

What Citizens Know about Referenda: Facts and Implications

Arthur Lupia, University of Michigan

Democracies around the world use referenda to offer legitimacy and elevated legal status to a range of statutory and constitutional proposals.

From a professional perspective, many referenda are complex. These referenda can contain large amounts of technical language and legalese. Other referenda are much shorter in length. These referenda produce specific instructions for specific circumstances or offer a vague aspirational statement about desired endstates leaving the details of how to reach these endstates to other governmental actors.

From citizens' perspectives, referenda have a different appearance. Whether referenda are long or short in length, whether they pertain to a specific circumstance or a large set of circumstances, whether they offer detail about implementation or leave those details to others, almost all referenda are presented to citizens as a *binary choice*. A binary choice is a choice with two options. In referenda, citizens typically have two options "yes" or "no."

These basic facts about referenda influence the kinds of information that voters seek and the outcomes that occur on Election Day.

.....

Are citizens competent to vote in referenda?

The complexity of many referenda produces questions about whether citizens are able to make competent decisions – that is, decisions that are consistent with clusters of facts and values that relate to quality of life for themselves, their families, their communities and their nation.

Evidence against the proposition of citizen competence is the fact that referenda often pertain to complex issues and evidence that many citizens tend to be ignorant of many attributes of items appearing on their ballot. Numerous surveys run in the days and weeks leading up to many referenda show significant numbers of citizen unable to answer seemingly relevant factual questions correctly.

Evidence in favor of the proposition of citizen competence is the fact that referenda offers citizens a binary choice and evidence that many citizens seek out and use simple environmental cues (such as interest group endorsements) that help them relate a ballot question to facts and values that affect their quality of life.

The fact the referenda offer a binary choice implies that if one of the two options was in fact better for a particular citizen, and if the citizen used a coin flip to determine how they would vote, they would cast the correct vote 50% of the time on average. However, if instead of using a coin, citizens seek out sources of information that they believe to be (a) relatively knowledgeable about the consequence of passing or rejecting the referendum and (b) having values or preferences that are similar to that of the citizen, then citizens can use the recommendations of these sources of information to increase their odds of a "correct vote" to significantly more than 50%.

Interest group endorsements, or similar endorsements from well-known public figures, newspapers, political parties, and the like provide a service to voters that is similar to the service that traffic lights serve to drivers.

Traffic lights. It is rush hour in a large city or suburb. We are at a four-way intersection. Each of the intersecting roads has four lanes for automobile traffic, plus dedicated lanes for left-turns and bicycles. At rush hour there can be 150-200 cars at this intersection. The engineering problem is how to get all of these cars, whose drivers want to advance in four different directions, through the relatively small space of an intersection in 90 seconds. As an engineering problem, this scenario is highly complex. We have 150-200 independent units. Each driver must decide when to accelerate, how quickly to accelerate, and when to step on the brake. The slightest error in timing could result in loss of life and substantial damage to one of their most valuable pieces of property (not to mention time needed to file police reports and wrangle with insurance companies). Hence, each driver must form a belief about the speed and acceleration capacity of most, if not all, of the other cars at the intersection. They must form beliefs about the intentions and decisions of each of the drivers. They must form beliefs about other drivers' beliefs about these factors. Again, to write a computer program that incorporates all of these factors would be very complex. There is so much about this situation that each driver does not know.

Yet, drivers make these decisions billions of times per day and with a success rate of nearly 100%. How do they accomplish this remarkable feat? They use the traffic light. When the light is green, they look at the car in front of them, and then they go. When the car is yellow, they look at the car in front of them and begin to slow. When the light is red, they slow or stop (though a few who have no cars in front of them decide to hit the gas, but the behavior is quite rare statistically).

Traffic lights are a device that simplifies decision contexts in which, from a technical perspective, we are ignorant about many seemingly pertinent facts.

In referendum campaigns, endorsements can play the same role as traffic lights.

In the best-case scenario, well-informed individuals and groups whose values citizens know well explain how they are voting on the referendum and explain why such a vote is consistent with their values.

In the worst case scenario, individuals or groups misrepresent themselves as having a certain set of values or as being well-informed, they make a claim about how others should vote, and citizens believe the advice falsely inferring that the advice is consistent with relevant facts and values.

Having stated best and worse case scenarios, there are many cases where citizens use endorsements to cast the same votes that they would have cast had they known more about facts that were available at the time of the election.

In sum, it is incorrect to infer that citizens who lack knowledge of certain details of a referendum will vote incompetently as a consequence. To draw this conclusion is akin to concluding that a person cannot get from their home to their airport because there is a particular route to the airport of which they are unaware. If there are multiple routes to the airport, a person need not know all of them to reach their destination. Finding one route

that leads them to their desired outcome in the time that they have available is sufficient to achieve their goal. Similarly, citizens can reach the “destination” of casting the same vote that they would have cast if they were cognizant of many technical details by relying on interest group endorsements. This possibility, and the fact that referenda are binary choices, increases the probability of citizens “voting correctly” to well over 50% in many cases.

Will most citizens read the fine print?

No. If a referendum is long or complex, most citizens will not read the fine print. This is both a historical claim and a claim about how citizens process political information today.

Prior to the Internet, there was substantial evidence that many citizens did not read the fine print of referenda. Instead they looked for simple cues, such as the endorsements described above, to form judgments on which way to vote.

With the emergence of the Internet, there is now an unprecedented competition for each person’s attention. Human attentive capacity, in turn, is quite limited. As a result, people seek to base many, if not most, of their decisions, on simple cues such as brand names, traffic lights, and the actions of other people in their environs.

In every polity, there is a small group of people who obtain as much information as they can about referenda. The Internet makes available to these people more information about referenda than has ever been available before. At the same time, the Internet offers addictive video games, hockey scores and highlights and cat videos. For people who want to avoid conversations about politics, the Internet provides an unprecedented number of distractions.

A common consequence of increasing competitiveness in the competition for human attention is the emergence of extreme bimodal distributions in how much information citizens obtain about politics. A bimodal distribution is a distribution that has two masses of density (think of it like the back of a camel with two humps). For any issue, there is now one group of people (a.k.a., “wonks” or “geeks”) who have access to, and know, more information than nearly all members of previous generations. The other group spends all of their time on other things.

It should be noted that these “other things” are not entirely, or even primarily, frivolous. Many citizens are in situations where all of their effort is required to care for children, elders, community members or to make ends meet. The information that is most valuable to them is the information that helps them get through the day, put food on the table, secure housing, and pay the bills. Political conversations, particularly about matters that seem abstract, are seen as a luxury rather than as a necessity.

It should also be noted that the “bimodal distribution” outcome is unlike the distribution of knowledge in pre-Internet, pre-cable generations in countries like Canada and the United States. In those eras, there were two or three television stations, two or three newspapers, and a small number of radio stations and national magazines. Most of these outlets carried some political content. So if a person wanted to watch television at, say, 6:00pm, they had to

watch the news. This limited choice meant that even people who were not inclined to be interested in politics were regularly exposed to political content. That is not true today. Hence, the bimodal distribution.

Most people will not read the fine print and will look for endorsements to help them decide which way to vote.

.....
Fact: For most citizens, a referendum is not an intellectual argument.

For legislators and associated professional persons who help to develop referenda, the end result is the product of a sustained and rigorous political and intellectual process. Many people who have this type of involvement in the development of referenda believe that citizens can, or should, also treat the referendum in this way. *They will not.*

The reason is that for the people who developed the referenda, the end result is one of thousands or millions of variations of the proposal that could have been chosen. The negotiations that led to a particular choice of language included arguments for or against successive variations. Memory of these arguments influence subsequent negotiations and influence how “insiders” see the resulting product.

Citizens are not involved in this process. Their role is very different. The action item for them is to vote “yes” or “no.” They are not permitted to offer amendments.

Hence, what voters do is seek to develop simple and emotionally salient narratives about what “yes” and “no” mean to themselves, their families and their communities. From a citizen’s perspective, the main question is “Is “yes” or “no” a better choice?”

A typical process for voters to draw this distinction is to seek environmental cues that help them answer this question with respect to their values. If a cue makes the preferred action clear (if it operates as traffic lights ordinarily do), they typically decide which way they are voting and stop their search. Once a citizen has “picked a team,” the choice tends to influence their subsequent information processing. Through a process that psychologists call “motivated reasoning”, people increasingly judge information about the topic not by its inherent accuracy but by whether or not it supports or threatens their “team.” So, for example, a person who has chosen “yes” begins to welcome and feel good about argument that supports their current view – at the same time they become defensive about or seek to distance themselves from contradictory information. In other words, once citizens pick a team, the choice tends to influence how they perceive all subsequent information.

So, for citizens, referenda are not intellectual arguments. They are opportunities for voters to seek information about which of two choices are better for them and then to defend their choice against contradictory claims.

.....
Fact: The “No” Campaign Will Have Significant Advantages

In referenda across the world, “No” campaigns have a significant advantage. A “yes” campaign is typically advocating for a change to current statutes or constitutions. A “No”

campaign is advocating for leaving things as they are. Historically, referendum campaigns are characterized by significant status quo biases.

For this reason, a common tactic for “no” campaigns is to develop narratives about possible consequences of changing the law and then spinning out worst-case scenarios of that consequence. Since it is typically the case that the proposed law has never been in effect, and since the referendum (a piece of paper) cannot speak for itself, “No” campaigns can stay within applicable campaign laws and yet distribute very frightening tales about the consequences of voting “Yes.” This, in fact, is the M.O. of “No” campaigns around the world.

In fact, in California, where there is an established group of professional campaign consultants who specialize on initiatives and referenda and where “win-loss” records affect reputation and subsequent compensation levels, top-tier professionals are reticent to touch a “yes” campaign unless initial polling shows support levels of 70% or more in cases where 50% of the vote is needed for victory. The reason for this decision rule is that the professionals understand that “No” campaigns have significant advantages. A common expectation is that support for “Yes” will decrease during the course of most referendum campaigns – with the fight being whether it can be kept over 50% on Election Day.

Some readers may ask whether the Brexit outcome is an exception to this rule. The answer is not as clear as one may think. The operative question here is “*What was the status quo?*” It is arguable that for younger citizens “UK in Europe” was the status quo. After all, it is the situation that they have known for all of their lives. But for older citizens, most of their lives was in a UK that was not part of the EU. Hence, it is arguable that for older citizens participation in the common market was part of the status quo, but subservience to the European Parliament was not. For older voters, EU membership was an historical aberration. This conjecture has support in the voting results. Younger voters supported REMAIN, their status quo, by a very large margin. At the same time older voters supported LEAVE, their status quo, by a very large margin.

As a general matter, “yes” campaigns are more difficult to wage than “No” campaigns. “Yes” campaigns seek to persuade citizens that invisible and unprecedented change will improve their lives. “No” campaigns seek to persuade citizens that change is scary and dangerous.

So if your members want electoral reform to pass, the “Yes” campaign will need to focus on relating consequences of the change to the aspirations and daily struggles of Canadian citizens. If the “yes” campaign offers intellectual abstractions and the “no” campaigns offers emotionally salient reasons to fear change, “No” will have an important advantage.

SELECTED REFERENCES

1. Arthur Lupia. 2016. *Uninformed: Why People Know So Little About Politics and What We Can Do About It*. New York: Oxford University Press.
2. Arthur Lupia and Richard Johnston. 2001. "Are Voters to Blame? Voter Competence and Elite Maneuvers in Public Referendums." In Matthew Mendelsohn and Andrew Parkin (eds.) *Referendum Democracy: Citizens, Elites, and Deliberation in Referendum Campaigns*. Toronto: MacMillan/St. Martin's Press, 191-210.