



Democracy on speed

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July, 2016



The question, when it came, was striking in its simplicity: “should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?” Two boxes. No caveats, no subordinate clauses, no footnotes. Definitely no 650-page White Paper, as there had been ahead of the referendum on Scottish independence in 2014. Not even a helpful leaflet that might explain what the EU is, what it does, and what the ramifications of leaving, or not leaving, might be. This was bare-knuckle democracy, fought in the soundbite age (and without, it now turns out, a plan for what this brave new Brexit order would look like once the fighters left the ring). £350 million per week for the NHS! 80 million Turks



heading to our shores! Reclaim our borders! Take back control!

More than any other electoral act, a referendum channels an extraordinarily complex, differentiated population into a fictive singularity: The People.

This is The People as oracle; as collective coin-flipper. Its verdict is not delivered in the equivocal language of swings and parliamentary seats; there is no coalition or compromise. Like the *benge* fowl that lives or dies, the referendum deals only in binaries: it is a guillotine to representative democracy's rough-edged saw. No wonder, when the Leave announcement was finally delivered it felt giddily unreal, as though we had not known our own force and were shocked at the blood now splattered on the carpet. "The will of the British people is an instruction that must be delivered" [intoned Cameron](#) in his election speech. Farage talked [straight to the demos](#): Brexit was a victory for "real people, for ordinary people, for good people, for decent people." To an electorate schooled in the convoluted first-past-the-post system of representative government—to tactical voting, to swing constituencies, to the clocking up of parliamentary seats and majorities, to believing that your vote doesn't *really* count here—there was something intoxicating about the referendum's simplicity and its violence. For a fleeting moment, The People really were sovereign.



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But what is a referendum, anthropologically speaking, and what is this sovereign thing that it conjures into being? We could look at a referendum, following Kimberley Coles (2007), as a socio-material apparatus for producing particular political facts. It is an apparatus, along with the secret ballot, the polling booth, the election monitors, the televised delivery of results, for translating political interests into singular decisions. More than any other political technology, however, the referendum's force lies in its claims to encompassment (all votes really do count equally) and its capacity to reduce complexity to a singular decision. That is the source of its political and moral superiority: for what could possibly be more democratic than a referendum, more authoritative than the sovereign voice of The People?

A referendum is a political technology, to be sure. It is a tool for cutting the network (in this case, in a way that excluded all long-term EU residents from that prospective People). But it is also more than this, for reasons that help explain its popularity in the current European moment of popular cynicism and populist politics. Presented in the form that the British people encountered it last week, a referendum is the ultimate neoliberal hat-trick, producing the illusion of perfect choice and unconstrained agency (You decide! Stay or Go!) even as the very



parameters of the question have been determined by a micro-elite to resolve an internal party spat. Its simplicity of form also conceals a fallacy at its core: for without the qualifications and footnotes, the small print Ts&Cs, none of us knows—can possibly know—what we are voting *for* in voting to leave. The referendum is a form of magical politics for a digital, post-political age. It is no surprise that the very form in which the question is posed on the ballot paper mirrors that of the TV quiz-show, whose contestants are asked about a hypothetical, unknowable future: Immigration or the Economy? Bank your earnings, or take a risk on more? Box A or Box B?

This is democracy at the roulette table; democracy on speed.

We shouldn't be surprised about Gove's "who cares about experts?" shoulder shrug when confronted with inconvenient facts: for the referendum's claim to superiority lies precisely in its celebration of the *demos* over the elected politician. It is this that allows it to trump parliament, to trump representation; to trump deliberation; to trump inconvenient facts or tiresome expertise. That is why referenda are so beloved of populist politicians everywhere: we need only think of Putin's annexation of Crimea, justified through a referendum in 2014, to see this politics at work. Putin is the past master of this political game.

The twist in this case, as with all oracular verdicts and spins of the roulette table, is that the outcome is never certain; the *benge* fowl might die. The ballot presents the illusion of choice, but the politicians who set the terms of the referendum also have only the illusion of control.

The People is a fickle thing. In this case, the Leave campaign's call to "take back control" has given form and solidity to undercurrents of fear, disillusion and xenophobia that won't easily now be contained.

Kimberley Coles, 2007. [*Democratic Designs*](#), University of Michigan Press.

