



A referendum about Europe? Who cares?

There's not much that's clear so far in the referendum, but one thing that looks pretty certain is that the campaign has yet to catch the public's interest fully. Indeed, it might not be exaggerated to say that most people don't really care.

There are various reasons for this. Firstly, the EU has not been an issue of significant public interest for over a decade: as much as it has motivated Tory MPs and Eurosceptic activists, as much it has bored the wider population. Secondly, and related to this, levels of knowledge about the EU remain low, which acts as a disincentive to engage with substantive points of debate. Finally, this is a very long campaign: it has been set in train by Cameron's general election success last May and already has been a possibility over several years.

In short, people don't care, don't understand and don't feel a sense of urgency.

Of course, as we close in on 23 June, more people will become interested and engaged. However, the question will be whether this is a big or a small effect.

Why does this matter? Because a referendum needs participation! There is a democratic need for participation in a mechanism that is precisely designed to let people have a voice. Whatever the outcome, if it is based on a low turnout, then it robs that decision of much of its legitimacy. Since politicians have decided that they cannot make the decision themselves, it falls to the citizenry to take that role.

Moreover, turnout looks more and more to be the crucial factor in this referendum: the polling strongly suggests that the higher that turnout, the more likely a Remain vote will be. At the same time, despite Cameron's European Council deal, Boris Johnson's coming-out or other events, the polls have not moved much over the last weeks. Which looks good for the Remain camp. But of course, the flip side of this is that if turnout can be raised, and "Leave" still win, then Leave's legitimacy will be all the stronger.

If a referendum needs participation, but people don't care much, the question is how you get significant public engagement. Engagement would not only be good for democracy, but also for the consolidation of a clearer British policy towards the EU, which has long floundered on a lack of obvious objectives.

If we assume that there will not be a spontaneous engagement by most people, then something needs to happen to make engagement look attractive. Here it's helpful to think about this in terms of positive and negative drivers.

On the positive side, we might have the arrival of a strong voice into the debate, who fuels a lot of public interest. However, even writing that sentence highlights the difficulty: we've already shot our bolts on Boris, Blair, Obama, Clarkson and even the Queen, so it's not going to be anyone you've heard of.

Likewise, the structural inability of the "Leave" campaign to settle on a single, clear plan for post-membership and the indifference of "Remain" to strategise how they will continue to promote British interests within the EU mean that the scope of a positive referendum agenda also looks slim.

Negative drivers seem more likely. The reaction to external voices – essentially, "butt out of *our* debate" – illustrates this well, where debate is not valued *per se*, but only within a heavily gate-kept national framework. The things that are more likely to cut through are negative articulations of fears or risks.

Partly, that comes from the wider environment. An EU facing another summer of the migrant crisis, weak Eurozone economic performance, aggressive Russian posturing, awkward Turkish and TTIP negotiations, and assorted populist challenges within member states looks a lot like a recipe for multiple negative headlines. Worse still, those potential points of weakness or failure would go straight to challenging what limited legitimacy the EU has, based on its outputs.

Making that even more difficult, both sides in the campaign might be tempted to push negative claims about each other. While Leave might have an embarrassment of riches in extrapolating from the EU's failures, so too can Remain make hay from the contradictions that arise from the multiple alternative futures offered outside the EU. Whatever one thinks of "Project Fear" type agendas, shock stories do have some media value. It's not hard to imagine pieces about either outcome will "Destroy the NHS!", "Cripple the Economy!", "Mean the End of the British Countryside as We Know It!", and the rest.

To some extent, all of these things are already out there. But drivers of debate can only go so far if they lack receptive audiences. The danger is then that the only things that matter are those that occur in the final couple of weeks: given the extent of the long-term ramifications of the decision, that looks rather careless, both on the part of politicians and on the part of citizens.

Best Wishes, Simon.