

British Referendums: Genuine Democracy or Governmental Strategy?

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Abstract:

Referendum use in Britain has undergone a significant upheaval. Despite the massive vigilance that British politicians exerted toward the device, it successfully managed to infiltrate the political agenda and establish itself as an institutional mechanism for settling major constitutional dilemmas. However, questions around their statutory place in the British constitution and political apparatus remain a topic of an ongoing academic debate. Based on their operational framework that challenges the sovereignty of the British parliament, it is important to evaluate the original rationale for their establishment and assess their democratic legitimacy. Following a historical analytical approach that draws on historical institutionalism, this paper attempts at tracing the evolution of referendum use in Britain and situates it within the broader development of Britain's political institutions. Accordingly, the paper sheds some light on how past decisions and path dependencies have structured the conditions under which referendums were held. Such an approach allows us to determine whether the British approach toward referendums derives from a genuine democratic pursuit or serves as a government strategy for targeted political gains.

Keywords: Democratic legitimacy, Democratic pursuit, Government strategy, Referendum use.

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INTRODUCTION

Whether constitutionally mandated or citizen-initiated, referendums witnessed a massive proliferation in many liberal states. This proliferation not only affected countries where referendums have a long history, such as the US or Switzerland, but also in countries where such an institution is extremely exclusive, such as Britain. Accordingly, referendums are being called as a means for solving political shortcomings and responding to public and party pressure.

Britain, as a parliamentary democracy, has long worked under a representative government that abides by the sovereignty of its parliament, which came to displace its monarchical rule. Under such a political apparatus, the referendum has long been perceived as an alien device to British norms. However, the referendum managed to infiltrate this complex polity and succeeded in establishing institutional recognition, thereby turning into a “vehicle for approving constitutional change” (Wright 2003, p.30). Therefore, it is vital to address the essence of such an establishment as it serves in determining the legitimacy of its outcomes. In the literature, there has always been a recurrent debate about the combination of means of direct democracy, such as referendums within the already established representative government, a combination which, in most cases, was believed to be problematic. Accordingly, in the case of the UK, this combination gains further complications due to the sovereignty of the British parliament. Nevertheless, recent research acknowledged referendums as being rather complementary to representative democracy since it is not voters who initiate legislation but rather approve or reject proposals that have been put forward by the legislature (Qvortrup, 2015, p.7). Referendums in Britain have long been approached with vigilance and resistance. Yet, despite the governmental resistance, they managed to infiltrate the British political process in the seventies, when it was used to solve a variety of fundamental constitutional issues. It is, therefore, crucial to examine the true nature of such an establishment and its political implications, especially when considering that referendums in the UK are of an ad hoc character and mainly advisory. From this standpoint, this paper

aims at examining the British approach towards referendums and whether their practice derives from a genuine democratic pursuit or a tactical tool in the hands of the government. In this regard, we will be following a historical-analytical method using historical institutionalism as a main approach, which would help us explain how and why referendums came to play a significant and long-lasting role in British politics, thereby identifying their true nature.

Additionally, this paper aims at tracing the historical evolution of British referendum use, assess the political narratives that shaped their holding, and evaluate their implications for constitutional and democratic norms. Such a methodology allows us not only to trace the foundations for their initiation but also to determine the path dependence of referendums in the British political realm. On the other hand, following this line of analysis is necessary to identify some critical junctures within referendum use in Britain, which eventually leads us to determine their nature and function.

2. Debating Referendums, the Genesis

The British political system found its roots as a constitutional monarchical system that evolved into a representative democracy, abiding by a sovereign parliament. From a historical perspective, means of direct democracy have always been viewed as alien to such a polity. However, calls for referendums were heard as early as the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the dominance of the political parties became problematic.

The ideological groundwork for referendums was first set by the liberal constitutional theorist A.V. Dicey in the late nineteenth century. Despite his strong advocacy of parliamentary sovereignty, Dicey introduced the idea of a direct vote as a means to prevent the enactment of Irish Home Rule. On the other hand, he viewed such a mechanism as a tool to regulate the excessive power the parties had gained. Through such a process, Dicey suggested that referendums would offer a veto card to the electorate to reject proposals passed without their consent, and act as a check on the

tyranny exerted by the political parties (Dicey, 1982, p.cix). Dicey's ideological stance for referendums did not originate from a genuine democratic pursuit; even though he put forward arguments that a referendum fosters the political education of the electorate; yet, he far more conceptualised them as the strongest tool that could limit the power of the Commons in parliament. Along with the Commons, the Lords, and the Crown, Dicey sought to integrate the referendum as a fourth chamber of the sovereign parliament. Such a framework was perceived as effective in securing the supremacy of the electorate in the decision-making process.

Along with Dicey, Joseph Chamberlain also sought the introduction of a referendum institution as a means to endorse his policy of tariff reforms, as he believed that public opinion was in his favour. However, his proposals were soon dropped by Belfour's government. Nevertheless, referendum proposals reappeared shortly after, as a result of the constitutional crisis of 1909 that had been triggered by the House of Lords' rejection of Lloyd George's "people's budget". Some unionists saw in the referendum a potential solution to the crisis, which demonstrated a significant shift in attitude among certain conservative politicians around referendum use (Bogdanor, 1981, p.17). Referendums in British politics at this period represented a non-British confrontational device for decision-making, yet they were the ultimate mechanism to be deployed during constitutional and party crises. For Bogdanor, such an approach meant that the referendum "was a doctrine for politicians at odds with their party" (p.20). Accordingly, the notion of referendums in Britain at this stage demonstrated a strategic perception of the device.

This early conception of the referendum was grounded on several ideological and political conceptions. Therefore, there were two distinct opposing lines of thought to such a conception. Both supporters and opponents of the device shared some political background. First, the referendum was introduced through the liberal lenses of Dicey, who advocated his support for the device not from a liberal perspective, but rather from a conservative one. Accordingly, from positive conservative lenses, the referendum represented a tool to block radical and liberal policies. Such perceptions were rooted in the belief that, in such massive

constitutional change, the masses tend to lean toward the preservation of the status quo, whereby the urge to block Irish Home Rule through a referendum originated. However, conservative opponents of the device always feared this non-British way of doing politics, which might undermine the sovereignty of the British parliament. Even Dicey's early impression of the device stemmed from this conception, which he referred to as "one of the most dubious devices of Swiss democracy" (Qvortrup, 1999, p.532).

Secondly, the Liberal opposition to referendums was grounded on the belief that they would replace one form of conservative obstruction to their policies with another (Meadowcroft, 1990, p.46). Nevertheless, Liberal Unionists' support for the referendum was founded on the belief that some check on the government and the dominance of parties, mainly the conservatives' method of blocking radical policies, is urgently needed. It is worth noting that, regardless of these various perceptions toward referendums, a common concern was shared among all of these theorists and politicians: the ability of the electorate to make an enlightened decision. Most politicians feared that such a device would undermine the authority of parliament, as the decision-making process would be in the hands of a numerical majority, which is not well placed to form reasoned decisions the same way a representative would (Meadowcroft, 1990, p.48). Consequently, once the House of Lords crisis was resolved in 1911, calls for referendums were dropped.

The interwar period was marked by a long absence of referendum demands, which was mostly due to the settlement between the two new competing parties in government, the Conservatives and the Labour Party. For Meadowcroft, these parties "endorsed a vision of democracy in which politics was to be left to the experts: voters should pick their party, but leave government to those who knew what they were doing." (p. 57). Accordingly, when the next call for a referendum was pronounced by Winston Churchill to determine the fate of the wartime coalition, it was severely rejected. In his response, Clement Attlee argued that the referendum was "alien to our traditions" and compared it to instruments of

“Nazism” and “fascism” (Bogdanor, 1981, p.35). Hence, calls for referendums appeared to be irrelevant to the political atmosphere of this period.

3. The Birth of the Referendum Experience

As previously argued, referendum calls witnessed a remarkable absence from the political agenda during the interwar period and even after the Second World War. Therefore, as soon as the political climate began to fracture and similar parties' divisions resurfaced, the referendum reemerged as the potential solution. However, this time the division led to the first-ever wave of referendum practices, notably with Britain's first national referendum in 1975. Such a resurgence of referendums requires a thorough examination of their underlying motives, especially when considering the previous perception of the device, which, for most politicians, fell outside the British political norms.

The seventies were marked by major political unrest. A combination of fundamental concerns, political and social tensions, and divisions led the referendum to resurface to settle the malaise, yet this time, it was to be put into practice. The rising tensions and severe conflicts in Northern Ireland, which were referred to as 'The Troubles', along with the abolition of the Irish parliament in 1972, paved the way for Britain to hold its first-ever referendum to settle the situation in Northern Ireland. Initiatives for the referendum were easily carried as shortly after the parliament's abolition. Therefore, the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) published a Green Paper in which it was expressed that the future of the nation would be decided in a referendum. The smooth passage of the referendum bill in parliament suggested that the referendum carried no risks to the order of the parties or parliament. Conversely, a certain concern was raised as to their framework and their implications on the future of the British political order, echoed in parliament. However, such concerns were shortly silenced, as the referendum outcomes were known beforehand. In this regard, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland stressed that the referendum was intended to

remove the border issue from the daily political agenda (NORTHERN IRELAND (*Hansard*, 24 March 1972)).

Despite the constitutional character of the referendum, which represented a self-determination process, the referendum was marked by a very basic campaign that did not require much effort. Similarly, despite the nationalists' opposition to the referendum and their boycott policy, the referendum resulted in an overwhelming support for the union, with 98% in a 58% turnout (Torrance, 2019). Nevertheless, the Northern Ireland Border Poll set a precedent for British experience with referendums, mainly on issues revolving around devolution and self-determination.

As the referendum has now been tested and appeared to at least regulate the Irish question for a while, it was suggested to solve another major division regarding the European Market integration. Even though Britain's membership in the EEC was approved by all three major parties in 1973, the overall public and political opinion on the matter remained an inconsistent one. However, the perception regarding the use of a referendum remained highly negative. All of the major British politicians strongly opposed the idea of holding a national referendum to solve the country's problems. Even Wilson, who initiated the referendum on the European question, was just shortly before strongly against such moves, calling it "contrary to our traditions" and "not a way in which we can do business" back in 1969 (Saunders, 2018, p.64). Wilson's position was extremely strong on referendum use and appeared as an unshaken one, as in 1970, during an election broadcast, when asked about a referendum on the European question, he stressed that "I have given my answer many times... and I don't change it because the polls go either up or down...I am not going to trim to win votes on a question like that." He further supported Heath's position on the referendum, reaffirming, "I oppose a referendum... I have always done so, as he has", as for Thatcher, the referendum was "a device for dictators and demagogues" (Saunders, 2018, p.64).

Despite this strong hostility toward the referendum, the intense division around the European question made it the only tool to settle the problem. In government, both major parties were divided between pro-marketeers and

anti-marketeers. Accordingly, there was a massive pressure exerted by supporters of the device, namely Jay Douglas, Tony Benn, and the conservative backbencher Philip Goodhart, who constructed their claims on the basis that a referendum was needed in order to give membership legitimacy. Benn further reinforced his endorsement of the referendum on a democratic basis, arguing that such major decisions should not be taken without referring to the people. Under such a climate, Wilson had to shift his position completely on referendum use and pledged to hold a referendum to settle the membership problem and grant it the required legitimacy. Therefore, in January 1975, Harold Wilson announced that he would hold a referendum on Britain's continued membership in the EEC, referring to it as "a major constitutional innovation", which actually was the case. Thus, the announcement was received with heavy media scepticism, fearing its potential implications.

Wilson's announcement also raised significant concerns in parliament, mainly with regard to the constitutional implications of the outcomes. The referendum was of a consultative character, yet its outcomes were to be treated as binding. However, the Referendum Act had no specific clauses as to the functions and procedures to be taken regarding the process. It was this lack of direction that confused politicians, an aspect that led Thatcher to criticise Wilson's approach as impulsive. Nevertheless, the referendum was the centre of public and media attention, and the campaign process was rich, with the government's recommendation to remain in the market. It is worth noting that the referendum led to a notable coalition between the usually opposed parties, who joined forces in their support or opposition to the market. The referendum outcomes were quite predictable, considering the social and economic situation facing the country. Although the referendum appeared to have settled the legitimacy question around European integration, it wasn't very successful in appeasing the fragmentation in the Labour Party.

Accordingly, eighteen months after the EEC referendum, the Labour Party split again on the issue of devolution for Scotland and Wales. Several factors contributed to the urge of holding another referendum for these nations. The Scottish and Welsh MPs exerted a certain nationalist pressure

on the Labour government, which sought a devolution bill as a means to appease those claims and secure election votes in those regions. Therefore, when the Callaghan government proposed the “Democracy and Devolution Bill” in 1976 for both Scotland and Wales, it faced major objections from MPs, especially those who opposed devolution, such as Leo Abse. Thus, instead of attempting to block the devolution proposals directly, he urged his fellow MPs not to approve the bill unless a referendum clause was added. To entangle the proposal even further, a 40% threshold requirement was added to the referendum clause.

The referendum was thus a product of several political and economic crises, where it was seen as the only remedy to appease the atmosphere. Even Callaghan admitted in his memoirs that, regardless of the uncertainties that surrounded the holding of the referendum and its potential implications, it represented a set of advantages that he judged important. Therefore, he contended that the referendum “helped to distract parliamentary attention from a morbid preoccupation with the state of the economy.” Furthermore, they “secured for the government the support of Welsh and Scottish Nationalist Parties, as well as the Liberals.” (Thiec, 2008, p.13-14). Accordingly, it appeared that both Scotland and Wales were not satisfied with the devolution proposals, as despite a majority of Scottish people voting for the assembly, they fell short of the threshold requirement, and for Wales, their opposition was a solid one, with 79.7% rejecting devolution.

This first British experience of the referendum had a resentful taste, as despite the holding of three major referendums, with Britain’s first national referendum in 1975, the approach did not originate from a democratic pursuit. The social and economic atmosphere of the country paved the way to the introduction of a device long perceived with sceptical eyes and feared by politicians, who considered it alien to British norms. Nevertheless, the seventies set a precedent in referendum use in British politics. Accordingly, issues revolving around devolution or issues referring to European integration could no longer be settled without passing first by a referendum. Hence, the next series of British referendums was held on similar issues.

4. A New Labour Tool?

The landslide victory of the Labour Party in 1997 after eighteen years of Conservative government marked a new political era in Britain. Blair's third way politics brought with it a series of reforms that touched several sectors of Britain. Hence, the referendum was once again called to settle some of these reforms after a decade of absence. Once again, devolution was at the heart of referendum proposals. Therefore, for Blair, a referendum on devolution would help him preserve support for New Labour in the Midlands, Scotland, and Wales. As opposed to the devolution referendums in the 1970s, which were initiated as a result of party divisions, these were, however, part of New Labour's manifesto. Conversely, popular opinion around devolution was long settled before Blair's referendum proposals, and the Scottish electorate and even the Welsh were ready to endorse devolution. Accordingly, Duclos's (2006) research demonstrated that support for devolution had increased by 22.7% (161). Hence, it appeared that eighteen years of conservative rule were enough for these nations, and mainly Scotland, to fully embrace devolution, where the referendum was only held to further legitimise "the settled will of the people" (Denver, 2002, p.829).

Blair supported his project of constitutional reforms with a democratic background, arguing that democracy belongs to the people and is a means of modernising Britain. In this respect, his reforms aimed at raising accountability and giving the British people a say in politics via a decentralisation project. After the Scottish and Welsh devolution, Blair sought to restore the Greater London Council and add a directly elected mayor. Therefore, on the 7th of May 1998, a referendum was held asking voters if they were in favour of the government's proposals for a Greater London Authority, which was made up of a directly elected mayor and a separately elected assembly. Blair's proposals were massively endorsed by four to one. Despite being criticised for a low turnout, the referendum demonstrated voters' approval of Blair's New Labour policies during his first year in office.

In this respect, Blair's devolution program aimed at settling another major conflict that had long destabilised Northern Ireland and Britain. A successful referendum on such a matter would represent a significant

achievement for him and his party. The political and social unrest in Northern Ireland urged Blair to find an immediate way to achieve a peace process, which was later referred to as the Good Friday Agreement. Accordingly, the peace agreement was in the form of a negotiated agreement between the opposing parties, namely the Catholic nationalists and the Protestant unionists; it therefore entailed a devolved power-sharing government that would satisfy both parties. Thus, Blair sought to give it further legitimacy through a referendum. The peace process and the referendum were massively covered by the media and managed to infiltrate public discourse. It was therefore made clear by the government and all the involved parties that the referendum would not represent a win for both parties, as much as it was about bringing peace. Due to the salience of the issue, the topic of the referendum, along with its potential implications, was well known to the public via the media and the lengthy referendum campaign. Therefore, on the 22nd of May 1998, the Good Friday Agreement was endorsed by a large majority in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

The success of the Good Friday Agreement encouraged Blair to further pursue his devolution program. However, this time the initiative was held six years later. Based on a certain democratic deficit pronounced in some regions in Britain, referendum calls echoed in the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. Moreover, based on a sounding exercise held in these regions, it was revealed that there was a certain interest in holding such a referendum (Rallings and Thrasher). Consequently, the government published its White Paper for a referendum proposal, which was officialised in 2003, suggesting that a referendum on regional assemblies would be held in the regions of North East, North West, and Yorkshire and Humber. The government's proposals received major criticism on several grounds. Even though the referendum decision was supposedly based on opinion polls and a soundings exercise, yet, it was argued that there was still a majority of people in that region opposing it.

On the other hand, the power granted for these assemblies was judged as very limited and not worth all the expenses. Such a criticism was mainly

pronounced by Shadow Deputy Prime Minister David Davis, who referred to the assembly as nothing but “an expansive white elephant” (House of Commons Debates, 2003). The referendum also faced remarkable criticism in the media, which found the initiative useless, and that it was only Prescott’s idea, who insisted on holding such a referendum despite the low rate of interest in the matter (Tomaney, et.al, 2003, p.13). Consequently, the regional assembly proposals were rejected by a large majority, most of them viewing it as nothing but another expansive institution with very limited powers. On the other hand, many ongoing major constitutional issues were on hold from being settled without referring to a referendum, an aspect that boosted opponents of the regional assembly to reinforce their position.

It is fair to say from this standpoint that this new series of referendums brought with it a new approach to the device and certainly built a new foundation for its use. Hence, devolution appears to have become a constitutional matter that could no longer be solved without the holding of a referendum.

5. The Status of Referendums

Despite the massive resistance of British politicians toward the establishment of referendums, the few past experiences have set a solid foundation for their use. Although there was still no legal document that outlined when a referendum is required, these past experiences ensured that some constitutional matters could no longer be resolved without a referendum. Issues surrounding devolution or European integration policies would certainly fit in this umbrella. In this respect, the parliament established the Political Parties, Elections and Referendum Act 2000 (PPERA), which regulates the holding of elections and referendums in Britain. The Act also led to the creation of the Electoral Commission, whose mission consists of regulating the conduct of referendums under the PERPA rules.

Under such regulations, the referendum managed to become a permanent institution in Britain and part of its constitution. However, there was still a

massive ambiguity regarding the holding of a referendum, its potential advantages and inconveniences, what issues would require a referendum and which would not, and their interaction with the already established representative system. From this standpoint, the House of Lords committee attempted to address all of these inquiries as a way of settling regulations around referendum use, taking oral and written evidence from a wide selection of politicians, academics, and specialists. The committee covered a detailed analysis of referendum use, addressed its advantages and its potential implications; thus, it was concluded that the referendum should be reserved for matters of fundamental constitutional character. Hence, considering the unwritten status of the British constitution, it was very critical to judge what issues would fall under that category. The committee, however, suggested some constitutional areas where the use of a referendum would be more appropriate. Yet, since there was no legal document to enlist them, the triggering of the referendum remained a tool in the government and parliament's hands.

This was shortly to be exhibited in the next referendum that was held in 2011 on the Alternative Vote. Although the then Prime Minister David Cameron and his party were strongly opposed to such moves, they were forced to surrender to the Liberal Democrats' referendum demands, out of the coalition bargain. Consequently, the government introduced the *Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill* in July 2010, urging the holding of a post-legislative binding referendum. The referendum campaign was rather timid and failed at explaining the potential implications of the Alternative Vote. In addition, the campaign did not receive noticeable media coverage, considering the timing of the referendum, which coincided with other ongoing local elections and the Royal Wedding, which was the centre of media attention. The Alternative Vote was strongly rejected, and the whole referendum was as in the words of Lundberg and Steven (2013), a reflection of politicians' personal interests, who were seeking constitutional change through cos-benefit calculations (p.18).

It is worth arguing that even though the Alternative Vote falls under the category of fundamental constitutional issues, as it touches a change in the electoral system in the House of Commons, one of the areas listed in the Lords committee report, its initiation was rather tactical and out of a coalition bargain. However, the next referendum experience resulted from a long governmental process held by the SNP, and represented a significant change for the UK government, as for the first time, a UK nation was seeking independence. Such a massive constitutional change would definitely fall under the fundamental constitutional issues that require a referendum.

The SNP had long stated its intentions for such a process from the perspective of self-determination. After a series of consecutive proposals in 2005, 2006, 2007, and 2010, the SNP managed to put into practice its initiative for a pre-legislative consultative independence referendum after its majority win in parliament in 2011. Despite the difficulties faced, the referendum was legally authorised through the Edinburgh Agreement and two main acts (the Scottish Referendum Act and the Franchise Act). What marked the referendum process this time was its transparency with the public, interest groups, and the media. Such procedures demonstrate, according to Tierney (2013), how regulations can foster deliberative participation of the citizens (1). On the other hand, the long process of the referendum legislation and even the campaign granted it more legitimacy and clarity, unlike the Alternative Vote, which suffered from a small time frame that did not allow enough clarity about the issue at hand.

The Scottish referendum campaign was very lengthy and informative, and was mainly marked by the involvement of several independent organisations, which spread awareness about the issue at hand and gathered support for both sides of the debate. Similarly, media coverage was also very lengthy and covered all the main areas related to the referendum issue. Therefore, even though independence was rejected by voters, the Scottish referendum process sets the example of how referendums should be approached. At this point, the status of referendums in Britain is a solid, permanent one, especially on issues related to Europe or devolution, yet their operational framework remains a questionable one. In this respect, the

latest British referendum experience strongly supports such an argumentation.

When arguing that the Scottish referendum sets an example on how referendums should be approached, the Brexit Referendum of 2016 clearly states the opposite. Considered as one of the most controversial political events, the Brexit referendum came as a result of deep and long division around the question of Europe since the 1990s. Cameron's impulsive decision to hold an in/out referendum on EU membership resulted from a massive pressure exerted by Eurosceptic MPs within his party, along with his overconfidence in reproducing the 1975 scenario and settling the EU question on his agenda. In his Bloomberg Speech, Cameron stressed the massive discontent regarding the EU and illustrated his intention of renegotiating membership terms, which he will reinforce with an in/out referendum. Therefore, he concluded his speech by emphasizing that "Britain's national interest is best served in a flexible, adaptable, and open European Union, and that such European Union is best with Britain in it." (Cameron, 2013). Cameron's announcement was severely criticised, as according to former Chancellor Ken Clarke, Cameron's commitment was "reckless and irresponsible" (Burton, 2021, p.104).

Several factors contributed to the rise of controversies surrounding Brexit even before the referendum. The socio-economic problems that were surrounding Britain, along with the massive Eurosceptic environment that had been intensified by UKIP and also the British Eurosceptic media, led Cameron's approach to be a failure even before the start of the referendum process. It is also worth noting that social media provided a strong persuasive platform for these Eurosceptics to promote their position. On the other hand, the timing of the referendum was remarkably short for Cameron to negotiate the deal he envisaged and persuade his electorate to endorse it. Conversely, such short timing paved the way for populist actors and Eurosceptics to spread misinformation around the EU and shape public opinion.

The Brexit case further demonstrates the unhealthy approach toward referendums. Despite falling under the category of fundamental

constitutional issues, the Brexit referendum was a product of impulsive commitment and poor legislation, which has been further violated by a misleading campaign and controversial media coverage.

CONCLUSION

As a constitutional monarchy that works under a sovereign parliament, Britain struggled to embrace direct means of democracy such as referendums. Ideally, referendums are a means to include popular opinion in policy-making through a process of education and deliberation that would promote democratic legitimacy. However, the British approach toward the device has always been founded on scepticism and vigilance. For British politicians, the referendum falls outside the British political norms and would undermine the sovereignty of the British parliament. Although referendum calls were echoed as early as the late nineteenth century, their practice faced major resistance. Thus, early referendum conceptions were founded on a conservative perspective, where referendums would serve as a means of preserving the status quo.

Based on our historical analysis, two distinct cases can be outlined for referendum use in Britain. The first case was to settle major party pressure and divisions, as was the case with the 1975 EEC referendum, devolution in 1979, and even the Brexit referendum. In this case, the referendum was perceived as a remedy to internal party divisions and a way to reach consensus between the opposing parties. The second case deals with targeted governmental policies, where referendums are part of party manifestos or governmental strategies to reach some desired policies. Such an approach was highly observed during the second massive wave of referendums in the 1990s, where the series of referendums served to further legitimise Blair's New Labour government, or during the Alternative Vote referendum, when the referendum was triggered for coalition purposes.

Therefore, referendum use in both cases tends to cover the same constitutional areas, mainly devolution, which represents the modern version of the Irish Home Rule concept that saw the integration of the referendum in political debate for the first time during the late nineteenth century. The second area deals mainly with trade policies and Britain's

external relations, most notably with Europe. This was observed during referendum calls in the early twentieth century over tariff reforms and the first national referendum on continued membership with the EEC, and the Brexit referendum. Under such circumstances, it is fair to say that the initial motive for holding referendums after decades of resistance was not a genuine democratic pursuit but rather, they were approached as a tactical option to solve some governmental controversies.

As demonstrated through our historical-institutional lenses, the referendum was put into practice in times when the government was either not willing to address some of its responsibilities or sought public support to endorse its policies. Similarly, it is also worth noting that referendums came into practice in a period of significant partisan de-alignment, when parties started to lose public support. From a comparative perspective, referendum calls were successfully shut down in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when party identification was at its peak; however, when such an identification started to erode, the referendum seemed as the perfect tool to gain public support. Accordingly, during the first referendum practice in the 1970s, both Conservative and Labour parties registered their lowest percentage of votes since the war (Saunders, 2018, p.71), a factor that explains why the government was finally ready to embrace referendums. On the other hand, it is crucial to note that even though referendum use has become more institutionalised and its character more constitutional, yet, their operational framework remains questionable. In light of the several controversies that resulted from their use, it is fair to observe that the initial shortcoming within referendum practice resides in the very first motive for their initiation. Instead of promoting democratic participations, referendums in Britain remain an elite mechanism to be triggered for purely tactical purposes and serve as, in the words of Atkinson and Blick, as “a means to end” (p.25).

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