

The recent use of referendums in European representative democracies (Hungary 2016, UK 2016, Catalonia 2017) has highlighted fears regarding populism, but also led to greater interest in direct democracy. In general, popular votes are often uncontroversial, but those that generate significant attention and polarise voters often show 1) high participation and 2) a close outcome (small margin). To highlight such votes, we combine both characteristics into a polarisation score which is related to the Gini inequality index.

Using data from Switzerland, a country with direct-democratic features, we apply this score to the last hundred years' worth of referendums, highlighting the most polarising votes of each decade. Summarising values by their maximum leads to a well-developed mathematical theory in many situations, and we use results from Extreme Value Theory to study the probability and time to recurrence of a Brexit-sized event in Switzerland.

The results indicate that events equally or more polarising than the 2016 UK referendum are quite frequent. However, 'populist' uses of referendums remain a common feature even in a country with a long tradition of direct democracy.