Referendum – a political hot potato?

By Pritish Gupta, January 15, 2019

Could there be another EU referendum? Labour Party calls the second referendum on Brexit an ‘option for the future’. Is democratic deficit the kingpin of all the ‘wicked problems’ engulfing the world today and is referendum the antidote to it? These thoughts keep on weaving among the disenchanted electorate and populists become the weaver. Referendums appear alluring as it reduces challenging questions to a binary choice of ‘yes’ or ‘no’. The starry-eyed people throng to the polling stations & anxiously wait for the results with hope in their eyes and placards in their hands. Those painted faces and colored strands of hair can evoke passionate hosannas from even the staunchest of critics. It’s an emotional roller coaster. Referendums propel people’s frustration with the establishment who have become jaded, complaining of exclusion from politics & who want to be heard. No doubt, hustings is a common sight today often resembling a jacquerie.

Referendums, often regarded as a political tool of decision making has been rustling for a while and the reason for much debate. The year 2016 witnessed a surprising British vote to leave the European Union. Few months later Colombia voted to reject the peace deal between the government & the guerrillas of the FARC to end the civil conflict. A referendum in Hungary produced a 98% vote to reject European Union’s role to allow for settlement of refugees in the country. Independence referendums also gained traction with Catalan independence referendum and Scottish referendum also contributing to the already coiled up European politics. A referendum may prove useful to ensure a base of political support for a controversial issue which has forced a gridlock in the country’s political sphere. Referendums are conducted to engage those with significant low level of information about the issues plaguing the country. The voter may also fall victim to the false information fueled by political actors trying to gain political capital within the system. What shapes the behavior of the voters in the referendum?

Slacktivism is surely leading the pack with the youth enfranchisement on the rise who is seen as the one & only democratic voice. The social media triumvirate is enough to create a storm in the teacup. The political discourse has become so coarse in today’s polarized world that the politest of dinner parties can turn us hot under the collar. The science of decision making undoubtedly forays in these unchartered waters. Cognitive bias suggest that when it comes to decision making, people tend to go with the default situation. With the British referendum results that preferred the ‘leave’ camp, this certainly went against the preference of status-quo bias. Even in the Scottish independence referendum, polls leaned towards an exit, but the ‘No’ camp stealed the show. The possible reason the bias is so powerful is that we are inherently more motivated to minimize loss than to
maximize gain. Behavioral science has found our gut instinct & emotions often shape our decisions & we then look for reasons or facts to back it up. In case of EU referendum, the word pair of ‘Remain/Leave’ also played a key role. ‘Remain’ carries a higher cognitive load to process the information. ‘Leave’ worked better as it required less work for the information to process for the voter.

Today, everyone has a political opinion & considers referendum as an expressive vote. They do not vote like ‘Spock’. But does giving a population the chance to give their views lead to a more informed voting public? French President Emmanuel Macron said soon after the Brexit results; ‘thorny issues cannot be resolved with a simple yes or no answers, & the public shouldn’t be asked to distill their opinion into that binary’. A study showed that the excitement leading up to a referendum does engage citizens more in political dialogue, but doesn’t necessarily make that dialogue fruitful. Referendums can lead to further polarization & can channel the naked politics of hate. Democratic recession can be improved upon by reviewing what roles referendums can play in our system. They could be made better with prior deliberations & preparation. The recent referendums in Ireland on abortion & same-sex marriage can prove to be a good example of how they can be made better off. Prior to the referendum there was a thoughtful & balanced debate with considerable inputs from the public, overcoming the problem of ‘information asymmetry’. Clarity about the outcomes involving all the stakeholders can be the basis of a successful referendum.

With United Kingdom on the cusp of a second referendum, things are looking topsy-turvy. With the Parliament set to vote on the Brexit deal this week, it could prove to be a defining moment for British politics. If the vote gets rejected, it could be a harbinger of uncertainty. In the event of loss of vote, Labour Party has vowed for a vote of no confidence in the government. Parliament can also take back the control if the deal is defeated. The chances of a second referendum are quite bleak but not out of question. Conservative MP’s are been heckled outside the Parliament by the people who voted to ‘leave’ as they are feeling betrayed. Whether it would be a ‘hard’ Brexit or a ‘soft’ one is the question that has been on the cards ever since the votes were casted. With the EU not being that flexible in its approach, we are looking at a very lengthy process of withdrawal from the EU. The impression of this embroiling crisis erodes the trust in democracy. Referendums cannot be the easy solution politicians are looking for. Direct democracy may not be that ‘direct’. To make it more effective, the Swiss system where referendums are quite common can be followed. Information pamphlets are produced with detailed information about the issue at hand as well as the procedure to vote. Referendums are planned in advance. The dates for the upcoming ones have been set up till 2034. Referendums do offer us ‘paradise’ but they might also upset the apple-cart. Referendums should be treated with kid gloves rather than a simple yin or yang.

Pritish Gupta is a student of M.A. International Affairs (Diplomacy, Law and Business) at Jindal School of International Affairs at O P Jindal Global University.