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# FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

## 1. Taking Responsibility

A referendum allows a government and political parties to avoid taking responsibility for making a difficult decision. Discuss this statement.

## 2. Yes or No?

Plebiscites and referendums boil down complex issues into a simple yes or no binary. Are all issues in life simple, two-sided matters? Or is life more complex?

## 3. Emotion vs. Reason

Our emotions can sometimes get in the way of reason and rational decision-making. For example, if a particularly egregious murder case was front-page news, it would be a poor time to hold a referendum on the death penalty.

What kinds of issues should not be decided by referendums?

## 4. National Identity and Sovereignty

Philosopher Roger Scruton believes that matters of national identity and sovereignty can only be decided by the people whose identity or sovereignty are at stake. This belief is why major constitutional changes and independence movements are usually decided by referendums.

However, a referendum may not resolve an issue of identity. For example, when the United Kingdom held their “Brexit” referendum on whether or not to leave the European Union, the leave side won with a slim majority. Because the result was close, many people felt the issue was not settled. Political parties were divided, and many people demanded a second referendum.

Are some issues so big and so divisive that they should require a “super majority” of well over 50% to pass?

## 5. Leading Questions

Sometimes the question asked in a referendum or a plebiscite can be problematic. For example, Quebec’s 1992 sovereignty referendum asked voters:

*Do you agree that Quebec should become sovereign, after having made a formal offer to Canada for a new economic and political partnership, within the scope of the bill respecting the future of Quebec and of the agreement signed on June 12, 1995?*

Research has shown that people are more likely to respond “Yes” to a question that begins with “Do you agree.” A better question would have asked “Should Quebec become sovereign?”

Why must a referendum question be as clear as possible?

## 6. Good and Bad Political Decisions

In his book *Too Dumb for Democracy?* political scientist David Moscrop defined what makes a bad and a good political decision.

### **A Bad Political Decision**

*A bad political decision is one driven by bias, poor or incorrect information, or hidden motives. It is a decision that is often made on instinct, without research or reflection — the sort of decision we are likely to rationalize in the face of challenge or questioning. And it is something we are all prone to do. (23)*

### **A Good Political Decision**

*A good political decision is rational (informed, coherent, and consistent) and autonomous (the person knows why they made it and can explain their reasoning to you). We make good political decisions when we have enough good information to work with, the time and resources to sort through it, and the skills to work through what we want and why we want it. A good political decision also includes the ability to explain our reasoning to ourselves and to others. It's not enough to say just because, at least not if we want to meet the standards of a democracy in which we treat one another as citizens worthy of respect. (25-26)*

Do you trust the general public to make good political decisions?

## 7. Democratic Miracle Machine?

In the public debate surrounding Saskatchewan's *Referendum and Plebiscite Act*, an April 21, 1991 editorial in the *Regina Leader-Post* said:

*The referendum and plebiscite mechanism may be a response to the times, but let no one presume it will be a democratic miracle machine.*

Discuss this statement.