



COUNTDOWN TO BREXIT



THE END OF THE ARTICLE 50 PERIOD

The challenges for the major parties as the Article 50 period comes to an end

In a matter of months the United Kingdom is scheduled to leave the European Union. The calls from both sides of the political divide have been growing for a public vote, or “people’s vote”, as it has been labelled.

Our partnership with Demos during the party conference season has tried to answer the question ‘If not Leave, what?’ - or more pointedly, how can the parties best navigate their own voters’ demands as the Article 50 period comes to an end.

What both major political parties have been left with, especially since Article 50 was triggered, is a political landscape that has become realigned quite firmly along the Brexit battle lines from 2016. The Conservative Party, which has always had a strong lead amongst Leavers, now seems to rely on its Brexit contingent to sustain its polling numbers. Labour, on the other hand, has become the home of Remain voters even if the party leadership seems unable or unwilling to commit to them.

On one hand this leaves us with the Conservative Party bring together committed Leavers and pragmatic Remainers. On the other we see Labour straddling disaffected Remainers and a group of anti-Tory Leavers.



LABOUR AND THE BREXIT MUDDLE

Labour’s unclear response to the government’s Brexit plan will only sustain the party for so long

Labour Remainers know they have a second home in the Liberal Democrats

Although it is clear that Labour’s voter base is made up predominantly of Remainers (by a factor of two to one), the party has collected these voters seemingly by accident or by default. Despite the party’s relatively strong polling performance compared with its pre-Brexit figures, the way Labour has won this group of voters makes the party vulnerable.

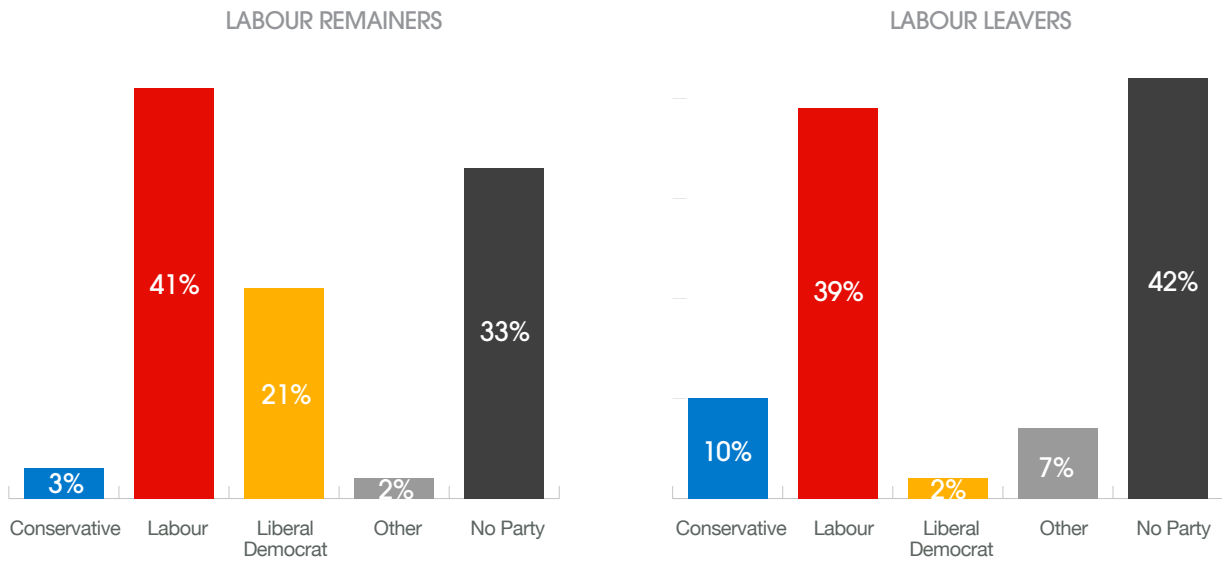
Just over a third (36%) of Labour Remainers would switch to the Liberal Democrats if they thought they had a better chance of stopping Brexit.

This rises to almost half (47%) if you test likelihood to switch to another pro-European party that could stop Brexit.

On the actual issue of Europe, Labour is relatively safe amongst its own Leaver contingent: Labour has a four-to-one lead over the Tories on Europe amongst its pro-Brexit voter group (39% to 10%). This cannot be said about the party’s larger chunk of Remainers, where the party’s lead over the Lib Dems is barely two-to-one (41% to 21%). In short, while Labour Leavers don’t have an obvious second home on the Brexit issue, their Remain faction does, and these voters seem to be aware that more than one party could reflect their Brexit vision. This isn’t helped by Labour Remainers being slightly more likely to select Brexit as an important issue than Labour Leavers (37% vs 32% respectively).



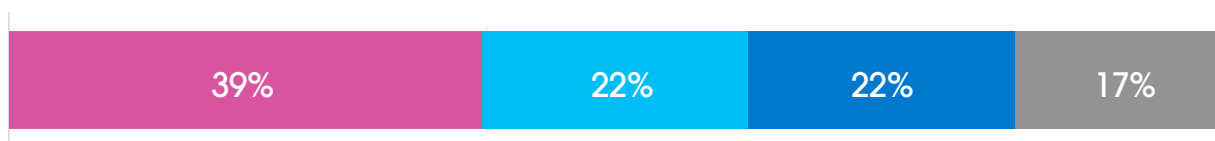
Which party do you trust most to lead the Brexit negotiations?



Those opposed to Brexit don't think Labour is really on the same page

The fight going on within the Shadow Cabinet is whether or not to respond to their voters' loudest demands. We asked Labour voters what they thought the party's Brexit policy should be: 39% said the party should fight to remain in the EU, while 44% said the party should still back Brexit – with that contingent evenly divided between those wanting Labour to back a soft Brexit (22%) or a hard Brexit (22%).

What would you like Labour's Brexit policy to be?



What do you think Labour's policy on Brexit is?



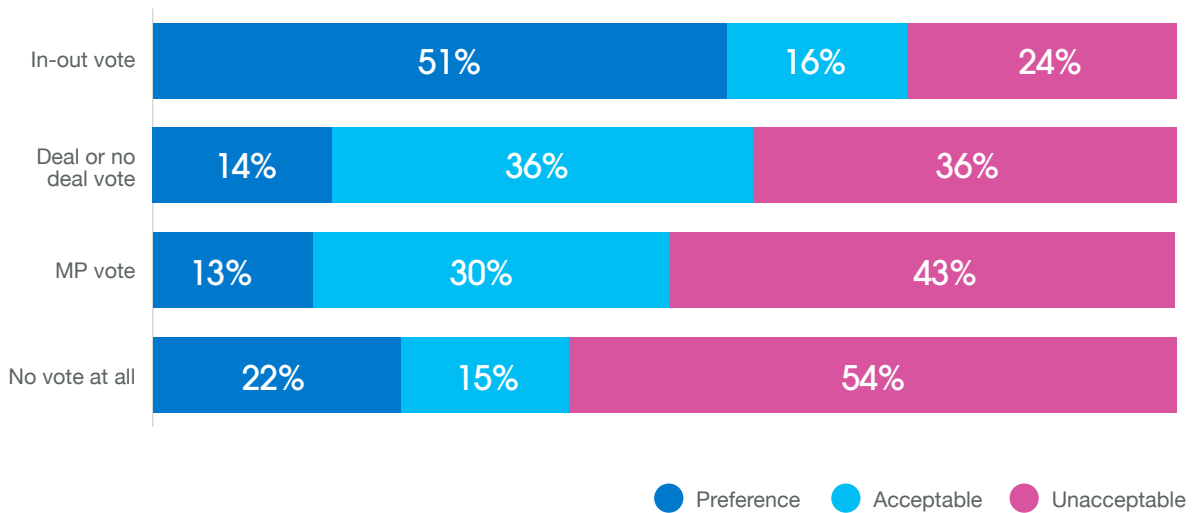
● To Remain ● Soft Brexit ● Hard Brexit ● Don't Know

The problem for Labour is that its largest coherent group, that 39% who want the party to keep the UK in the European Union, don't think the party is on the same page. Just over two fifths (43%) of this group think Labour is still leading them out of the EU, while only 35% think the party is fighting for what they believe in.

A second vote could force the party's divisions to the surface

A second vote is where the party's divisions are most likely to bubble to the surface. With all of the findings up until now, it might not be surprising that an in-out vote is the preferred next step for 51% of Labour voters now we know what deal the UK has from the EU. But for a quarter (24%) of Labour voters a new in-out referendum is unacceptable.

Labour voters' preference on a new vote



Labour's dilemma is that the nearer we get to Brexit, the more likely its Remain voters will demand some action in return for their support. But if Labour does give that leadership it will only help them to hold onto those Remainers they won by default and is unlikely to win them new voters from the Leave camp. There is also no guarantee it won't push away the minority in its party who are ultimately pro-Brexit but who have simply not had to engage with Labour's policy on it until now.

Finally, if Labour comes out more clearly in favour of stopping Brexit, it could also serve to galvanize the Conservative's pro-Leave base without Theresa May having to bend to them any further. With politics so heavily divided, the party with a lead in the polls is often the party with the more enthused or more determined voters, and clear opposition could paradoxically bolster the government.

CONSERVATIVES WEDDED TO BREXIT

Leave voters' support for the Tories is entirely conditional on Brexit happening, but what happens once the UK is outside of the EU?

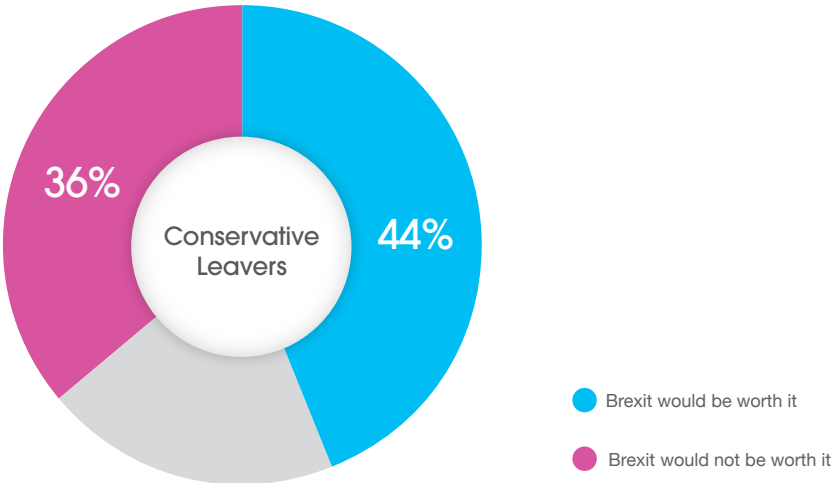
Leavers are more dedicated to Brexit than the party they support

In comparison to Labour's rather complex coalition, the Conservatives have become reliant on their pro-Brexit contingent. Before Chequers, the Conservatives had a lead in the polls for a couple of months. It was only after Chequers and several Brexiteer MPs resigned calling the plan a 'betrayal' that Leavers started straying back to UKIP. It's in that context that our poll found that if they were to vote in another general election today 82% of Remainers who voted for the Tories in 2017 would do so again, compared to only 71% of 2017 Conservatives that backed Leave.

The danger for the Conservative Party is that so many Leavers are wedded to Brexit.

If Brexit were to result in a Labour government, 44% of Conservative Leavers think it would be worth it. Only 36% of Tory Leavers think a Labour government is not a price worth paying for leaving the EU. In short, Conservative Leavers are more loyal

Would Brexit be worth it if it let another Labour leader into government for 5 years?

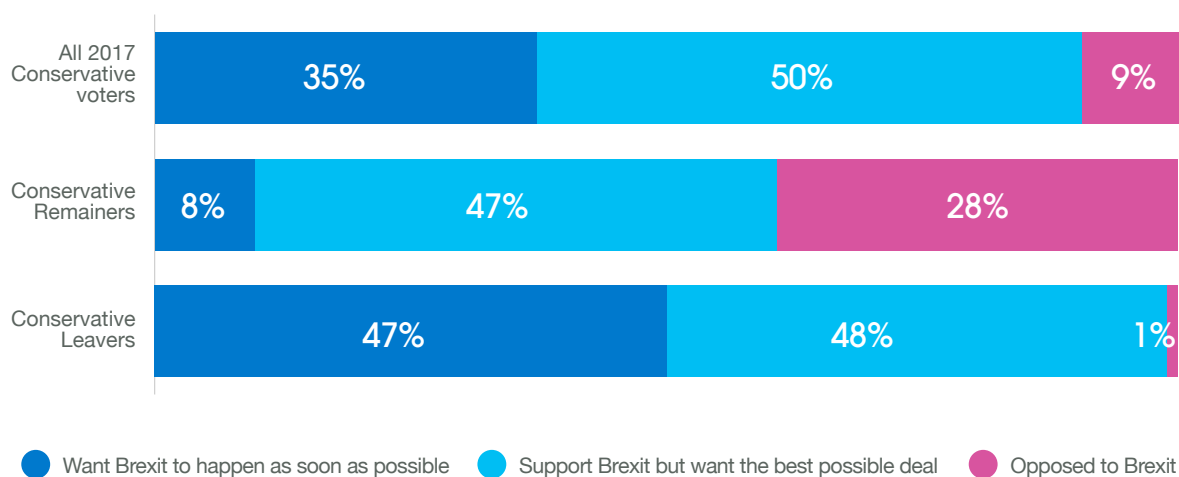


The danger also is that this group’s preferences begin to distort the Conservatives’ message and priorities, and to some extent it already has. The Tories have so effectively draped themselves in Brexit that it’s done a lot of the legwork for a non-committal Labour frontbench, driving Remain voters towards the Labour Party. But a harder right-wing also makes it more difficult for Theresa May to frame her deal outside of the language and assumptions of committed Brexiteers. For them the deal needs to be a clean break, but the language of compromise the prime minister is using now doesn’t match her tone for much of the last two years.

For some Brexit isn’t just a priority, it’s now Brexit at all costs

Although half (50%) of Conservative voters want to make sure that Britain get the best possible deal when it leaves the European Union, regardless of how long it takes, just over a third (35%) don’t care how or on what terms Britain leaves the EU, just as long as the UK leaves as soon as possible. This large minority who simply want Brexit at all costs also show a high propensity to vote based on this issue – 39% say it is the single most important issue deciding their vote, far higher than any other issue. To some extent the party is held hostage by its Leaver wing, demanding Brexit and demanding it now.

Which of the following best describes your view?



However, it’s not to say that all the concerns of hardliner MPs transfix their voters as well. For example, the concern that Theresa May isn’t truly behind Brexit because she originally voted Remain does not cut through. Two thirds (66%) of Conservative voters say they are happy to have a Remainer lead the party, just as long as they back a clear Brexit. Remarkably, it’s true for both wings of the party, Remainer (69% agree) and Leaver (65% agree). But this is not to say that committed Leavers will not judge her more harshly now the deal itself comes under scrutiny.

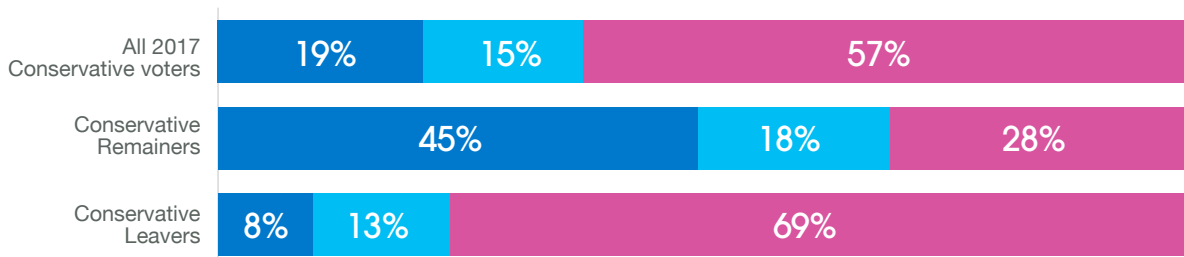
Further votes on Brexit only spell danger for the Prime Minister

Of course, if Theresa May can't deliver Brexit and get it through Parliament she will be in severe danger. Several Remainder MPs, from Sir Philip Lee, who participated in our event 'If Not Leave, What?' with Demos, to Justine Greening, have come out in favour of a second vote. Although Theresa May has promised a meaningful vote in Parliament, she has ruled out another public vote. Many influential figures on the Remainder wing of the Conservative Party think that a referendum could be the only way to resolve a deadlocked Commons. But, it's so unpopular with Conservative voters that accepting another vote is needed, even as a last resort, is perilous.

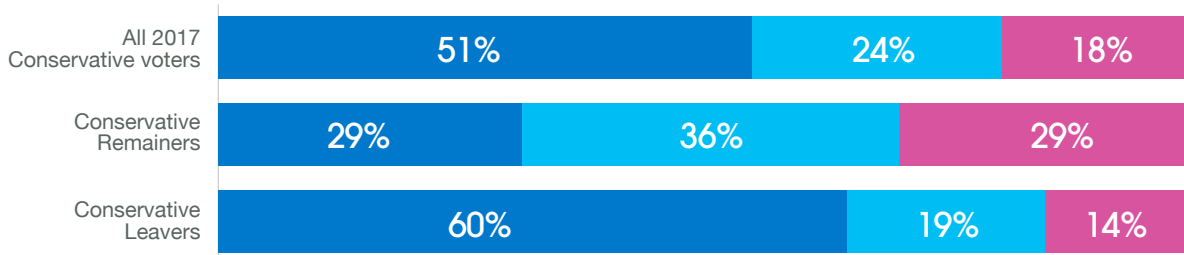
Three in five (60%) Conservative Leavers would prefer there to be no vote at all, not even in the Commons.

Quite simply, Theresa May does the deal, the government signs it off and the UK leaves the European Union. By contrast, they find another vote, especially an in-out vote, unacceptable (69%). You then add to mix that Tory Remainers are surprisingly comfortable about not having any more votes on Brexit (65% would accept or prefer no vote at all). It all suggests that the course of least resistance for Theresa May is one which sees Brexit done and dusted, regardless of the political pressure to go back to the people.

Is an in-out referendum acceptable or unacceptable?



Is having no vote at all acceptable or unacceptable?



● Preference ● Acceptable ● Unacceptable



Putting the pieces back together again after March 2019

If the message seems straight forward – get Brexit done or lose a large number of loyal Brexiteers – that's because it is. But it only takes Mrs May to March 2019 and certainly does not provide answers on how to grow the Conservative Party's electoral support beyond Brexit.

Once we leave the European Union the challenge will be even more acute. Quite simply, where do the Conservatives go from there?

The Conservatives have already shattered their old electoral coalition established by David Cameron in favour of one held together by Brexit. Once Brexit is done, can that coalition be sustained? And does the party have the answers to maintain or create a new winning range of voters based on a wider programme for government? These are all questions that can only be determined once the UK has left.

COUNTDOWN TO BREXIT

What's left for the parties to do?

The proximity of Brexit means that both parties now have little room to maneuver outside of their current positions.

The Conservative Party has to ensure that whatever happens on 29th March the UK leaves the European Union. If the UK isn't out of the EU in March, serious damage could be done to the Conservative Party's poll ratings in the short-term, with a prolonged extension of EU membership doing serious damage to the party's ability to ever win back committed Leave voters.

On the other hand, Labour is left with a difficult balancing act. It must try to not excite Brexiteer sentiment within its own traditional group of voters while responding to the increasingly concerned Remain voters who want the party to challenge the government on Brexit. Brexit might do damage to the Conservatives but failure to make a stand could see those who flocked to Labour at the general election looking for another political party entirely.

Increasingly both parties need to think about what politics will look like in 2019 and beyond.

The Conservative Party especially needs to plan for this. Our own polling on the day of the general election suggests that voters might have gone with the Tories for a general sense of trust, leadership and support for Brexit, but Labour won on policy terms by a long stretch. Ultimately, providing both parties don't lose the trust of their respective Brexit camps, then they will need a new narrative to sustain them until the next election.

The Conservatives, in particular, seem to lack a narrative outside of Brexit. Philip Hammond's Budget and Theresa May's conference speech suggests the Conservatives are building on the 'end of austerity' theme. But, conceding ground to Labour on this point doesn't yet suggest they have a coherent narrative about what their government wants to do on the domestic front.

For Labour, if Brexit is substantially done and dusted as an issue by the next election – and they were seen as doing little to prevent it – then the party could suffer. A new homeless 'centre ground', opposed to the Tories and disappointed in Labour, will be once again up for grabs. Rebuilding trust with this group will be what wins the Conservatives another election or gives Jeremy Corbyn a shot at Number 10.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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James works across a variety of fields including our social research division and is a member of the Opinium political polling team. James' experience has primarily been amongst consumer and secondary research, delivering cutting edge insight into the key drivers behind our changing behaviour and attitudes for clients, ranging from academic institutions to media outlets and think tanks.

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**What people think,
feel and do**