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EDITORIAL

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# Cleavage Referendums: Ideological Decisions and Transformational Political Change

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## Abstract

Referendum use has been increasing around the world. In some cases, referendum devices are incorporated into the institutional architecture of the state while in many others, referendums are used in an *ad hoc*, and often consultative manner, to determine positions on contentious and divisive political questions. Many of the divisive referendum questions are what we term "cleavage referendums" in this thematic issue. These referendums ask questions that draw from underlying cleavages or fault lines in politics. Voting in these referendums will often exhibit first-order effects, as voters make decisions that align with their fundamental values and beliefs. The articles in this issue make three important contributions to enrich existing work on referendums: The first contribution lies in the development of new conceptual models for analysing referendums, such as new forms of classifying cleavage referendums, presenting a predictive model for the outcomes of referendum votes, and documenting and applying methodological approaches and frameworks that can provide the foundations for further future comparative work. The second contribution builds on the burgeoning literature that sits at the intersection of deliberative and direct democracy. In this sense, the articles interrogate examples of deliberative and participatory innovations in combination with referendum votes, while also examining their further potential, especially in one of the most contentious referendum contexts, secession. Finally, the role of cleavage structures in shaping voter decision-making is explored thoroughly in comparative analyses and single case studies.

## Keywords

cleavage referendums; ideology; political cleavages; referendum campaigns; referendum voting; referendums

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## 1. Introduction

Referendums can be viewed through the prism of a hierarchy, some ask voters to decide on minor matters of policy and administrative design while others are deeply consequential and require voters to make decisions on questions of high politics, such as sovereignty and the boundaries of the state, on the nature of citizenship, and on the fundamental values and beliefs which underpin society and politics. These latter referendums share an important unifying feature, they draw from deep ideological divides and can be classified as "cleavage referendums" in the vein of Lipset and Rokkan (1967). Referendums that intersect with political cleavages often define and transform politics for long periods of time, they exhibit first-order effects in voting (Garry et al., 2005; Suiter & Reidy, 2020), and voters make decisions that align with their fundamental values and beliefs. Often, these are the referendum votes that "go global": Brexit in the UK, independence votes in Scotland, Quebec, and Catalonia, and votes on issues like migration, abortion, divorce, and same-sex marriage in Poland, Ireland, and Australia.

Political science has developed several "grand theories" of voting at elections and these have been used to great effect to build a global base of understanding of why people vote, who they vote for, and for what reasons. One of the challenges that besets the study of voting at referendums is that there is a more modest conceptual toolkit available to underpin comparative research but we could also make greater use of the central concepts of political behaviour to form more integrated strands of research on the conduct of, and voting at, different types of referendums. This editorial makes the argument that cleavage dynamics manifest in many of the most consequential referendums that take place within states and using this lens to approach the study of referendums allows us to expand the explanatory power of our research, building connections and identifying differences across time and cases. Cleavage structures provide the predictable bedrock of voters in many referendums and oftentimes we do not pay enough attention to this in our voting models.

The argument in this editorial builds from, and isolates, a central element of LeDuc's (2002) model on the determinants of stability and change in referendum voting. Social cleavages, ideology, and core beliefs, overlapping and interconnected concepts, were identified by LeDuc as the core features that should lead to stability in voting patterns at referendums. It is this corner of his referendum classification system that is the focus of this thematic issue.

The literature on the declining relevance of cleavages to election outcomes is well-developed and does not need to be traversed here. In many respects, some referendums draw in much more direct ways from cleavages than elections ever did. Referendums ask a single question that often explicitly arises from a major political fault line or cleavage. Elections in the 21st century rarely draw exclusively from a single contested political space even taking account of expanded social divisions and "new cleavages" (Kriesi, 1998). This thematic issue presents a collection of articles that seek to unpack many of the dynamics that are particular to cleavage referendums rooted in the deep value and belief divisions in a polity.

## 2. This Thematic Issue

### *2.1. Grand Theories*

Quinlan et al. (2025) provide the first article in the collection and the research is notable in two important respects: First, the authors take up the challenge of expanding the conceptual toolbox of referendum research to facilitate more robust cross-national and longitudinal analysis of referendum outcomes. Their referendum forecasting model includes historical, institutional, and economic factors to predict referendum outcomes. Secondly, the research is valuable because the forecasting model works! It has strong predictive power, and as the authors argue, rivals opinion polls in its ability to predict referendum outcomes. This finding is especially important as the model was tested on 42 constitutional referendums in Ireland, which covered a wide variety of topics and was not confined to cleavage referendums alone which, as some of the later articles in this issue argue, are among the more predictable in terms of referendum outcomes.

### *2.2. The Deliberative Turn*

Turning to the second strand of research in this issue, it is widely acknowledged that the connection of direct and deliberative democratic traditions has immense potential to enhance citizen voice in politics (Reidy & Suiter, 2023). This point is picked up in several articles which advance the argument that the deliberative turn is especially relevant for cleavage referendums. These types of referendums frequently address fraught and intensely contested matters of politics, culture, and society and, as Levy (2025) argues, deliberative innovations have considerable potential to moderate the intensity of the contestation.

Secession referendums are perhaps the most typical example of cleavage referendums drawing as they do from beliefs about state sovereignty and the boundaries of the state. Levy (2025) begins by asking the most fundamental question: When should secession referendums be triggered? The author argues that the answer lies not in legal theories of "primary right" and "remedial right" but in the burgeoning potential of deliberative approaches to political decision-making. Levy interrogates roles for mini-publics, deliberative negotiation, and ultimately deliberative referendums to deliver more thoughtful and inclusive mechanisms for making secession decisions.

Paredes et al. (2025) ask the question: What is the best procedural combination to take when approaching constitutional change? The article directly compares the routes to, and the conduct of, referendums in Chile and Ireland. In the Chilean case, participatory tools were connected with constitutional referendums while the Irish case involved the integration of citizens assemblies into the early stages of discussions on whether a referendum should be triggered. Using a three-part analytical framework, the article concludes that successful procedural combinations must create deliberative space which enhances the potential for consensus decision-making and mitigates against elite polarisation. It also argues that one of the critical advantages of a deliberative assembly lies in its generation of topic resources that reflect the different strands of the arguments on the issue and the views of citizens representing the public. Although the article does also acknowledge that in the Irish case, some recent referendums have been unsuccessful so the deliberative turn is a work in progress.

### 2.3. Explaining Voter Decision-Making

How cleavages underpin voting behaviour is a theme in four of the articles. Secession is again to the fore in Rivera Otero et al.'s (2025) examination of the role of emotions in shaping voter decision-making at the controversial 2017 referendum on Catalan independence. The authors persuasively connect the underpinning nationalist cleavage structure of the referendum to distinct emotional profiles among pro-secession and anti-secession voters. Those who favoured Catalan independence were motivated by pride and hope in the political leaders on their side, while anti-secession voters expressed anger, concern, fear, and anxiety towards those leaders. Importantly, emotion was a more significant factor in shaping decisions on the pro-Catalan independence side.

Referendums on abortion, same-sex marriage, and other issues that draw from deeply held values and belief systems have become more common in recent decades. Most particularly, some populist nationalist leaders have sought to use these types of referendums to mobilise conservative voter groups. Musiał-Karg and Casal Bértoa (2025) explore elements of this specific dynamic using the case of the 2023 referendums on sovereignty, retirement, and migration in Poland. They present "populist polarizing referendums" as a new referendum type and one that sits at the intersection of cleavages, populism, and partisanship. Their argument is convincing. They demonstrate that the Polish government sought to use the 2023 referendums to polarize public opinion by holding referendums on emotive issues that connected into deep political cleavages which intersected in important ways with the dynamics of party competition. While this strategy had been successfully deployed by other populist regimes, notably Hungary, they further demonstrate that strategic positioning by opposition parties and depoliticization delivered an important defeat for the government. Ultimately, they conclude that it is not a given that referendums that draw from cleavages are guaranteed to polarise and divide.

Using valuable cross-national data, Hutter (2025) also argues that referendums do not always drive cultural conflict and lead to more polarised or identity-focused debates. The author demonstrates that referendums expand actor participation in debates on major issues and that they also serve to increase the salience of the issue being decided. The article also makes an important methodological contribution in that it has a comparative focus on European integration referendums and, in its use of "text as data" techniques, provides a model for future cross-national analyses.

Cunningham et al. (2025) delve also into referendums on moral and social issues in their examination of the Irish abortion referendum in 2018. This referendum has been much discussed in the literature as an early example of the success of the deliberative turn in referendums (Elkink et al., 2020) but, in this instance, the authors temper the potential deliberative claims as they demonstrate that the outcome reflected the longer-term inversion of the conservative–liberal cleavage in Ireland. The referendum campaign was important in that it mobilised voters to cast their ballots, but opinion formation was rooted in the underpinning cleavage structure and there was limited evidence of opinion change during the referendum campaign or even in the long lead into the referendum decision.

The 2018 Irish abortion referendum runs in a somewhat contrary direction to the global trend, in that the outcome of the referendum was a major liberalisation of abortion provision on the back of a large majority and a comparatively high turnout of voters. The importance of religious and other value cleavages lies also at

the core of Morales and Pérez-Cosgaya's (2025) examination of the 2022 constitutional referendums in Chile. They demonstrated that the "reject" decision was substantially rooted in the socio-structural and socio-political cleavages which define Chilean politics. In particular, they point to the salience of abortion for Evangelical voters. The insertion of a liberal clause on abortion in the proposed new constitution was an important mobilising factor against the constitutional draft for the comparatively large cohort of religious voters in Chile.

Finally, given that the EU has been a central driver of referendums in Europe for many years, it is unsurprising that EU integration referendums feature in several of the articles in this thematic issue. Paulissen et al. (2025) take up the question of how a referendum on a cleavage-related topic can affect the definition of that cleavage within a polity. Using a case study of the 2022 Danish defence referendum, the authors provide decisive empirical evidence that the pro-side sought to depoliticise the European integration cleavage aspect of the Danish defence opt-out during the campaign. Undoubtedly, heavily influenced by the Russian war in Ukraine, campaigners were able to mobilise majority support in favour of the abolition of the opt-out, in an outcome that ran contrary to the longstanding trajectory of that political fault line. The article is also notable for its important methodological contribution and use of social media advertising data to look inside the black box of digital campaigning and its connection to referendum outcomes.

## 3. Conclusions

The articles in this collection have contributed to three important threads of referendum research: First, in the development of new theories which can be used further in comparative and longitudinal analyses. Second, by exploring the growing combination of deliberative institutions with referendums, especially on cleavage style issues. And, third, by exploring how cleavages shape voter decision-making. In some respects, this thematic issue has demonstrated that cleavages retain potentially greater explanatory power at referendums than they do at first-order elections. Finally, although cleavage referendums are infrequent, when they are held, they can have system-defining impacts.

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## Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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