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feel and do

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# Opinium Political Report

## Where are we on Brexit?



From the Opinium/Observer polling series

21st September 2020

## One-minute takeaway

- Approval of Boris Johnson's handling of Brexit is in negative territory (42% disapprove vs 32% approve), down from last year predominantly due to a decline in active approval of his approach from Leave voters.
- The dynamics between Labour and the Conservatives is now totally different to last year as Keir Starmer has vastly better ratings on Brexit across the political spectrum than Jeremy Corbyn had.
- The government should be wary of picking a fight over its own Brexit deal, as belief that Boris Johnson's withdrawal agreement is a good deal has declined since last year (from 25% in October to 13% this month).
- The argument around breaking international law sends the wrong message to Remainers that could accept a Johnson Brexit while only actively appealing to a minority of Leave voters.
- Boris Johnson is easily presented as wanting to leave the customs union and single market without a trade deal. If no trade deal is agreed 68% of Leavers accept there is no alternative to 'no deal', but only a minority (30%) of them actively want that outcome.
- As most voters of all stripes think that leaving without a trade deal is likely at the end of this year, the best outcome for the prime minister is to achieve one against the odds, rather than being blamed as the cause of the failure in negotiations by the opposition.
- Keir Starmer has avoided being painted as a roadblock to Brexit., although voters are not totally sure what he would do in a potential 'no trade deal' scenario at the end of this year.

# Brexit and the party leaders

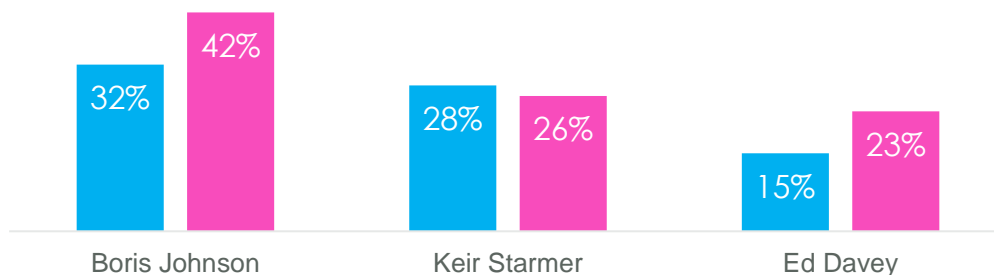
## Brexit continues to be a divisive issue for Boris Johnson

Brexit is not comfortable territory for any party leader to focus on at the moment. The particular concern for the prime minister, whose political popularity is so grounded in the issue, is that approval of his handling of the Brexit process is now relatively low. Despite how divisive it was in 2019, Boris Johnson was able to get net positive approval ratings for his Brexit approach at some points in October 2019, but now only a third (32%) approve of his handling of the process, with 42% disapproving.

### Approval of party leaders on Brexit

(9-11 September 2020)

■ Approve ■ Disapprove



## Public more receptive to Starmer on Brexit than Corbyn, even if he remains an unknown quantity

The Conservatives should pay particular attention to the change in attitudes to the Brexit position of their main opponent. At the end of October last year, almost evenly balanced attitudes towards Boris Johnson’s Brexit performance was contrasted with severe disapproval of Jeremy Corbyn’s Brexit response (60% disapproved of the leader of the opposition on Brexit, while only 16% approved).

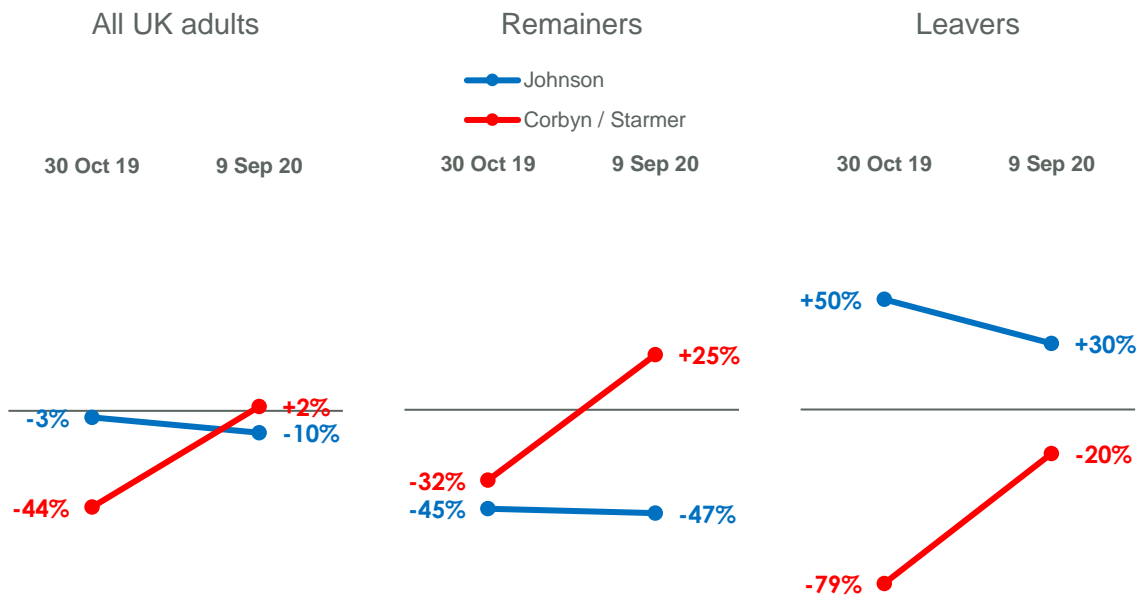
If there is criticism of Keir Starmer it is that the public do not have an opinion on his Brexit stance yet, but this means he has potential for outmanoeuvring the prime minister on this issue and that makes him far more dangerous to the Conservatives. If Labour is assuming the hardest decisions on Brexit will be long finished before the next election, then his current approach seems to be successful in not overtly rubbing large numbers of voters up the wrong way from either side.

## Johnson-Starmer dynamic on Brexit neutralises a key advantage for the prime minister

Boris Johnson’s precarious position on Brexit is shown when you break down these net scores by vote in the EU Referendum.

**Leavers** have become less overtly positive at the prime minister’s approach to Brexit (net approval rating dropping from +50% to +30%). Even if he retains general approval the real challenge he faces is that Jeremy Corbyn was vehemently opposed by Leavers (net disapproval of -79%), but Keir Starmer gets comparatively mild disapproval. If the Conservatives want to position him as a roadblock to Brexit it has not worked anywhere near as well as it did with his predecessor.

### Net approval of party leaders’ approach to Brexit



The position amongst **Remainers** has also improved for Labour. Boris Johnson’s hard-line Brexit stance is just as unpopular amongst Remainers now as it was last year. On the other hand, Keir Starmer’s Brexit stance has had a cautiously positive reception from Remainers (net approval of +25%), miles away from the disappointment Remain voters expressed towards Jeremy Corbyn (net disapproval of -32%).

In short, Boris Johnson no longer faces an incredibly unpopular opposition leader. This means he has less of a free ride amongst Brexit supporters while disenchanting Remainers have an opposition leader they can get behind.

Now that the Brexit issue has moved on, it is harder to make this the black and white issue portrayed in the general election campaign. This gives Starmer a wider audience for his restrained criticism of the government without putting off large numbers of either side of the Brexit debate.

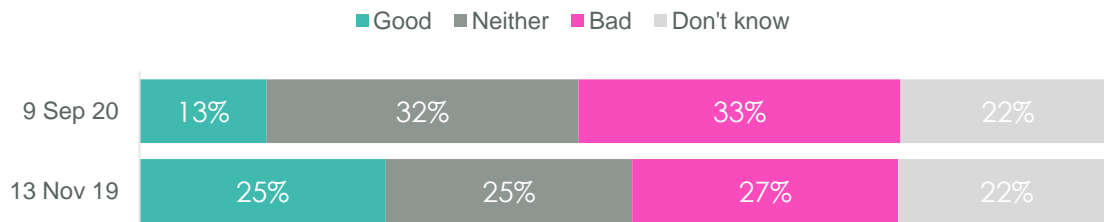
# The Brexit deal and what next

## Brexit deal no longer viewed positively

Currently, only 13% think that Boris Johnson’s deal that he negotiated last year is a good deal, while a third (33%) think it is a bad deal and a similar proportion (32%) think it is neither good nor bad.

Depending on the government’s strategy and what it actually wants to achieve, it is apparent that Boris Johnson’s deal has lost active support – in November last year almost twice as many (25%) thought it was a good deal. However, it has nowhere near the active disapproval that faced Theresa May’s deal: 45% thought the former prime minister’s deal was a bad for the UK, while only 33% currently believe this about Boris Johnson’s deal.

### Perception of Boris Johnson's withdrawal agreement



### Perception of Theresa May's withdrawal agreement



This provides some of the political space for the prime minister to act as if it the deal was the best that could be achieved and is simply working to avoid some its potential pitfalls. But perceptions of Theresa May’s deal worsened as the debate around it became a political slog. The prime minister will not want to be associated with (or indeed forced to stick with) a deal that is broadly accepted to be bad for the UK, so taking aim at it or fighting over it would be best avoided for the Conservatives.

## How permissible is breaking international law?

The current controversy around the Internal Market Bill has also landed the prime minister in a position where it unites Keir Starmer’s natural base and divides his own.

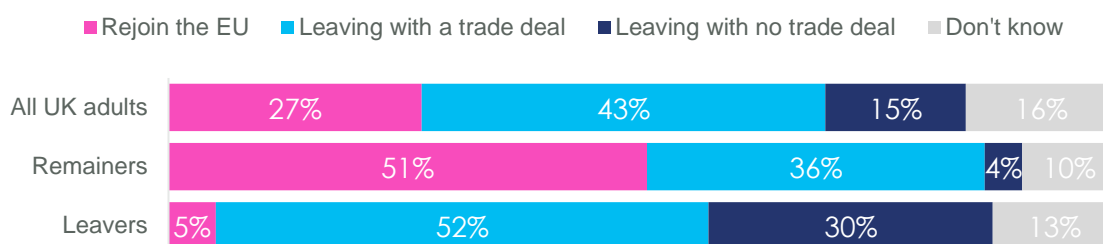
Only a plurality of Leavers think it is acceptable for UK law to diverge with international law (45% acceptable vs 31% unacceptable), while a clear majority of Remainers think it is unacceptable (67% unacceptable vs 21% acceptable). Put simply, it galvanises only a minority of gung-ho Brexiters while sending the wrong message to the Remain voters most receptive to the Conservatives providing that they genuinely intend to achieve a trade deal with the European Union.

## Both sides would like to avoid 'no deal' if possible

The best outcome, from a public opinion perspective, is that the UK leaves the transition period at the end of this year with a trade deal (43%). Only a quarter (27%) at this stage want the UK to re-join the EU, and only 15% outright want to leave with no trade deal with the EU.

### The public's preference on Brexit

(9-11 September 2020)



The challenge for the **Conservatives** is that a 'no deal' at the end of this period is not a popular first option, even amongst Leave voters (only 30% of whom prefer a 'no deal' outcome).

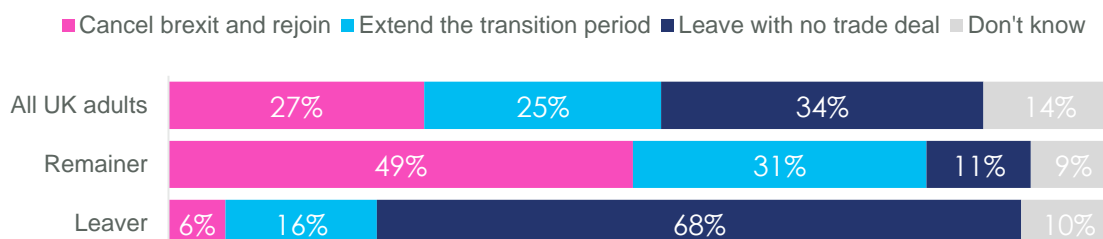
Remainers have an entirely different position: half (51%) want to re-join the EU, marking them as being well beyond the reach of the Conservatives on this issue. But a third (36%) of Remainers, accepting the reality of the situation, are looking for a trade deal. Being able to leave with one is the safest course for the Conservatives to maintain the electoral coalition of determined Leavers and compromising Remainers that gave them a majority.

## A 'no deal' scenario reignites divisions

If we are unable to agree a trade deal by the end of this year, the public position becomes much more complicated. Leavers shift quite clearly from only 30% wanting to leave with no trade deal as a preference to two thirds accepting that this is the necessary next step (68%).

### What we should do if we can't agree a trade deal

(9-11 September 2020)



Remainers, by comparison, don't really change their outlook: half (49%) would want to re-join the EU but a minority (31%) would prefer an extension. It is in this scenario where Boris Johnson would be left with Leavers then pressing the government to make good its threats while Remainers would prefer almost anything but.

## Playing the no trade deal scenario

### No trade deal would be no surprise to voters...

There is decently high public expectation that the UK will leave the transition period at the end of this year without a trade deal: 52% think it is likely while only 15% think it is unlikely. This view is shared widely across both Brexit supporters and Remainers.

It might not be surprising that four in five (79%) Remainers who think no EU trade deal is likely would blame the UK government and Boris Johnson, while 72% of Leavers who believe this is likely would blame the EU, Michel Barnier or other European leaders.

### ... but what do we expect from the party leaders?

**Boris Johnson** has made it clear to all wings of the electorate that he would be prepared to leave the customs union and single market without a trade deal at the end of this year if no deal has been agreed. Both two thirds (66%) of Remainers and seven in ten (71%) Leavers think this would be the prime minister's preference.

This does mean that his base can align Boris Johnson's instincts with their own very clearly. The danger remains that he is almost too neatly packaged as preferring 'no deal', and should the negotiations eventually fail those more middle of the road who wanted it to succeed might point the finger at him.

**Keir Starmer**, by comparison, has been incredibly careful not to be presented as a roadblock to Brexit. Even in a potential 'no deal' scenario, only 29% of Leave voters believe he would like to use it as an opportunity to overturn the whole Brexit project. Remainers, if pushed, think he would probably prefer to extend the transition period until a trade deal could be negotiated (49%).

If the strategy is to create the fewest enemies over Brexit, Starmer appears to be relatively successful in that so far. The warning for the Labour leader is that Jeremy Corbyn also tried a similar approach with limited success up until 2019. Then once actual decisions had to be made it ultimately pleased neither side.

The situation is very different, as Brexit is no longer a live issue in the same way and no one believes the opposition has the power to stop the government in the way they did last year. Still, should there be a huge political flare up over failed trade negotiations with the EU, he could yet be caught between two polar opposite camps: Remainers who want a far harder line against Brexit on one side, and Leavers ready to leave the negotiating table without a trade deal on the other.

# About Opinium

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