guardian may perhaps offer some glimmer of hope for what is needed:

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/dec/20/polls-stay-eu-yougov-brexit-peoples-vote> .

Tony Gardner-Medwin, 3 Jan 2019 (rev. 5 Jan)

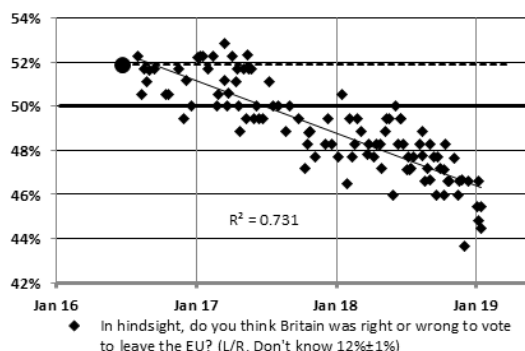
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RESPONSE TO COMMENTS (up to 18 Jan)

I've had several interesting comments since posting this to friends and colleagues, and again I am going to omit discussion or mention of pros & cons of Brexit itself, or indeed of the conduct of the 2016 referendum or what makes for a good or bad referendum. I want to focus again on the idea (which May & Corbyn seem adamant about) that a second referendum would be a betrayal of trust and of democracy. It seems to me that to enact Brexit at the moment would be, given the evidence, itself a clear betrayal of the democratic will of the people.

Here's my distillation of comments and my responses. Apologises if I have missed important points :

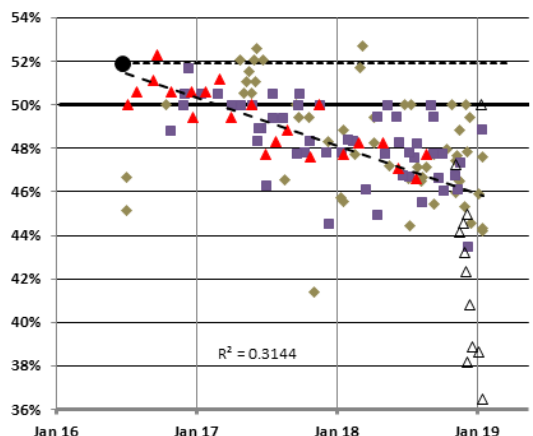
1. People asked if the data I illustrated was maybe chosen partly because it suited my beliefs ('*selection bias*'). However, the rest of the data on the website (below right), though more noisy, has much the same trend.



Above is the data I chose to highlight, for judgments in hindsight about the 2016 referendum decision.

On the right is the remainder of the 2-option poll data on the website post-referendum. (Linear regression is for the combined data). These questions were about future choice, sometimes ill-defined. They show broadly the same trend as the 'hindsight' data, but with more scatter.

NB The open triangles relate specifically to May's deal that was voted down by parliament on 14 Jan.



2. 80% voted in the 2017 election for parties supporting brexit negotiation in their manifestos. Yes, Con & Lab could hardly have done otherwise, given the 2016 referendum result, though their plans were different. Lib-Dems & SNP too, except their plans included asking for approval in a final referendum before a deal would be implemented - obviously sensible to me, though it might well have compromised a negotiating position if they had thought they had a chance of being in power.
3. There would be distrust, resentment and maybe violence (poor distraught Sunderland was mentioned!) if politicians do not enact brexit. Maybe, but there will be huge resentment and distrust too if they enact a bad brexit against what appears at the time to be the will of the people. Both the UK and EU have learned a lot from these negotiations, and this should be put to good use to solve real problems, in many countries, to create a more popular EU. We need proper leaders.
4. The age-dependence of brexit inclination may have two opposite effects as time moves on. Remainers may turn into brexiteers as they age, which could enhance a brexit vote, since the median age of the population is increasing. More commonly, people suggest that today's youth with a more pro-EU attitude will retain this and enhance 'remain' as they age and gradually displace elderly voters with their nostalgia for olden times. Maybe there are data that could quantify these opposite effects, but there are many other factors too that may contribute to opinion shifts and it is simply the net effect that counts.
5. Conspiracy theory! In this, May - as a remainer - has all the time been planning (perhaps in cahoots with the EU) to confound the referendum by constructing a hopeless deal as the 'only' deal. Her cover is lip service to the brexit result as a democratic commitment, so as to justify even contemplating such a bad deal. If you like this theory, she's sure leaving it a bit late to change her tune - to support for the 2nd referendum that she needs to jettison her supposedly staged deal.
6. The 2016 referendum was a mess - marginal, wrong design, full of lies, targeting social media subgroups with different messages, a turnout biased toward brexit because the clear expectation was remain. I don't want to go there - the arguments would become as tedious as those about brexit itself. We had a dumb referendum - people voted for their dreams, and we now need to face reality, including the fact that dreams are not real.