

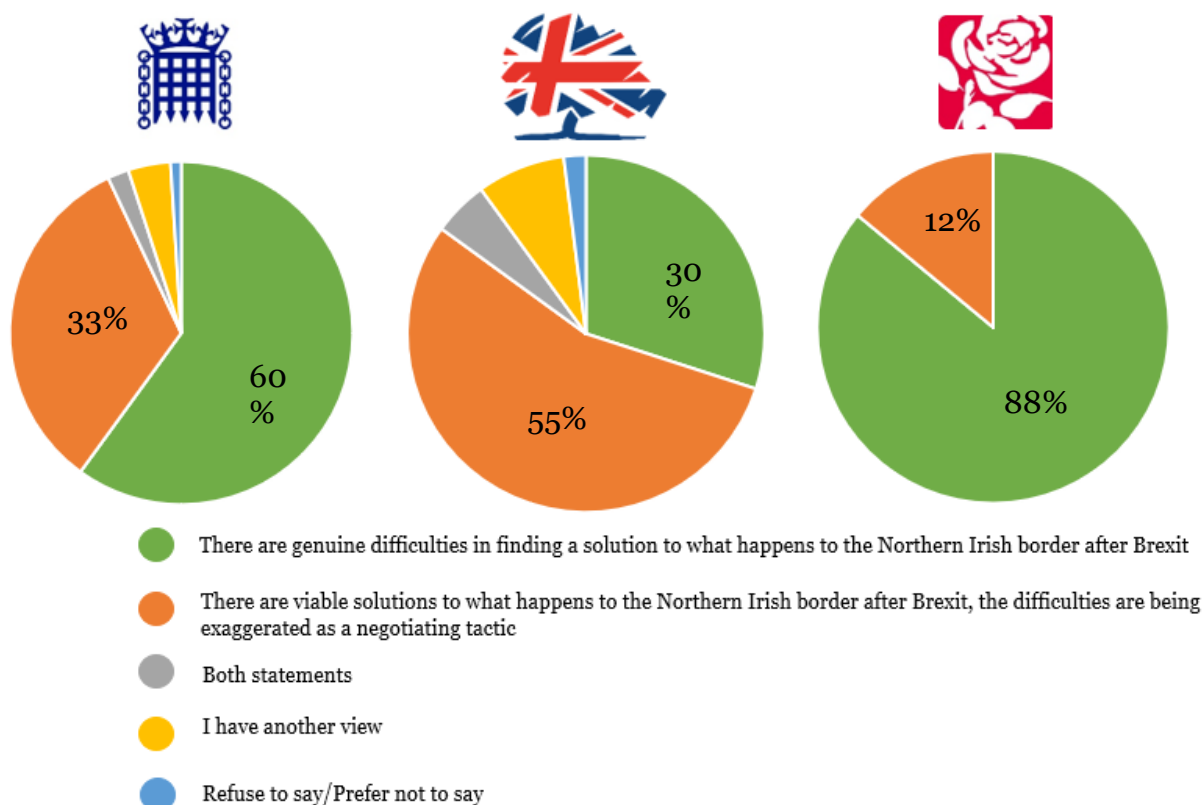
New survey of MPs shows a Commons more divided on Brexit than ever before

For the past four years, The UK in a Changing Europe and the Mile End Institute at Queen Mary University of London have conducted an annual poll of MPs, to uncover their attitudes to Brexit. This year's survey – conducted by Ipsos MORI in November and December 2018 – suggests the House of Commons has become even more polarised in the last 12 months.

The root cause of the Prime Minister's Brexit woes is a lack of support among her own MPs for her deal. Nearly three-quarters of all MPs think that Theresa May has done a poor job of negotiating Brexit – and nearly half (47%) of Tory MPs think the government has done a bad job, more than approve (37%) of the government's handling of Brexit. But that hasn't made them change their minds about the desirability, or otherwise, of leaving the EU. The problem for the PM is that none of this is going to make it easier to pass her deal through the Commons. This is because the premise behind the compromises she has made are not accepted on the Conservative benches.

Worryingly for her, Conservative MPs, and Leave-voting MPs more generally aren't, impressed by the need for an Irish backstop. Nor, it seems, are they that concerned about the supposed downsides of a no-deal Brexit – which is going to make it difficult for Mrs May to use the potential risks to scare them into supporting her deal. Just as worryingly, hardening views – particularly (but not exclusively) among Conservative and Leave-voting MPs – on what does and doesn't respect the referendum result could make any attempt to put together a majority for a softer, 'Norway-style' Brexit very difficult indeed.

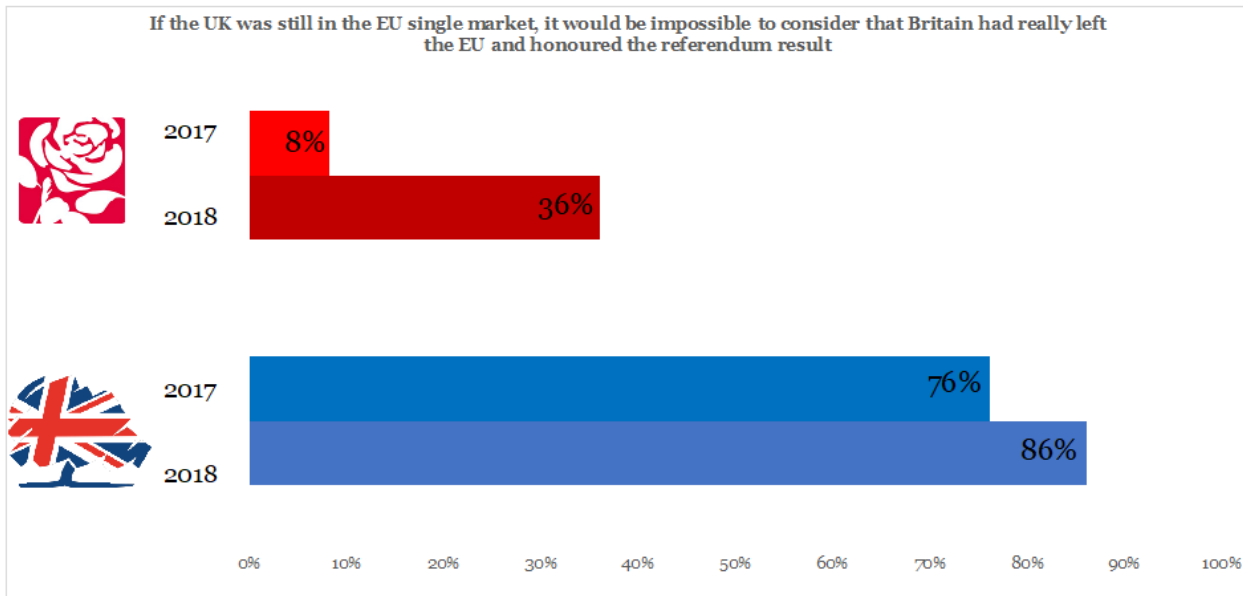
While 60% of MPs accept the idea that 'there are genuine difficulties in finding a solution to what happens to the Northern Irish border after Brexit', over half (55%) of Conservative MPs think there are viable solutions to the Irish border question short of the backstop, and that the difficulties implicit in finding a solution are being exaggerated. This is also true of 85% of MPs who voted Leave in 2016.



Conservative MPs remain bullish about the prospects for trade with countries outside the EU after Brexit. This – along with the increased likelihood of no deal – presumably helps explain their unwillingness to accept anything other than a ‘hard’ Brexit leaving maximum room for manoeuvre in trade negotiations with other countries. 70% are optimistic that the UK will be able to quickly sign deals with major powers such as China and the US, and just 12% pessimistic. Some 85% of Tory MPs think these trade deals will at the very least compensate for loss of EU trade, and 58% think new trade deals will more than compensate for any lost EU trade.

More bad news for Theresa May lies in the fact that a majority of her own MPs (as well as an overwhelming majority of the Commons) think she has done a bad job of handling Britain's exit from the European Union. Just 34% of Tory MPs think the government has done a good job, and 47% a bad job. Overall, the government has an approval rating of -53 among all MPs for its handling of Brexit; 17% approve, 70% disapprove.

There are, however, no obvious alternatives. Our survey underlines the problems the PM would face in trying to garner a Commons majority for a softer Brexit than she has proposed. Opposition to membership of the single market has significantly increased in the last 12 months. When we asked MPs last year, 42% of them believed that membership of the single market was incompatible with leaving the EU, and 56% disagreed. These figures have now reversed: 58% now think a position similar to EEA membership would mean ‘we haven’t truly left the European Union and honoured the referendum result’, and 39% disagree.



This is principally due to a significant movement away from single market membership among Labour MPs. In our previous poll, 8% said single market membership would not represent a Brexit that honoured the referendum. The figure today is 36%.

These numbers only get worse for those in favour of a ‘softer’ Brexit – particularly a Norway-type outcome. If new foreign nationals from other EU countries had the automatic right to live and work in the UK, then 66% of MPs think that would not be honouring the referendum result while fewer than one in three (31%) reckon it would be. There is a now majority against the idea that freedom of movement in its current form is compatible with the 2016 referendum among both Conservative (88%) and Labour MPs (52%), and among MPs that voted Leave (90%) and Remain (54%).

The Prime Minister could, of course, try and attract Labour MPs by offering permanent membership of a customs union. Our survey suggests that the arithmetic here would be tight: 50% of MPs, and 80% of Conservative MPs, feel customs union membership would not honour the referendum result. In other words, this option would probably see Mrs May lose more Conservative votes than she gained Labour ones.

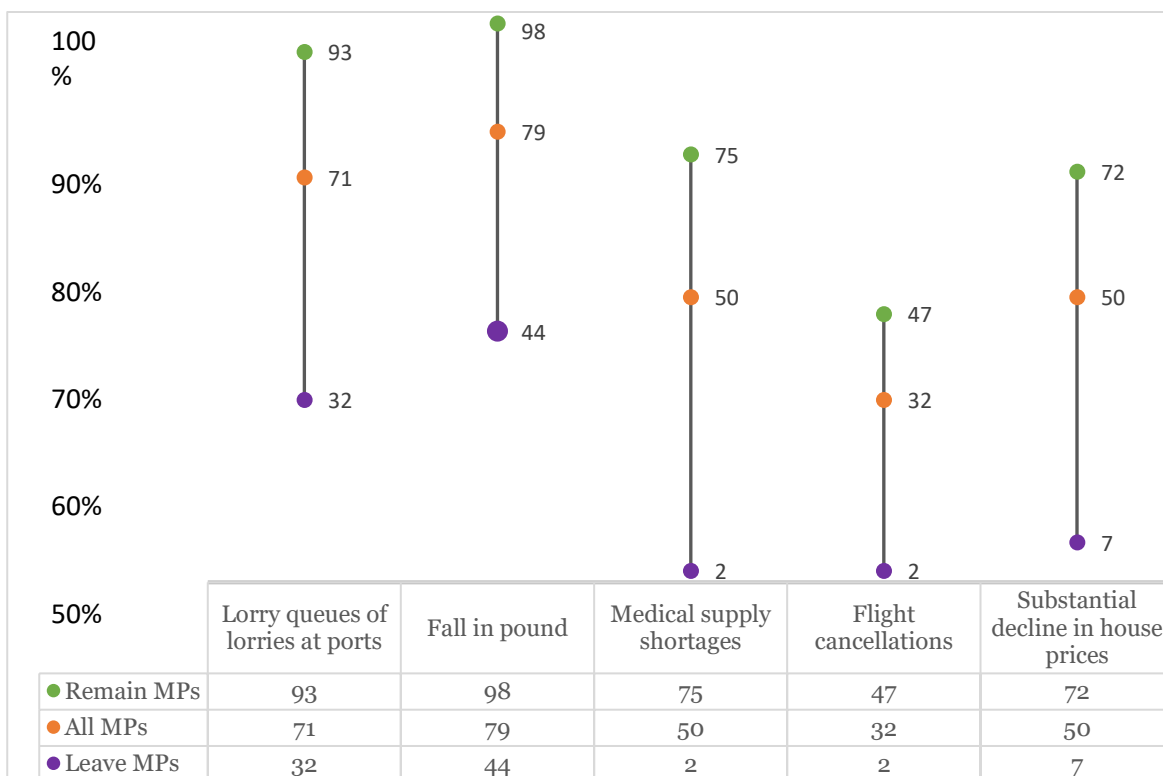
There is no sign of mounting regret the decision to Leave. All MPs surveyed who voted Leave in 2016 said they would be likely to do so again, and 95% said they would be certain to vote Leave if given the chance again. Remainers, too, are sticking to their guns.

This is reflected in attitudes towards the future. In total 60% of MPs think the general economic condition of the UK will improve over the next 10 years, 7% expect the economy to plateau and 22% expect economic prosperity to decline. Conservative MPs are the most optimistic: 83% expect the economy to improve.

MPs were divided on whether a no deal Brexit would lead to significant short-term disruption. MPs were asked to indicate how likely five outcomes were in the event of no-deal: the cancellation of a large number of flights between the UK and the EU; a shortage of key medical supplies; a substantial decline in house prices; a significant fall in the value of the pound and long queues of lorries to Dover and other ports.

Leave MPs were highly sceptical about the likelihood of disruption, except in two areas: 44% of Leave-voting MPs see a drop in the value of Sterling as likely (54% unlikely), while 32% see disruption at ports as likely (66% unlikely). Remain MPs saw both these eventualities as probable, 98% anticipating a fall in the pound and 93% expecting lorry queues.

MPs were divided on the likelihood of medical shortages (50% likely, 49% unlikely, 1% don't know) and a substantial decline in house prices (50% likely, 49% unlikely, 1% don't know). Leave-voting MPs were near-unanimous in their scepticism. In contrast, a significant majority of Remain-voting MPs feel medical supply shortages (75%) and a fall in house prices (72%) are likely eventualities. MPs were less worried that large numbers of flights between Britain and the EU would be cancelled. Just under a third (32%) of all MPs (albeit 47% of Remain-voting MPs) felt this was likely.



A key question is whether Brexit has exacerbated existing social divisions in the UK or simply highlighted divisions that already existed. Leave MPs (78%) and Conservative MPs (78%) believe the latter. In contrast, Labour MPs were split: 48% felt Brexit has created divisions, 42% that these divisions already existed and 10% believed both statements to be true.

If the UK does Leave the EU on 29 March, this opens up the question of whether it is likely to re-join. No Conservative or Leave MP felt a return to membership was likely in the next 20 years, while 50% of Labour MPs and 37% of Remain voters thought it was.