

PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS A NO DEAL BREXIT

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Introduction

In a [speech outlining her government's Brexit strategy](#) at Lancaster House in January 2017, the then Prime Minister, Theresa May, declared that 'no deal would be better than a bad deal'. Yet, in the event, when the House of Commons rejected the deal that she eventually negotiated on no less than three occasions, Mrs May opted to seek an extension to the process of negotiating the UK's withdrawal rather than leave without a deal.

The stance taken by her successor as Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, has been very different. He has called for a radical change to the deal negotiated by his predecessor and indicated that, in the absence of any new deal, the UK will leave the EU without a deal on the new deadline of 31 October. In so doing [he has argued](#) that not only does this stance guarantee an end to the impasse on Brexit that appears to frustrate many voters, but it would also be a first step in uniting a country that has become deeply divided as a result of the Brexit process.

The original decision to leave the EU was made by voters in a referendum in June 2016. If that instruction is going to be regarded as having been executed effectively then we might think that not only is it important that the UK should leave the EU, but also that it should do so in a manner that is backed by the electorate. So, the first question we address in this paper is, 'how do voters feel about the prospect of leaving the EU without a deal?' Is this a step for which there is clear majority support? Are Leave voters happy to see Brexit delivered in that way, and are Remain voters, frustrated by the Brexit impasse, now willing to embrace such a prospect too? Indeed, is there any sign that support for leaving without a deal has increased in the wake of the difficulty in reaching an agreement with the EU? And how far do people's attitudes reflect their views of the likely consequences of leaving without a deal?

If there is indeed widespread popular support for leaving without a deal then pursuing such a policy would seem to lay the foundations for the realisation of the new Prime Minister's wish to unite a country that has been divided by the Brexit process. However, there would also seem to be a possibility that leaving the EU in that way would perpetuate existing divisions. Perhaps Remain voters regard it as an anathema whereas the Leave voters are willing to embrace it with some enthusiasm? Maybe attitudes towards no deal simply replicate those to be found in the wider argument about the merits of Brexit that the country has been having for the last three years – and which may well continue after a no deal exit. Thus the extent to which leaving without a deal seems likely to unite the country is the second question we address in this report.



For or against?

It might be thought that the most obvious way of ascertaining public attitudes towards leaving the EU without a deal would be simply to ask people whether they are in favour of, or against, such a step. In practice, very few polls have adopted this approach. However, the results of three recent exercises that have done so are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Levels of support and opposition to leaving the EU without a deal

	ComRes			BMG			YouGov		
		2016 Vote			2016 Vote				
	All	Remain	Leave	All	Remain	Leave	All	Remain	Leave
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Support	36	12	74	37	13	68	40	9	77
Neither	12	8	10	13	10	13	(Neither was not offered as an option on this poll)		
Oppose	40	72	11	44	74	15	45	80	13
Don't Know	11	6	6	6	4	3	16	12	11

Sources: ComRes 2-5.7.19; BMG Research 15-16.7.19; YouGov Average of 2 polls, 2-3 & 3-4.7.19

Detailed wording: ComRes: To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with the following statements? I would support the UK leaving the EU with no deal

BMG: And thinking specifically about each possible scenario, to what extent do you support or oppose each option? Leave the EU without a deal

YouGov: Would you support or oppose Britain leaving the European Union without a deal on 31st October?

Three features stand out. First, leaving without a deal appears to be relatively popular among those who voted to leave the EU three years ago. Between them the three polls suggest that somewhere between two-thirds and three-quarters or so of such voters support the idea of leaving without a deal, while only around one in seven to one in eight are opposed. It would seem that for most Leave voters at least, delivering Brexit by exiting the EU without a negotiated deal would be an acceptable course of action.

However, those who voted Remain mostly take a very different view. Whatever frustration they may or may feel about the Brexit impasse, some three-quarters to four-fifths or so of them are opposed to leaving the EU without a deal, while at most only around one in eight support such a step. There is little sign here that a no deal Brexit would lay the foundations for ending the division about Brexit.

READY AND WILLING TO LEAVE WITHOUT A DEAL? PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS A NO DEAL BREXIT

Thanks to this difference of outlook, across the electorate as a whole we find that supporters and opponents of leaving without a deal are almost evenly matched – though according to these polls at least the latter group appears to be slightly the more numerous. One reason why this is the case is that those who did not vote in the 2016 referendum are, on balance, more likely to oppose than support a ‘no deal’ Brexit, although many do not express a view either way. According to ComRes, 18% of those who did not vote in 2016 support leaving without a deal and 39% are opposed, BMG make the figures 31% and 46% respectively, while in YouGov’s case 22% are in favour and 43% opposed.

However, it is possible that some voters draw a distinction between what they would prefer to happen and what they might be willing to support in certain circumstances. This possibility becomes evident when we examine the responses [YouGov have obtained](#) when voters are asked whether they think leaving the EU without a deal would be a good or a bad outcome – or simply an acceptable compromise. When the question was most recently asked in the middle of August, just 22% of all voters indicated that they thought it would be a ‘good outcome’, whereas as many as 49% said that it would be a bad one. Just 16% said that it would be an ‘acceptable compromise’. More importantly, among those who voted Leave, only a little under half (46%) said that a ‘no deal’ Brexit would represent a ‘good outcome’, while another quarter or so (27%) said that it would be an ‘acceptable compromise’. The contrast between these figures and those for Leave voters in Table 1 suggest that maybe as many as one in three of Leave voters who might be willing to support ‘no deal’ regard such an outcome as a second if ultimately still acceptable best.



Circumstances

This suggests that we should examine further the conditions under which voters might be more or less willing to back leaving without a deal. Are they more likely to support leaving without a deal in some circumstances than in others? Equally, do their views depend on what alternative outcomes or courses of action are presented to them? Given that voters as a whole are apparently relatively evenly divided in their views about Brexit, such considerations might be crucial to determining where the balance of public opinion might eventually lie.

The contrast between the results obtained by three polls that posed very different sets of circumstances certainly suggests this could well be the case. The first is a poll conducted by Ipsos MORI in July in which voters were asked, 'If the UK and the EU cannot agree a deal on the terms of the UK's departure from the EU by October would you support or oppose...the UK leaving the European Union without a deal, sometimes referred to as a 'no deal' Brexit?'. Voters were being asked to consider a situation where responsibility for an inability to reach a deal by the scheduled date might be thought to be shared between the UK and the EU (and one where, perhaps, a deal might still eventually be possible). Faced with this prospect just 38% of voters said they were in favour of leaving without a deal, while as many as 50% indicated that they were opposed.

However, when in August ORB international presented voters with an alternative set of circumstances they obtained a rather different result. They asked, 'How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statement? If the EU is unwilling to re-open negotiations on the withdrawal agreement, the UK should leave the EU without a deal.' In this instance voters were being asked to consider a situation in which responsibility for failure to reach a deal is laid squarely on the EU. The result was a very different balance of opinion in which 46% indicated agreement with the proposition and only 39% were opposed.

Meanwhile, a third reading from ComRes produced a different result yet again. On this occasion voters were asked, 'To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with the following statements? If Boris Johnson is the next Prime Minister and is unable to get a better deal from the European Union by the 31st of October... the UK should just leave without a deal.' Here voters were being invited to ask what should happen if the outcome of further negotiations might be thought unsatisfactory from the UK's perspective, but without any explicit suggestion that this was the fault of the EU. Those who agreed with the proposition (37%) and those opposed (37%) were evenly matched.

In short, if the UK does eventually leave the EU without a deal, the public reaction may well depend in part at least on where responsibility for such an outcome is thought to lie. Voters are rather more likely to react favourably to such a prospect if failure to reach a deal is thought to be the fault of the EU than if they think the UK government has at least some responsibility for what has happened. If so, voters' judgement on a 'no deal' Brexit could well depend on the success or otherwise of politicians at laying the blame on either the UK government or the European Union.

Alternatives

But do the alternatives that might be on offer, and their possible timing, also make a difference to the views that voters express? Perhaps some voters are willing to back no deal in preference to reversing the Brexit process, but would still prefer leaving with a deal over either outcome? Maybe leaving without a deal is a more popular option as compared with one that is presented as involving further delay to the Brexit process?

These considerations do seem to make a difference. This becomes evident first of all in the level of support for leaving the EU without a deal when the idea is pitted against one or more options that involve delaying Brexit yet further – or simply cancelling it altogether. In an indication, perhaps, of the frustration of many Leave voters at least at the delays to Brexit, in these circumstances leaving without a deal proves to be relatively popular.

For example, in their polls, Opinium have invited respondents on more than one occasion and in more than one way to choose between such an array of Brexit options. Each time they have recorded high levels of support for leaving without a deal. First, [between February and July](#) the company regularly asked voters whether, in the event that the Commons cannot agree a deal, the UK should leave without a deal or should ‘delay Article 50 and hold a public vote on what to next’. In recent months, the company has consistently found rather more people backing leaving without a deal than opting for another referendum - in the most recent reading in early July, for example, the figures were 47% and 41% respectively. Meanwhile, [later in July and in August](#) Opinium asked a further question that asked what voters what they thought Boris Johnson should do if he is unable to secure the approval of the House of Commons for a deal. On average, no less than 45% backed no deal, whereas just 28% said we should remain in the EU after all (without necessarily holding a referendum) while just 13% were in favour of delaying Brexit. In both cases, at least three-quarters of Leave voters backed leaving without a deal.

However, rather lower levels of support for leaving without a deal are obtained if voters are simply asked to choose which of a set of possible outcomes to the Brexit process they would most prefer without any reference made to their timing or how the choice might arise. For example, in three polls ([including two](#) conducted on behalf of [Pagel et al at University College, London](#)), [YouGov have asked](#) voters to rank in order of preference four possible outcomes to the Brexit process: leaving without a deal, leaving on the basis of the deal negotiated by Mrs May, a softer Brexit involving staying in the EU single market and customs union, and remaining in the EU after all. In each case leaving the EU without a deal was by far the most popular of the three Brexit options for leaving the EU. However, on average it still only secured the support of a little less than three in ten of all voters (28%), including fewer than three in five of those who backed Leave (57%). Not dissimilar findings have also been reported by [BMG Research](#), [Kantar](#) and [Sky Data](#). Again, it seems that the proportion of Leave voters who back no deal in preference to any other option is somewhat lower than the proportion who might in some circumstances be willing to support it.

In contrast, the low level of support for a ‘no deal’ Brexit among Remain voters varies relatively little. Even when faced with a choice between no deal and delaying Brexit, as posed by Opinium, only 16-17% of Remain voters choose no deal, little different from the figures for such voters in Table 1. Meanwhile, according to YouGov, just 3% think no deal would be a good outcome, and just another 7% that it would be an acceptable compromise – over four in five (82%) think it would be a bad outcome. Meanwhile, when asked to rank four alternative conclusions to the Brexit process, on average three-quarters (75%) of Remain voters put no deal last, suggesting that many of them could well be antipathetic to the idea.

Has support risen or fallen?

But even if support for leaving without a deal is largely confined to those who voted Leave, perhaps it is still the case that such a step is more popular now than it once was, and maybe especially so since the advent of an administration that is more willing to embrace such a step? If so, maybe this is a sign that support might grow further should the UK government continue to argue the case for doing so?

The longest running time series available to us of a question that simply asks voters what they think about leaving without a deal while not specifying a particular set of circumstances or asking them to select one option from a range of alternatives, is the question from YouGov that asks whether such an outcome would be good, bad or an acceptable compromise. A summary of all of the readings that YouGov have obtained in response to this question is given in Table 2. It suggests that voters have become a little more inclined to the view that leaving without a deal would be a good outcome. Whereas in three readings in January and February on average 18% held that view, in the three polls that have asked the question since the UK failed to leave the EU on 29 March the figure has been 22%. However, the shift is clearly no more than a marginal one, while the one reading that has been taken since Boris Johnson became Prime Minister does not suggest that any further movement has occurred more recently.

Table 2: Perceptions of whether leaving without a deal would be a good or a bad outcome

	8 Jan	31 Jan	23 Feb	8 Mar	13 Mar	15 Mar	1 Apr	10 Jun	16 Aug
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Good Outcome	17	18	19	20	21	25	20	23	22
Acceptable Compromise	15	17	13	14	15	17	13	14	16
Bad Outcome	52	51	54	52	50	49	50	49	49

Dates denote the last date of fieldwork

Source: YouGov

Other polling is consistent with this conclusion. We have already noted that when Opinium most recently asked its respondents in July to choose between no deal and delaying the Brexit process in order to hold a referendum, 47% opted for leaving without a deal, a figure that was little different from that obtained by the company in a number of polls in May. However, when Opinium [first started asking the question](#) in February, the proportion in favour of no deal was averaging at 42%. In short, here too is evidence of a small increase in the popularity of no deal during the spring.

Equally, however, other polling has failed to uncover any significant increase in the popularity of leaving without a deal since Boris Johnson became Prime Minister. When in August [Kantar invited its respondents](#) to choose between four Brexit options, at 23% the proportion backing no deal was almost exactly the same as the 22% who had previously done so in May. When the same month [Surovation asked a question](#) that invited voters to choose between remaining in the EU, leaving with

a deal, and leaving without a deal, at 19% the proportion who backed no deal was actually six points down on what the company had recorded on the eve of the European Parliament election in May. [When BMG Research repeated in August a question](#) they had asked the previous month setting out a set of Brexit options in the event that no new deal is agreed by the end of October, they found that, at 36%, the proportion choosing leaving without a deal was only two points higher than their previous reading. Meanwhile, when in August [YouGov asked respondents to choose between four different Brexit outcomes](#), at 26% the proportion who chose leaving without a deal was exactly the same as it had been at the beginning of April.

Perceived consequences

If as appears to be the case, many Leave voters are at least willing to accept a 'no deal' Brexit, if not necessarily to prefer one then we might anticipate that they are relatively sanguine about the consequences of leaving without a deal. They certainly appear to be less concerned than those who voted Remain. For example, when at the beginning of July [YouGov asked](#) whether 'the economy as a whole' would be better or worse off if the UK left the EU without a deal, as many as 79% of Remain voters said that it would be worse off, while just 3% indicated that it would be better off. In contrast, only 13% of Leave voters said that the economy would be worse off, while as many as 45% said that it would be better off. That said, as many as 31% of Leave voters indicated that leaving without a deal would simply not make much difference either way. That outlook might have helped persuade them that leaving without a deal would be acceptable, but perhaps also helps explain why not all of those who hold that view would positively prefer such an outcome. Meanwhile, on other issues covered by the same poll, such as 'our protection against terrorism' (53%), and the 'NHS' (37%), the perception that leaving without a deal would not make much difference was even more widespread among Leave voters.

Other polling conducted since Boris Johnson became Prime Minister has confirmed the impression that while Remain voters are inclined to be pessimistic about a no deal Brexit, Leave voters are not necessarily particularly optimistic. [Opinium found in August](#) that as many as 68% of Remain voters believe that leaving without a deal would be 'bad' for the UK economy as a whole, a view shared by only 14% of Leave voters. At the same time, however, only around a half (48%) of Leave voters said that a no deal Brexit would actually be 'good' for the economy, with 30% saying it would be neither good nor bad. A similar picture emerged from this poll in respect of the perceived impact of leaving without a deal on Britain's international reputation. Only when it came to [the impact on 'the UK's longer term future'](#) was the pessimism among Remain voters more or less counterbalanced by the level of optimism among Remain supporters.

Similarly Kantar have recently reported that as many as 52% reckon that leaving without a deal would have a negative impact for them personally by the end of the year. In contrast, just 13% of Leave voters express that view. However, only 36% of Leave voters feel that leaving without a deal would have a positive impact on themselves – rather, as many as 46% said that it would have neither a positive nor a negative impact. Once again, it seems that many Leave voters are accepting of, rather than enthusiastic about, leaving without a deal.

Conclusion

There is, then, considerable support for leaving the EU without a deal among those who voted Leave. They may not necessarily believe that leaving without a deal would be particularly beneficial, but at least a half of such voters would prefer the UK to leave without a deal, while at least a half or so of the remainder are willing to support such an outcome, and especially so if any alternative were to involve further delay to the Brexit process. Although there is so far little sign that support for such a step has increased since Boris Johnson became Prime Minister, the new government's Brexit strategy seems well attuned to the existing mood of those who wish to leave the EU.

However, the strategy does not seem particularly likely to help bring the country together. At least three-quarters of those who voted Remain are opposed to a no deal Brexit, indeed may well be antipathetic to it, while many are concerned about the possible consequences. This suggests that it is highly likely that the country would be divided down the middle should such a path be pursued, and that the polarisation that has already been engendered by Brexit would be perpetuated. Meanwhile, unless the government succeeds in laying the blame for a no deal Brexit on the EU it may well find that supporters of its decision are somewhat less numerous than its opponents. Against that backdrop, it will require skills of the highest political order if the country is eventually to be brought together.

EXIT

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