



UK IN A CHANGING EUROPE

EXPLORING 'BREGRET': Public attitudes to Brexit, seven years on.

FOREWORD

Brexit refuses to go away. Over seven years since the referendum, and over three and a half since the UK finally left the European Union, the issue continues to generate headlines and spark furious debate. One reason for this is a sense that public opinion is still evolving. There has been much talk of ‘Brexit regret’ among Leave voters.

Given this, Public First and UK in a Changing Europe decided to talk to Leave voters to hear from them what they thought. In a survey carried out in May and June 2023 and a series of focus groups held between May and September, we posed a series of questions to them about what they think about Brexit, how it has gone, whether they have changed their minds and what they think the future holds. This report describes what we discovered.

Let me, first and foremost, express my profound gratitude to the team at Public First who were, quite simply, a delight to work with. Particular thanks of course to James Frayne, Ines Wittke and Seb Wride, who co-authored the report.

At UKICE, Sophie Stowers has done a sterling job of analysing the findings and helping to write this report. Her ability to organise herself to continue with her day job while taking on tasks like this never ceases to amaze me. Thanks too to Joël Reland, Alex Walker, Stephen Hunsaker and Joelle Grogan for taking the time to read, edit and comment on earlier versions.

As ever, I hope you will find what follows interesting and informative, and don’t hesitate to get in touch if you have any questions or comments.

September 2023

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CONTENTS

Executive Summary	4
Introduction	6
Methodology	7
Chapter 1: Back to 2016	8
Chapter 2: Brexit impacts	19
Chapter 3: The extent of Brexit regret and its meaning	29
Chapter 4: Immigration	35
Chapter 5: The way forward	44
Chapter 6: Brexit fatigue, political divisions, and trust in politics	53
Chapter 7: Voters who were too young to vote in the referendum	57

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Voters feel negatively about the course that Brexit has taken so far. Even among Leave voters, less than one in five feel that Brexit is going well, although most seem hesitant about making a definitive assessment.
- The most common reasons people feel Brexit is going poorly are economic (increased prices, staff shortages, and a weaker economy more generally). This is the case for both Remain and Leave voters.
- The public associates several daily life issues, including travel delays (36%), increases in cost of living (79%), and staff vacancies across sectors (42% in health and social care, 40% in hospitality), to some extent with Brexit. Many also agree that other global events, such as the Coronavirus pandemic and the war in Ukraine, have contributed to these issues.
- Most voters are pessimistic about the impact of Brexit in the long run. Less than a third of respondents (27%) think Brexit will turn out well. The majority of Leave voters, however, think it will (61%), although this optimism is much less prevalent among those Leave voters who feel Brexit is going badly (19%).
- Whilst many Leave voters think Brexit is not going well at the moment, this does not necessarily mean they regret having voted Leave.
- A large majority of Leave voters think leaving the EU could have benefited the UK economy, but these opportunities have not been grasped (70%). This is true both for those who would now back Remain (56%), and those Leavers who think Brexit is going badly (58%).
- Immigration played an important role in convincing people to vote Leave. Yet this importance tends to be overestimated by non-Leave voters, especially relative to other issues, such as control over the lawmaking process, and independence from EU institutions.
- Leave voters are divided on whether Brexit will ultimately enable the UK to reduce net migration.
- The vast majority of voters say they would vote the same way as they did in 2016, knowing what they do now. However, Leave voters are more likely to say they would have voted differently than Remainers (16% vs 6%).

- Respondents expressed a real sense of fatigue with the Brexit debate, and relatively high levels of indifference with regards to the future of the UK's relationship with the EU. This perhaps explains why we did not find overwhelming support for another referendum. Though a plurality of voters supported it, a significant proportion also opposed it (46% vs 32%).
- There is however clear support (53% net) for a closer relationship with the EU, including among Leave voters.
- We find high levels of distrust towards politicians, and a sense that Brexit was used instrumentally by the Conservative Party rather than being a response to the public's genuine concerns about Europe.
- Many Leave voters also attribute Brexit's failure to a lack of competence amongst British political leaders. 51% of Leave voters who think Brexit could have turned out well but didn't cite UK politicians' ineffectiveness as a reason.

INTRODUCTION

Since the EU referendum was held in 2016, academics, journalists and pollsters alike have written extensively on public attitudes and the drivers of the Leave vote. There has been a notable increase in the last few years in the proportion of people who say the decision to leave the EU was wrong which some have interpreted as an obvious sign of ‘regret’ amongst Leave voters about their decision.

We wanted to examine this issue in greater detail in order to understand whether the attitudes of Leave voters had indeed shifted. This research aimed to explore precisely how many people felt they made the wrong choice, how strongly they felt it, and why, with the hope of shedding some light on what ‘Bregret’ means and what its practical implications might be.

METHODOLOGY

Public First ran the data collection for this project using a mixture of quantitative and qualitative research methods. The qualitative portion consisted of five focus groups, which we ran in May and September of 2023 in:

- **Bassetlaw:** Two groups of Leave voters. Recruitment of one group focused on those who said they would still vote Leave knowing what they do now. The second group's recruitment focused on those who said they would vote Remain knowing what they know now. These were held in May 2023.
- **Thurrock:** Two groups of Leave voters who think Brexit is going badly. These were held in September 2023.
- **Ashfield:** One group of Leave voters who think Brexit is going badly. This group was held in September 2023.

Public First also ran a nationally representative poll of 4,005 people in the UK. This was conducted online between the 26 May and 2 June 2023. The results were weighted by interlocking age and gender, region, and social grade to nationally representative proportions. The results tables can be found [here](#).

The results, jointly written up and analysed by UK in a Changing Europe and Public First, are presented in this report.

CHAPTER 1: BACK TO 2016

The 2016 referendum presented voters with a choice between two options: Leave or Remain. In the years since the referendum, these labels have become much more than just options on a ballot paper. They are now shorthand for a particular set of values and identities, giving a name to a cultural divide [which had existed](#) for a number of years.

As such, the preferences of these two groups - and the reasons behind their vote choice in 2016 - were distinct. For those who voted for Remain, the key concern was the impact that leaving the European Union (EU) might have on the British economy. This was a priority for Remainers across political divides, social grade, and education level.

Remainers' key concern was the potential impact of Brexit on the British economy.

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From what you remember, which of the following reasons best explains why you voted Remain? (Base: those who voted Remain in the 2016 EU referendum)



Source: Public First polling for UK in a Changing Europe. Fieldwork 26th May - 2nd Jun 2023, n=4005

It's striking that the main reasons given for backing Remain were instrumental - as a means of avoiding economic damage, retaining freedom of movement rights, or effective problem solving. Very few respondents expressed any kind of emotional attachment to the EU or any affection towards its institutions; rather, their reasoning was pragmatic.

For Leavers, 'control' (again, a focus of the official campaign) was a dominant theme. Though 50% of voters simply said they'd voted Leave because of their dislike of the EU as an institution, for many, Brexit was about allowing the UK more control over its laws, and over the type and number of people who could legitimately enter the country. Indeed, in the focus groups we held, regaining control was consistently associated with the Leave campaign.

“From finance to the size of bananas, it was getting stupid [...]. Even if the law courts here decided to do something, it could then go to the EU courts, so we didn’t have any real control over national things”-

Male Voter, 40s, Bassetlaw

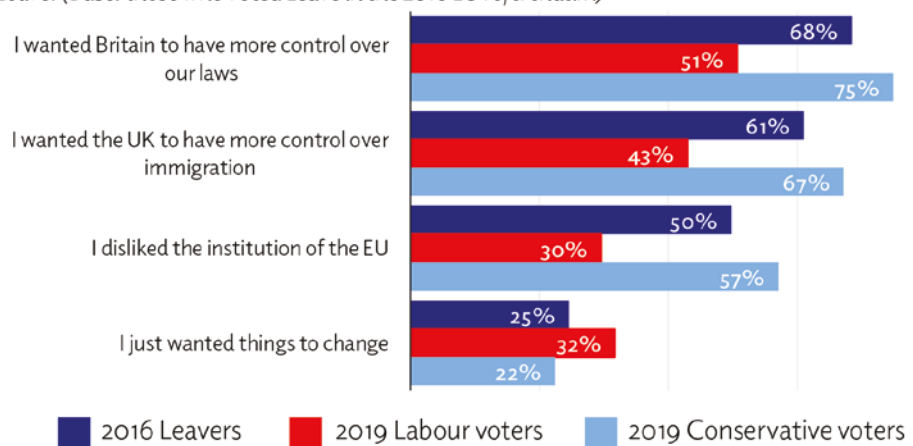
“ I feel like the Leave side represented us getting our independence back, being able to make our own rules, take control of the country (...) we get control of our borders, we get to say who gets to enter” -

Female Voter, 20s, Bassetlaw

Leavers now say that sovereignty was one of the key reasons they voted for Brexit in 2016

From what you remember, which of the following reasons best explains why you voted Leave? (Base: those who voted Leave in the 2016 EU referendum)

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Source: Public First polling for UK in a Changing Europe. Fieldwork 26th May - 2nd Jun 2023. n=4005

There is little difference between Labour and Conservative Remainers when it comes to their reasons for opposing Brexit. However, this is not the case for Leave voters. For Conservative Leavers, control and a general dislike of the EU were the main issues, while Labour Leavers focused on immigration, public services, and a desire to send a message to Westminster.

Inequality has been a recurrent theme since the referendum, given that many poorer, urban constituencies in the North and the Midlands voted for Leave. Some have portrayed the referendum as a ‘howl of rage’ against ‘the system.’ Our findings provide some support for such arguments. Some Leave voters were attracted by the promise of change:

“What it really came down to for me was, in general, the Remain side was saying we need to keep things as they are. Whereas if you weren’t really fully happy with things as they were, the Leave campaign was just so powerful, saying ‘this is all the ways things can be different if you’re not happy right now’, which a lot of us weren’t.” -

Female voter, 30s, Bassetlaw

“We were all promised this “El Dorado” of a place that we’re all going to be better than we’ve been in the past and the NHS was going to get this extra funding...it’s just turned into this fairy tale Cinderella story after that, it were all make believe” –

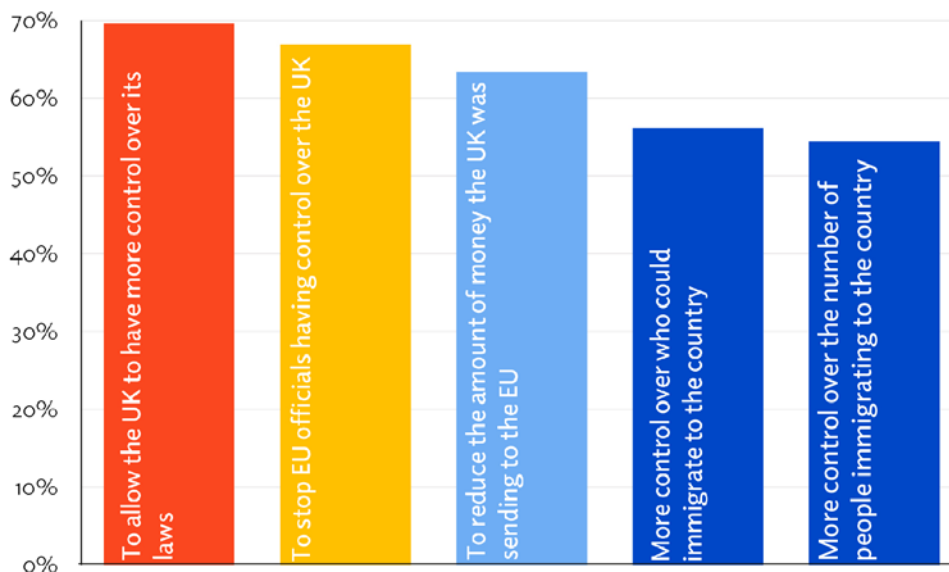
Male voter, 30s, Ashfield

Leave voters from lower social grades and those with A-Levels or below were disproportionately likely to cite ‘bringing attention to the state of the country’ as one of the main reasons for voting for Brexit.

For Leavers in general, however, this was not a priority. Rather, the key driver of support for Brexit was a desire to reclaim control over law-making, reduce the influence of EU officials, and cut the amount of money sent to the EU. In other words, they voted for control over money, laws and borders.

Leavers say that sovereignty, the amount of money sent to the EU, and immigration were key to their vote for Brexit

How important were the following to your vote to leave, if at all? (Base: Leave voters who cite the below as ‘one of the main reasons I voted to leave’)



Source: Public First polling for UK in a Changing Europe. Fieldwork 26th May – 2nd Jun 2023. n=4005

Many voters recall that the referendum felt like a significant political event, more so than a typical general election. Leavers we spoke to in our focus groups recall talking to friends and family about the campaign, and deliberating over how to vote.

“It was everywhere. I have some quite politically minded friends, so it became a topic of debate that we’d discuss quite a lot. The news apps and news cycles were just filled with that [the referendum] and pretty much nothing else. (...) It was like the royal wedding of elections.” –

Female voter, 30s, Bassetlaw

“It was massive. I remember sitting and spending time really trying to find out the information that I covered and was asking a lot of people, how are you voting? [I thought] this is going to go down in history. Everyone needs to make sure they’re registered to vote, everyone needs to get involved in this, this is going to be pivotal to Great Britain as we

know it.” – Female voter, 40s, Bassetlaw

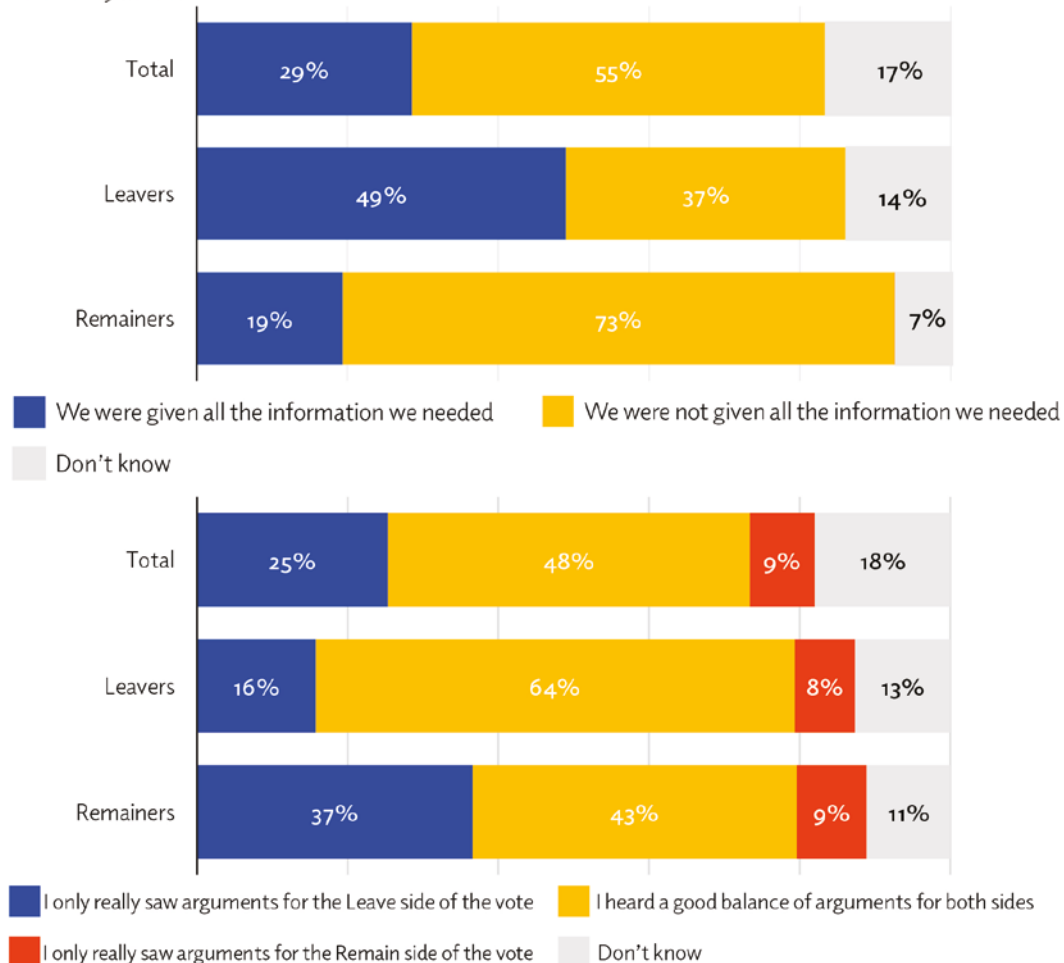
Despite this, over half of respondents to our survey do not think that they were given sufficient information to make an informed decision. Those who voted Remain are disproportionately likely to say this, while almost half of Leavers believe they had all the information they needed.

Leavers are also 20% more likely than Remainers to say that they saw a balance of information from the Leave and Remain sides ahead of referendum day. Just 43% of Remainers agree, with more stating they saw primarily ‘Leave’ arguments.

Leavers are more likely than Remainers to say that they had sufficient information to vote in 2016

Thinking back to making your decision to vote in 2016, which of the following comes closest to your view?

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Leavers and 25% of Remainers say the other side made any good points during the referendum campaign.

When we asked Leave voters about the most convincing reasons for voting Remain, the response of almost a third was ‘none’. There is some sympathy for concerns around the UK economy and loss of free movement privileges, albeit from fewer than a quarter of Leavers. This was reflected in our focus groups:

“There was definitely things that hit harder from the Remain side, particularly for myself. There was lots about freedom of travel, (...) travel for students, for young people. Even things like the power of the passport, I remember being a really big thing, we’d lose the power of our passport.” –

Female voter, 30s, Bassetlaw

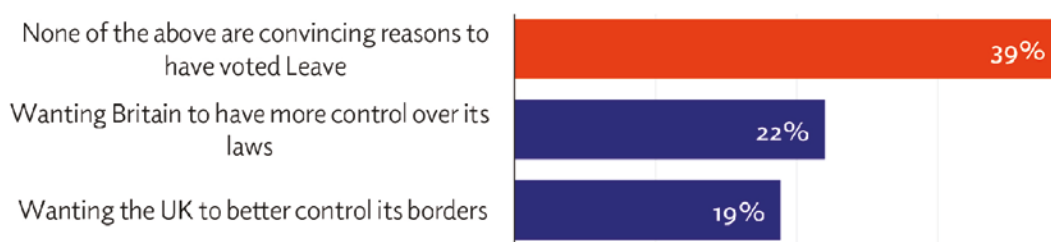
Leavers and Remainers find the other side’s arguments unconvincing

*Below are some reasons which people have given for voting Remain. Which, if any, do you think are convincing reasons to have voted Remain?
(Base: Respondents who voted Leave in 2016)*

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*Below are some reasons which people have given for voting Leave. Which, if any, do you think are convincing reasons to have voted Leave?
(Base: Respondents who voted Remain in 2016)*



Source: Public First polling for UK in a Changing Europe. Fieldwork 26th May – 2nd Jun 2023. n=4005

Remainers, too, are unconvinced. Their most common response is that there were no convincing reasons to vote Leave in 2016, though around 20% admit that wanting Britain to have more control over lawmaking and its borders were valid reasons for doing so.

None of this is surprising given that people tended to inhabit their own ‘echo chambers’. 44% say they voted like most of the people they are closest to, with Remainers more likely to say their close friends, spouses, children, and extended

family voted the same way as them. Respondents in our focus groups could clearly pinpoint the influence of their relatives on their vote choice.

“I think you were almost bombarded with so much information it was almost hard to digest, which I think goes back to a little bit of why I was so heavily influenced on who I voted for, because the information was so overwhelming that I found it easier to take that information from friends and family.” -

Female voter, 20s, Bassetlaw

“If I’m going to be completely honest, I think I was massively influenced by the news and by family members and people around me and the choices that they were making.”-

Female voter, 30s, Bassetlaw

We know why people voted the way they did. The obvious follow-on is: are they happy with the result? Given the lack of sympathy for the other side expressed in the previous section, it’s fair to imagine that many voters will have neither changed their minds, nor come to regret their vote, since 2016.

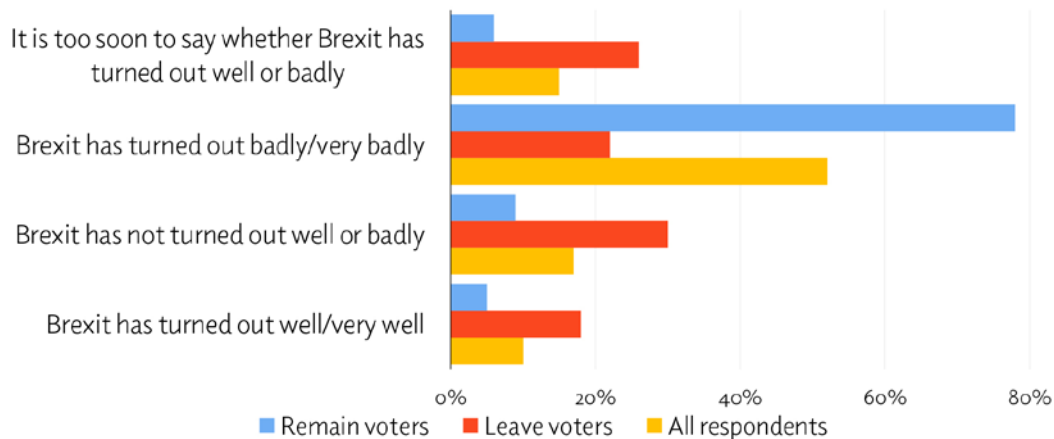
A majority of respondents maintain that they would vote the same way again. This is, however, less true of Leavers. 16% of 2016 Leavers now say they would vote Remain, compared to 6% of Remainers who say they would vote Leave. As per our polling, a majority of the country is now in favour of Remain (54%, a shift of 6% since June 2016). It is important to note, however, that 15% of those we polled would not vote, or are unsure of how they would vote if the referendum were held now.

Our results can help to explain these shifts. 52% of respondents say that Brexit *has gone either badly or very badly, and just 9% say it has gone well. This is, predictably, particularly true for those who voted Remain. Yet while Leavers are much less likely to think Brexit is going badly, only 18% say Brexit is going well, with almost a third undecided.*

Multiple polls across the last eighteen months have revealed the way opinion

Over half of respondents say Brexit has gone badly or very badly. Just 9% say it has gone well.

Would you say that Brexit has so far turned out well or badly?



Source: Public First polling for UK in a Changing Europe. Fieldwork 26th May - 2nd Jun 2023. n=4005

on Brexit has shifted. However, the two questions often left unanswered are: a) why this has happened and b) whether this shift is permanent, or the result of temporary dissatisfaction with the implementation of Brexit.

We prompted voters to say what they think is going well because of Brexit. Most often cited were the UK's ability to move quickly on vaccine development during the Coronavirus pandemic (23%), and the signing of trade deals with non-EU countries (23%). For Leavers, in addition to these, there was a recognition of the fact that the UK can now make laws free from EU control (37%). Given that control was a priority for Leavers when voting, this likely contributes to their more positive evaluations of Brexit.

In our focus groups, Leave voters struggled to cite a benefit of Brexit unprompted, aside from loose notions of the country 'gaining control' of itself. When prompted, however, vaccine development was a popular response.

“On a personal level, I don’t see the benefit but I guess the country as a whole has probably obviously got more independence and a stronger say in what they can and can’t do as to whatever they feel is there” -

Female voter, 30s, Thurrock

When asked what has gone poorly in post-Brexit Britain, economic issues are key. Most respondents state that goods have become more expensive (47%), the economy has weakened (47%), and that key sectors have experienced staff shortages (43%). It is hardly surprising that Remainers say this, given the importance of the economy to them in 2016. Yet a significant proportion of Leavers also recognise that Brexit has had an impact on the economy, with 23% believing the economy has been damaged and 28% thinking goods have become

more expensive.

“It seems likely we’re paying a higher price for goods; it’s harder to get everything. The price of everything’s gone up” –

Male voter, 40s, Thurrock

“Things were supposed to get better, everything they told us that was going to happen hasn’t happened. Our economy has gone downhill and prices of everything’s gone up, everyone’s struggling.” –

Female voter, 40s, Thurrock

“It feels like other countries are laughing at the fact that we’ve left, and we seem like we’re struggling, but we don’t seem like we’re helping ourselves either” –

Male voter, 30s, Ashfield

More widely, almost half of Leavers who would now vote Remain, and Leavers who think Brexit is going badly, think the Leave campaign failed to keep their promises.

“I just think maybe they [the Leave campaign] overpromised. Nobody could see what was going to happen, they’re going through the messiest divorce that’s ever been had in the history of politics. I don’t think there’s ever going to be a hundred percent happy ending”–

Male voter, 40s, Bassetlaw

“I think the speed of implementation has probably been the most disappointing thing for me. I think in the Leave campaign there was a suggestion that things could happen a lot quicker than they perhaps have (...) But yeah, frustrating that a lot of the promises aren’t being met, I guess” –

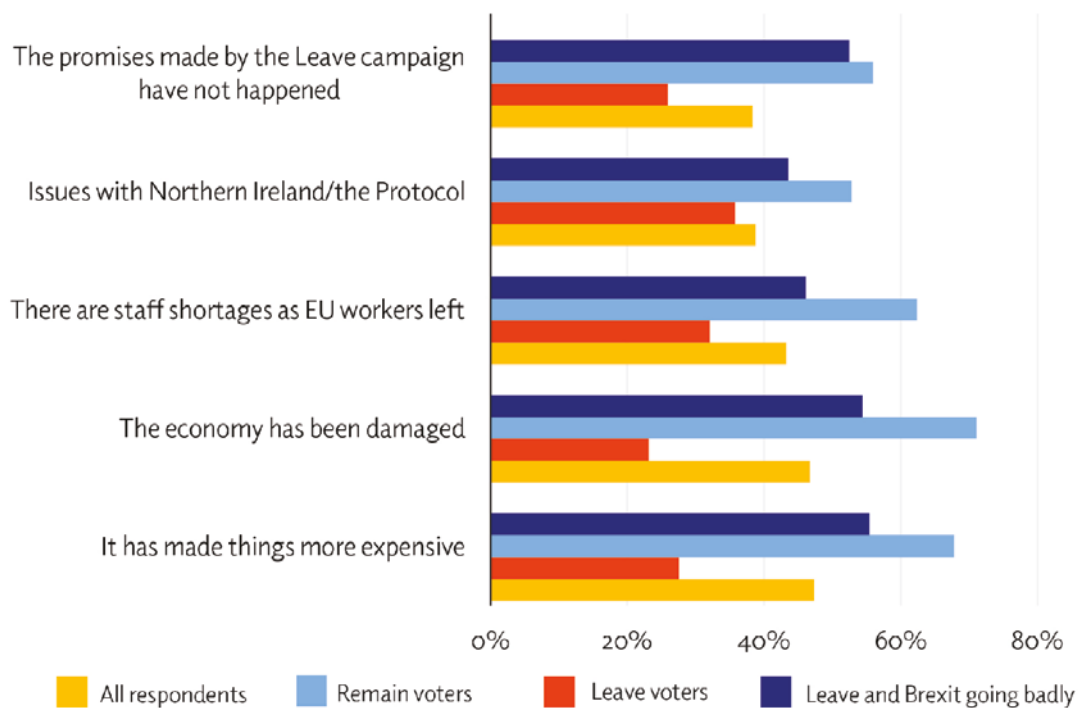
Male voter, 30s, Bassetlaw

Just 30% of respondents think Brexit will turn out well in the long run, compared

Almost half of dissatisfied Leavers think that the Leave Campaign has failed to keep its promises

Which of the following things, if any, do you think have worked out badly as a result of Brexit?

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Source: Public First polling for UK in a Changing Europe. Fieldwork 26th May - 2nd Jun 2023. n=4005

to 43% who think it will turn out badly. Of those who say the UK's departure from the EU has not gone well, almost three quarters (74%) say it never will.

Looking at Leave voters more specifically, they express more optimism, with 61% saying it will turn out well in the long run. Yet only about one in five Leave voters who think Brexit is going badly now think it will turn out well in the long run (19%).

More broadly, the public is pessimistic about the commitments of the Leave campaign being delivered on. 31% say that more stringent migration controls will never be put in place, with similar figures for increased funding for public services like the NHS (34%) and increased attention to inequality (28%).

Leavers are more optimistic. They do think that, on many of the issues they were most concerned about- increasing sovereignty and reducing the control of EU officials- Brexit has delivered. On other issues, they are more likely than the wider public to believe that although other changes may not have taken place yet they likely will in the future.

“The news isn’t getting much better, but I think anything like this will always take time, I wasn’t around for the last kind of big vote when we voted to join the first place, but I don’t imagine, I might be wrong, that that was an instant kind of success and everything just fell into place

immediately, it takes time. We wouldn't have expected it would take as much time as this, but there's been huge things that have got in the way of progress. So, I'd like to think it's going to get better, I just would've hoped it would've been quicker than this." –

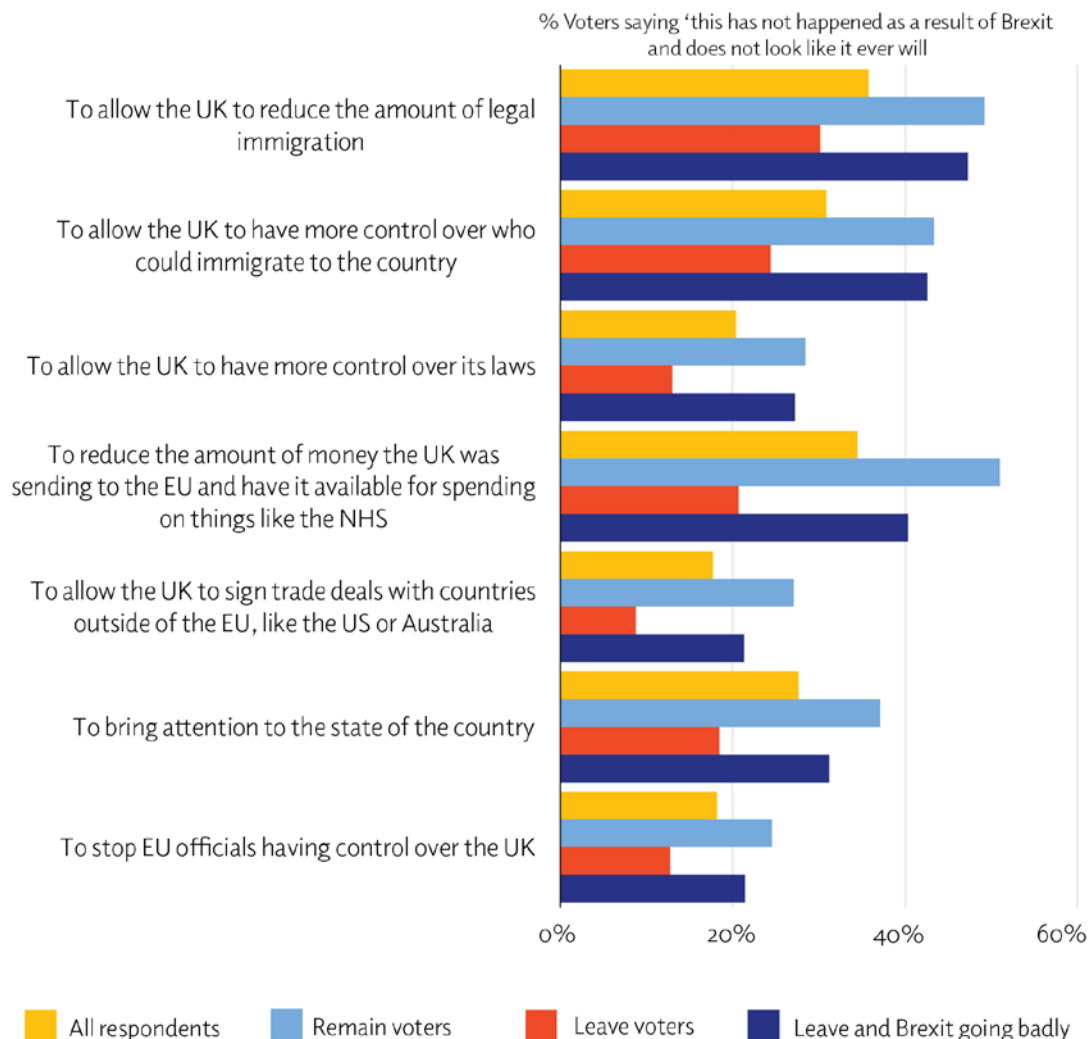
Female voter, 30s, Thurrock

However, those Leavers who think Brexit is going badly are not quite as optimistic, with particular concerns about whether commitments on migration or increased funding for public services will ever be delivered.

The public is pessimistic about the prospect of tighter migration controls, more money for the NHS and increased attention to inequality post-Brexit



Below are some reasons that people have said they voted for Brexit. Looking at each of the following, do you think this has happened as a result of Brexit, or if not will it happen in the future?



Source: Public First polling for UK in a Changing Europe. Fieldwork 26th May - 2nd Jun 2023. n=4005

judgement on Brexit and its impacts. And a large portion of Leavers (including 30% of those who think Brexit is currently going badly) said they would still vote Leave if they had known what they knew today. It could be interpreted that for many, the promises of the Leave campaign are simply yet to be delivered.

CHAPTER 2: BREXIT IMPACTS

Our data allows us to look at the ways voters think Brexit has impacted the UK. In this section, we initially consider the impacts voters have noticed ‘on the ground’, and the extent to which they attribute these to Brexit. We also look at perceptions of ‘Brexit impact’ in three areas which dominated the referendum campaign: the economy, immigration, and the Union.

We asked our respondents if they had personally heard, seen, or experienced any of the so-called ‘Brexit impacts’ reported in the news in recent months. These include travel delays, increases to the cost of living, and staff vacancies in the NHS, the hospitality sector, and public services.

A large portion of the population is aware of these issues, with a significant number having personal experience of food shortages, travel delays, and the increased cost of goods, including the Leave voters in our focus groups.

“I come from a health background so we lost a lot of EU nurses post-Brexit because they didn’t have indefinite leave to remain” –

Male voter, 30s, Bassetlaw

“Where I work, it’s 10 times worse. So, for imports, for exports, the process is so much longer, so much paperwork. I’m not surprised there’s so many shops and businesses are closing, it’s just honestly horrendous” –

Female voter, 40s, Thurrock

“I remember when I used to do a delivery job a few years ago and there was a time after Brexit that they were begging people to ask around to try and find drivers for the lorries and stuff because there was just no one to do it. People weren’t turning up and the staff just halved.” –

Male voter, 20s, Thurrock

However, many respondents, both in our survey and focus groups, were reluctant simply to blame Brexit, not least in the context of a pandemic and a war in Europe.

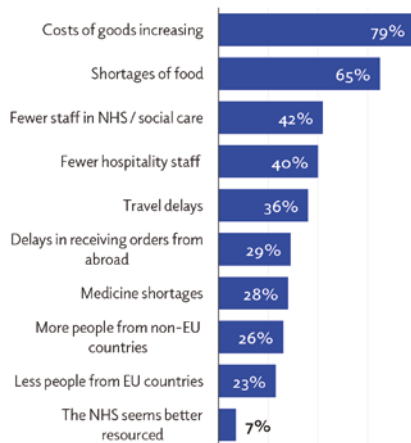
“I’m kind of torn a little bit because we’ve gone through a Covid pandemic and we’ve got uncertainty in Europe with war, of course, currently as well, so, that’s inevitably going to delay some of the things that were perhaps promised.” –

Male voter, 30s, Bassetlaw

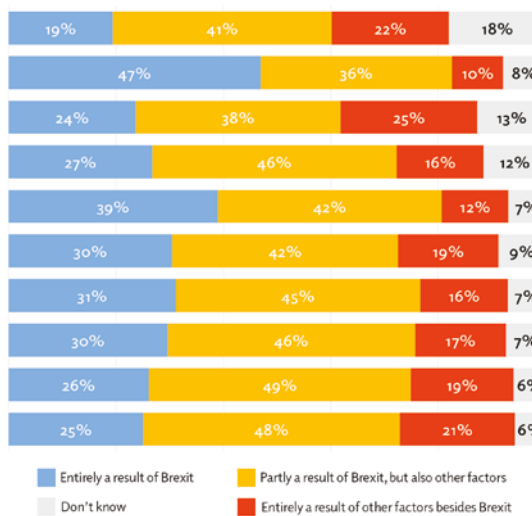
Most respondents have personal experience of issues such as increased food costs, staff vacancies and travel delays, but do not attribute them to Brexit alone

Source: Public First polling for UK in a Changing Europe. Fieldwork 26th May - 2nd Jun 2023. n=4005

Which of the following have you personally noticed happening in the UK over the past year, if any?
(Response: Have personally noticed this)



For those things you have personally noticed or have heard about, do you think these have happened as a result of Brexit, or other factors besides Brexit?



Perhaps unsurprisingly, after a year of rising inflation and a cost-of-living crisis, voters think the British economy has weakened. 60% of voters think Brexit is responsible for this decline. 43% also say that Brexit has had a negative impact on inward investment, with Britain a less attractive environment for business post-Brexit. Leavers tend to be more optimistic, with just 15% believing that leaving the EU has had a positive impact on the UK economy, with 77% either neutral or negative.

However, voters do not solely blame the UK's departure from the EU for this: similar numbers cite interest rate increases, the consequences of the war in Ukraine, the pandemic, and the economics of the Truss government. Again, Leavers are more likely than the public as a whole to believe that Brexit *in conjunction with other external factors* is responsible for weak economic performance.

“The economic situation that we’re all in, and I believe the world is in, is because of Russia. (...) The West and most of the world was quite reliant on Russian gas, cheap Russian gas (...) and food shortages, everything shortages, the price of the cost of living going up can all, I believe, go back to the Russian invasion of Ukraine” –

Male voter, 60s, Thurrock

“I personally don’t think that the cost of living inflation, anything like that has got anything to do with Brexit. It is not a European or British issue, it’s a worldwide issue with inflation and cost of living. So, for me, I don’t think Brexit has played an impact or impacted on it at all.” –

Male voter, 40s, Bassetlaw

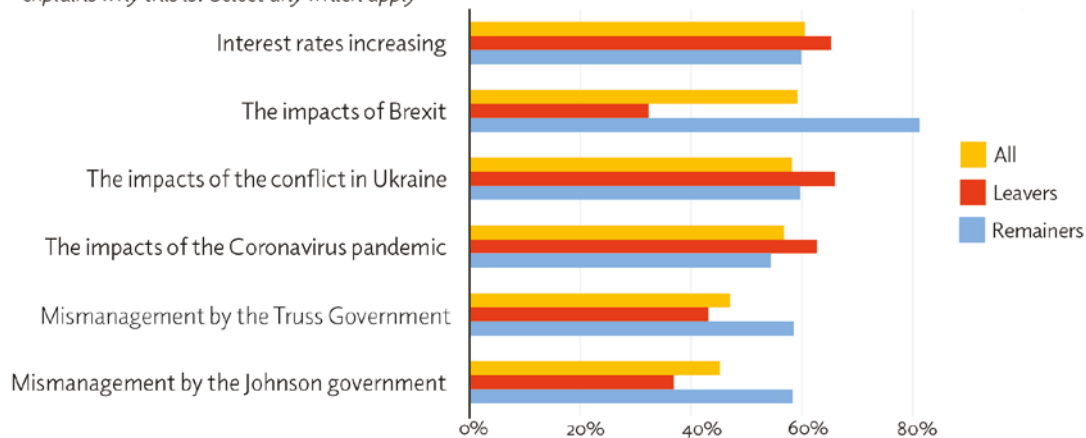
“It’s very difficult because obviously, the Covid crisis, we’ve got to take that on board of how it brought the country to a halt” –

Female voter, 50s, Ashfield

Around 60% of voters say Brexit has negatively impacted the UK economy over the last year

You said that the UK economy has got worse over the last year. Which of the following best explains why this is? Select any which apply

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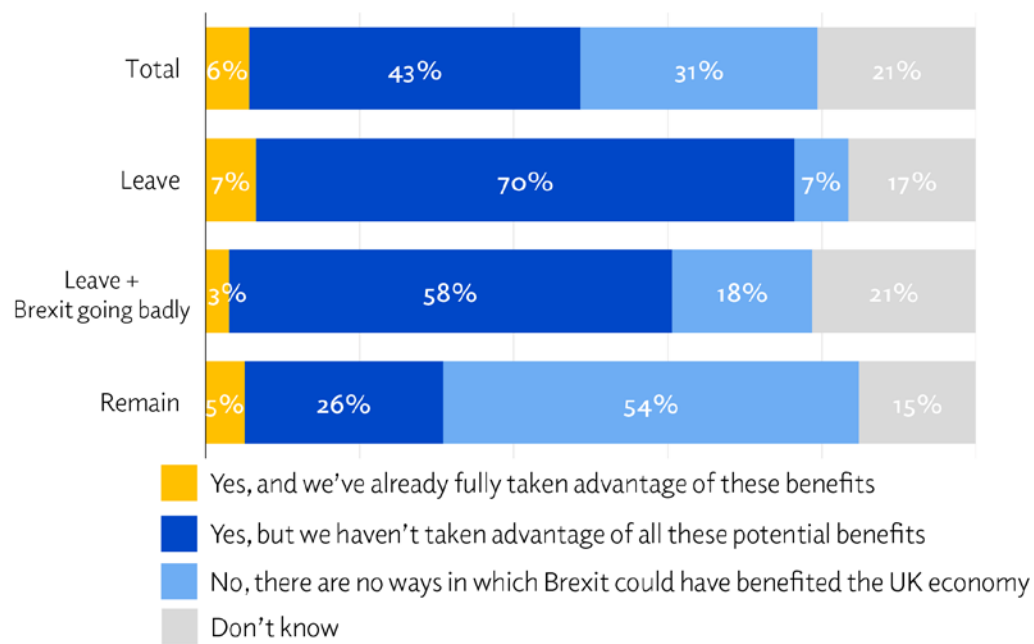


Source: Public First polling for UK in a Changing Europe. Fieldwork 26th May – 2nd Jun 2023, n=4005

The public generally takes a dim view of the impact of Brexit on the economy. Yet over two in five respondents believe there are ways leaving the EU could benefit the economy, albeit these have not yet been taken advantage of. This sentiment is concentrated primarily amongst 2016 Leavers, including those who either regret their decision in 2016 and have since switched to supporting Remain, and those who believe Brexit is going badly. This suggests some optimism amongst this group that the benefits of Brexit are not irretrievably lost, but rather have not been claimed by successive governments since 2016.

Four in ten voters think there are ways that Brexit could have a positive impact on the UK economy

In your view, are there ways in which Brexit could benefit the UK economy?



Source: Public First polling for UK in a Changing Europe. Fieldwork 26th May - 2nd Jun 2023. n=4005

Opportunities identified include signing new trade agreements, encouraging businesses to source goods locally as opposed to importing from the EU, and reducing 'red tape'. These are popular options amongst Brexiteers and those who are currently unhappy with the course of Brexit. This suggests that while there is relative consensus amongst Leavers and Remainers that Brexit has not had a positive impact on the economy, Leavers think there are ways this can be rectified.

Respondents think that, by signing new trade deals and cutting administrative burdens to trade, Brexit could benefit the UK economy

You said there are ways in which Brexit could benefit the UK economy. In your view what are these ways?

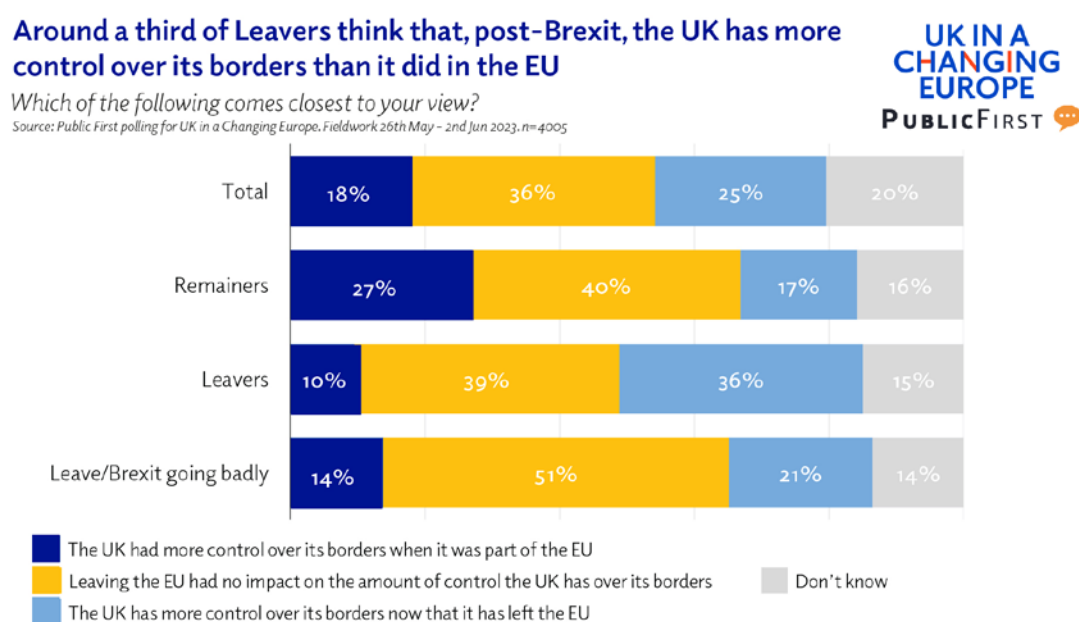
(Base: Respondents who think there are ways in which Brexit could benefit the UK economy)



Source: Public First polling for UK in a Changing Europe. Fieldwork 26th May - 2nd Jun 2023. n=4005

Immigration was a [key issue](#) during the 2016 referendum. The official Vote Leave campaign pivoted to focus on it after the ONS [revealed in May 2016](#) that net migration was at its second highest level on record. We go into more detail on this in Chapter 3, but it is important to understand why some Leave voters feel let down by Brexit.

While our data shows that Leavers' key priority was regaining 'control', stricter migration controls came a close second, and is the only justification for leaving the EU that Remainers have some sympathy for. Over a third of voters- including around a quarter of 2016 Remainers- think that, when the UK was part of the EU, its migration system was not strict enough and allowed too many people to immigrate into the UK.

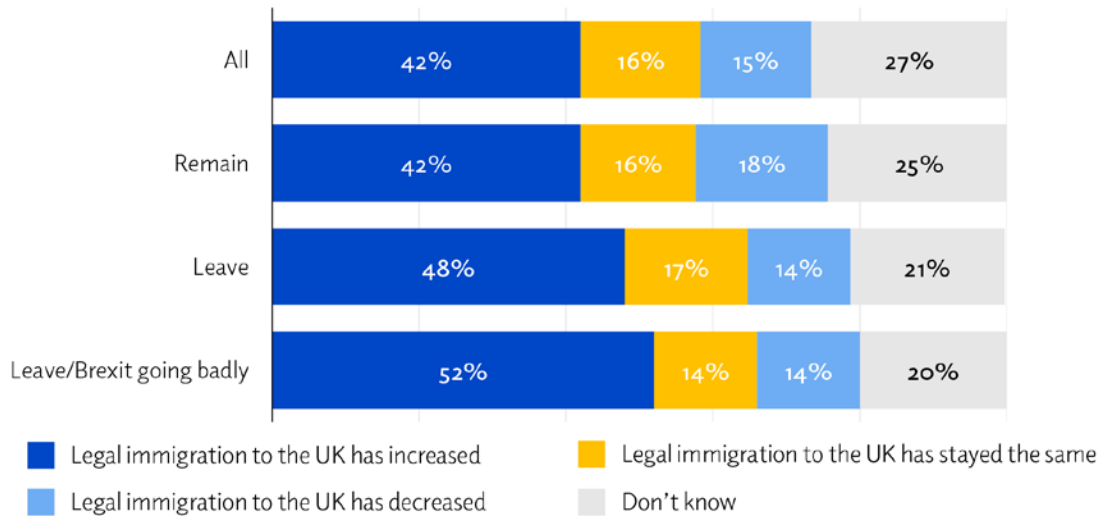


Almost 40% of Leavers think Brexit has had no impact on the control the UK has over its borders. A significant portion of Leavers who are dissatisfied with the course of Brexit (51%) think the same. 62% of this group also believe the country's current migration system is too lax.

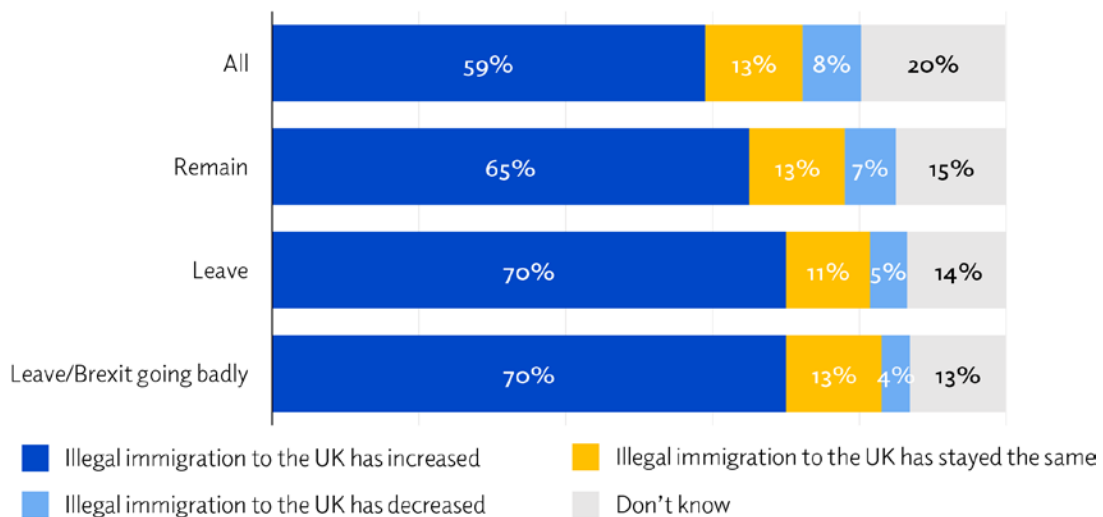
Moreover, leaving the EU is deemed by most respondents to have made it more difficult to deal with small boats crossing the Channel, including two in five of those Leavers who think Brexit is going badly. Previous research has shown that this form of illegal crossing is a [priority issue](#) for many Leavers post-2016.

Voters are more likely than not to think that rates of both legal and illegal migration have increased since Brexit

Thinking specifically about **legal** immigration, which of the following comes closest to your view?



Thinking specifically about **illegal** immigration, which of the following comes closest to your view?

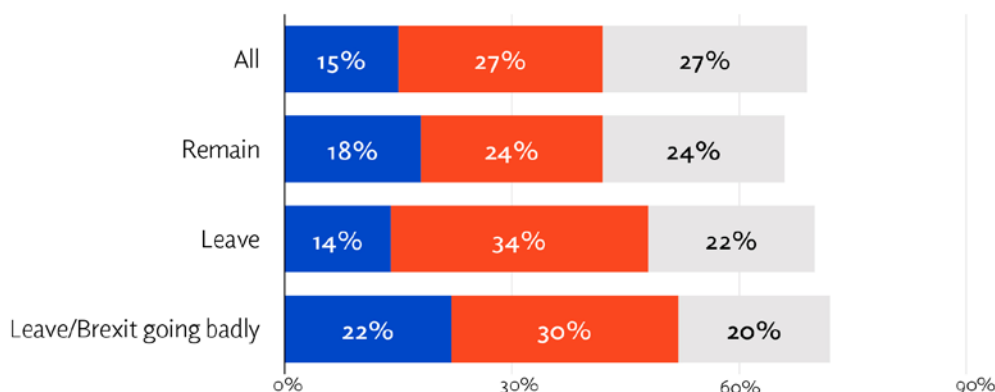


Source: Public First polling for UK in a Changing Europe. Fieldwork 26th May - 2nd Jun 2023. n=4005

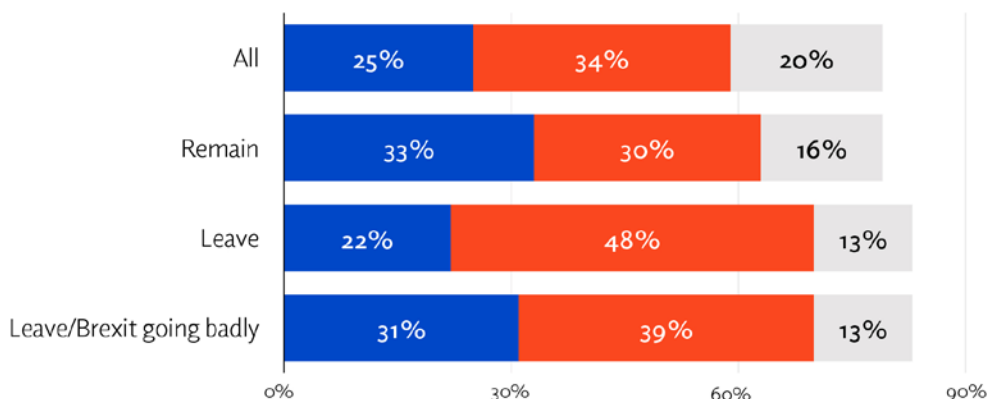
Although most respondents believe both illegal and legal migration to the UK has increased since 2016, the public is still more likely to say this is not wholly a result of Brexit. Though Leave campaigners [argue](#) they have made good on their commitment to deliver a more stringent migration system outside the EU, for many Leave voters, this may be hard to reconcile with record levels of net migration.

Most respondents who believe migration has increased since 2016 do not believe this is due to Brexit

Thinking specifically about **legal** immigration, which of the following comes closest to your view?
(Base: Respondents who think legal immigration to the UK has increased since 2016)



Thinking specifically about **illegal** immigration, which of the following comes closest to your view?
(Base: Respondents who think illegal immigration to the UK has increased since 2016)



- (I) Legal immigration to the UK has increased as a result of Brexit
- (II) Legal immigration to the UK has increased since Brexit, *but not as a result* of Brexit
- Don't know

Source: Public First polling for UK in a Changing Europe. Fieldwork 26th May – 2nd Jun 2023. n=4005

Brexit's consequences for the Union have been a key focus of the media, politicians, and the public since 2016. The four nations of the UK voted differently in 2016: England voted most strongly for Leave (53%), followed by Wales (52.5%). In contrast, 56% of voters in Northern Ireland, and over 60% of Scottish voters, chose Remain.

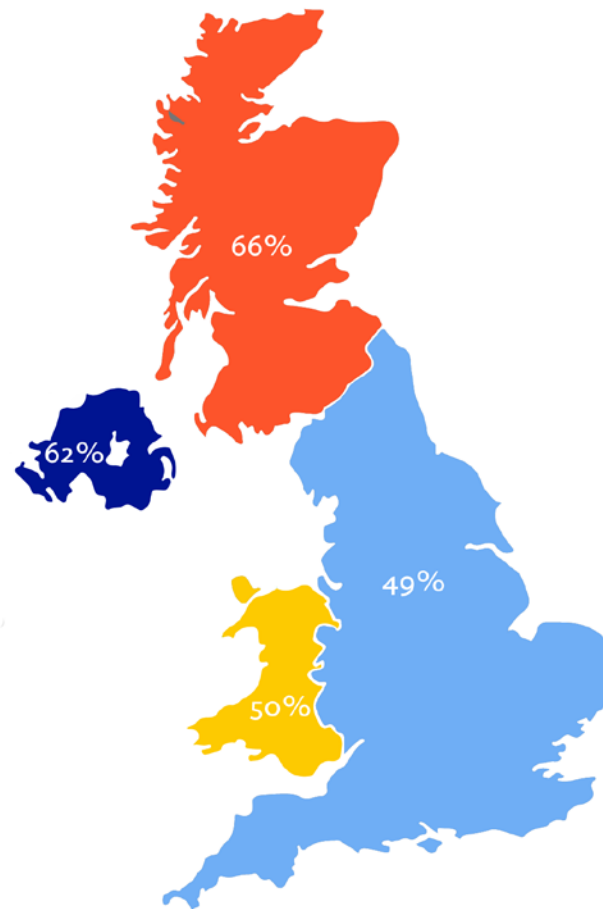
Unsurprisingly, perceptions of Brexit as 'negative' have therefore [been concentrated](#) in certain parts of the country. Our survey finds stark differences between the four nations in how well they think Brexit has been going.

Respondents in Scotland and Northern Ireland are much more likely to say Brexit has gone badly, had a negative impact on the economy and that 'nothing has gone well' because of Brexit.

Respondents in Scotland and Northern Ireland are more likely to say Brexit has gone badly thus far than those in England and Wales

Overall, would you say that Brexit has so far turned out well or badly?
(Base: Respondents answering 'badly' and 'very badly')

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Source: Public First polling for UK in a Changing Europe. Fieldwork 26th May - 2nd Jun 2023. n=4005

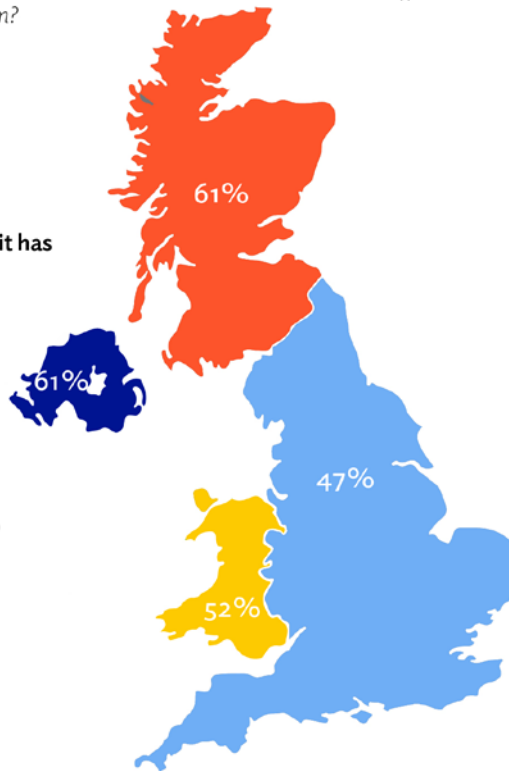
Respondents in Scotland and Northern Ireland are more likely than those in the rest of the country to say that there should not have been a referendum in the first place and are more open to rejoining the EU. Ongoing issues in Northern Ireland with the implementation and implications of the Protocol, as well as the absence of a functioning Executive, alongside anger amongst Scottish voters about being taken out of the EU 'against their will', go some way to explaining these divides in public opinion.

And these divides have translated into concerns amongst voters from across the UK about the sustainability of the Union. Almost half of those we surveyed think that the Union is weaker post-Brexit; again, this sentiment is highly concentrated in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

People outside of England are more likely to think that the Union is weaker post-Brexit, compared to English voters

What impact, if any, do you think Brexit has had on the Union between the different countries in the United Kingdom?

Respondents answering 'it has made the Union weaker':



Source: Public First polling for UK in a Changing Europe. Fieldwork 26th May - 2nd Jun 2023. n=4005

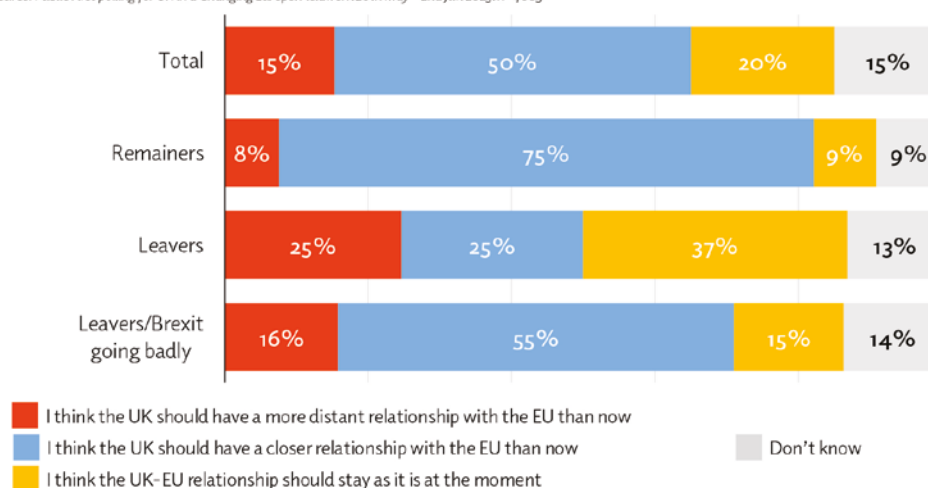
For many voters, working more closely with the EU could help to alleviate the concerns they have about Brexit's impact on the economy and migration, as outlined above. Around two in five voters are dissatisfied with the current UK-EU relationship. Around 50% say that the UK should have a closer relationship than it does now, with an almost equal amount saying relations should at least be 'more friendly'.

Leavers are more hesitant. Of all respondents, they are the most likely to say they are satisfied with the current state of the relationship. Yet almost half (46%) are indifferent to the current partnership; this could be interpreted to say these voters can be pushed either way and are not completely shut off to the possibility of closer cooperation. This seems the case given that 55% of Leavers who believe Brexit is going badly think there should be a closer UK-EU relationship.

Half of voters think that the UK and the EU should have a closer relationship

Which of the following comes closest to your view?

Source: Public First polling for UK in a Changing Europe. Fieldwork 26th May - 2nd Jun 2023. n=4005



Indeed, in our focus groups of Leave voters, though most are clear that they do not necessarily regret the way they voted in 2016 and have not changed their minds, many see the value in some closer cooperation with the EU.

“We’ve made our bed, let’s all lie in it, let’s move forward and look to the future and any of those positive things that we did have, those positive relationships, laws, agreements, we can start to possibly discuss rebuilding them” –

Female voter, 20s, Bassetlaw

CHAPTER 3:

THE EXTENT OF BREXIT REGRET AND ITS MEANING

Over the course of the last few years, ‘Brexit regret’ has become a popular theme in the media and amongst some commentators. The notion that Leave voters feel they did not have enough information to make an informed decision and that they would vote remain now if given the chance again even has its own term: ‘Bregret’.

A number of polls have shown an increase in the number of people who would now vote Remain if given the chance. In our research (both quantitative and qualitative) over the last couple of years, we have seen a gradual but marked increase in the number of people who think Brexit has not worked and who would now vote Remain.

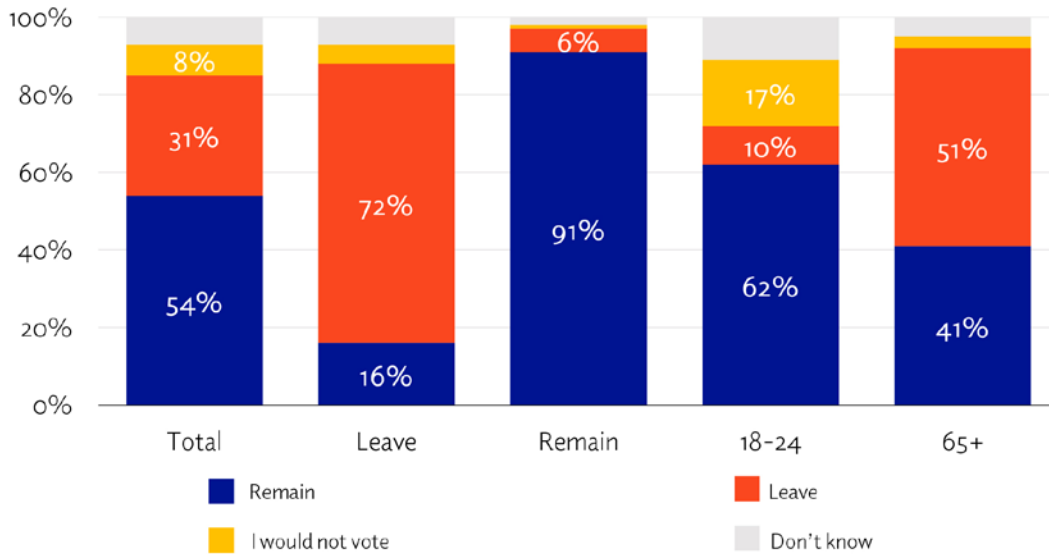
How extensive, then, is ‘Bregret’? Who actually regrets their vote? And if they do, what is the nature of their regret? Are they genuinely angry, or just disappointed? Do they think it has gone badly, and if so, why? Who do they blame? Could things have gone differently? Have Leave voters now become Remain voters? Only by asking these fundamental questions can we really understand the real nature of ‘Bregret’.

Let us first look at the questions that have tended to get the most attention: how would people vote if there was another referendum? And how do people think Brexit has worked out so far?

We found 16% of Leave voters say they would have voted Remain if they knew what they know now, with a large majority (72%) saying they would vote Leave again in another referendum. Yet just 18% of Leavers think Brexit has turned out well or very well; 30% are neutral; and 22% say badly or very badly. Over a quarter say it’s too early to tell.

Most Leavers and Remainers say, knowing what they know now, they would still vote as they did in 2016

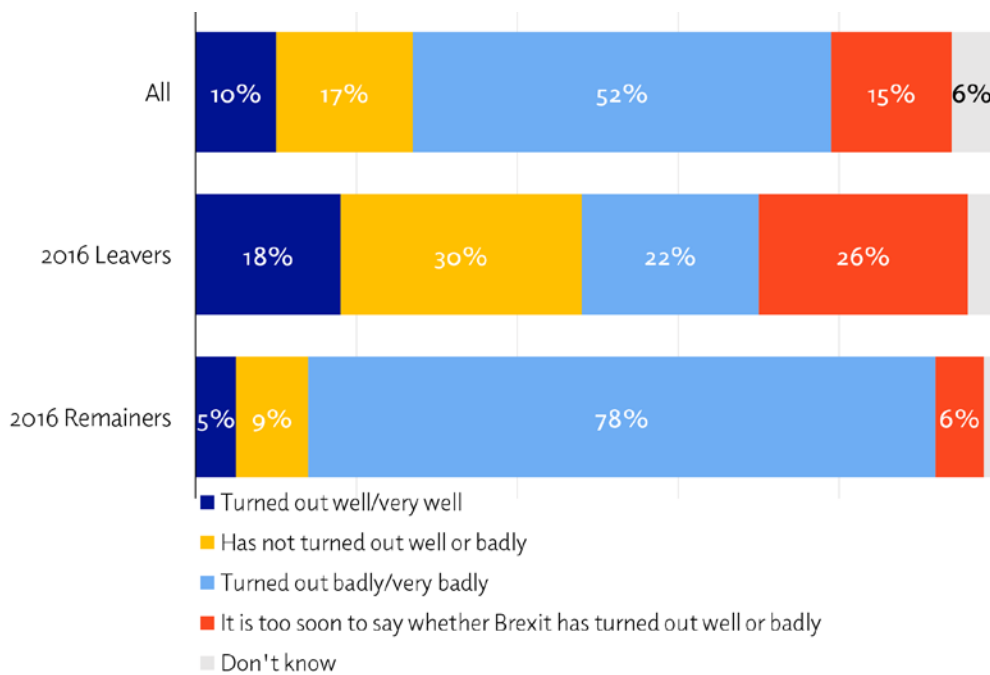
If you knew what you knew today, how would you have chosen to vote in the 2016 referendum, if at all?



Source: Public First polling for UK in a Changing Europe. Fieldwork 26th May - 2nd Jun 2023. n=4005

Just 18% of Leavers say Brexit has turned out well thus far

Overall so far, would you say that Brexit has turned out well or badly?



Source: Public First Poll for UK in a Changing Europe. 26 May - 2 June 2023. N= 4005 UK adults.

However, it is worth stressing that most Leave voters do not regret their vote.

The number of people who truly regret their vote and are angry about it is probably much lower. In fact, in our polling, we found that only 16% of Leave voters agreed that they have regrets about how they voted in the Referendum, which is much lower than the 34% who think Brexit is going badly.

This came across in our qualitative work. There were some who were openly frustrated about how Brexit had turned out and felt they had been misled. Others, however, were more cautious when it came to whether they ‘regretted’ their vote, even if they felt Brexit was going badly.

“I’m always reticent in democratic type processes to look back and say, yeah, I would change if I did it again because we knew it was sold as a kind of once in a lifetime thing and we made a decision based on information we got at that time and I think in any election you can look back and say, well actually I’d of done something different if I had another go.” –

Male voter, 30s, Bassetlaw

“Do I regret it? No, we’ve started on this journey, let’s finish the journey.” –

Male voter, 60s, Thurrock

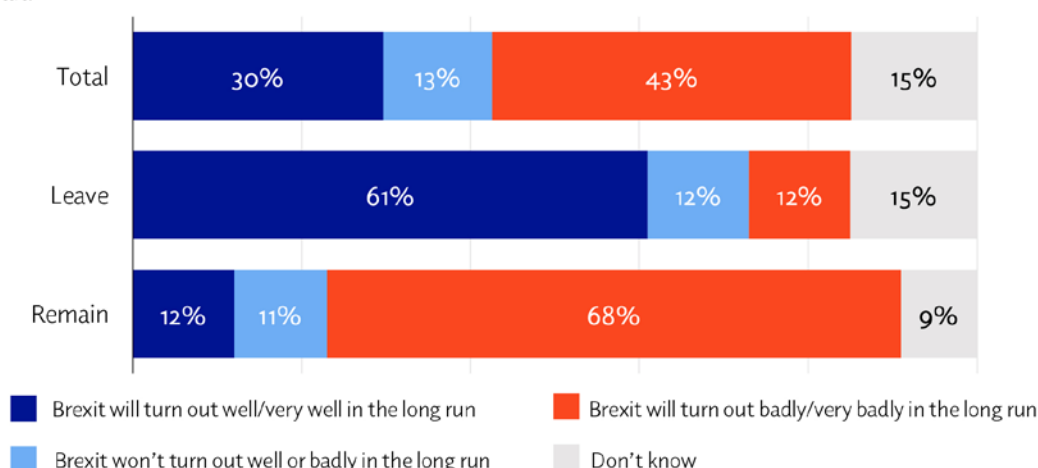
“So, I don’t regret it, but I do wish that we had had stronger people representing us to make the deals a bit more and not cave in so quickly.” –

Female voter, 30s, Thurrock

To further contextualise the concept of ‘Bregret’, we also need to look at what Leave voters think will happen in the future. Even though a significant minority of Leave voters think Brexit has worked out badly so far, a majority of them think Brexit will turn out well in the end.

Most Leavers think that, in the end, Brexit will turn out well

If you had to guess, would you say that Brexit will turn out well or badly in the long run?



Source: Public First polling for UK in a Changing Europe. Fieldwork 26th May - 2nd Jun 2023. n=4005

“I still think that we can do Brexit as a country, I still think that it’s doable, but unfortunately...I think it’s really hard because of COVID.” -

Female voter, 30s, Thurrock

This is not to say that no Leavers feel misled; in fact, many do. But their anger is directed at politicians for not doing enough - not trying hard enough, in many cases - to make Brexit work.

“David Cameron went away the minute the results came back. Theresa May was always anti-Brexit, but tried to do her best with it, but didn’t really get very far. Boris was Boris.” -

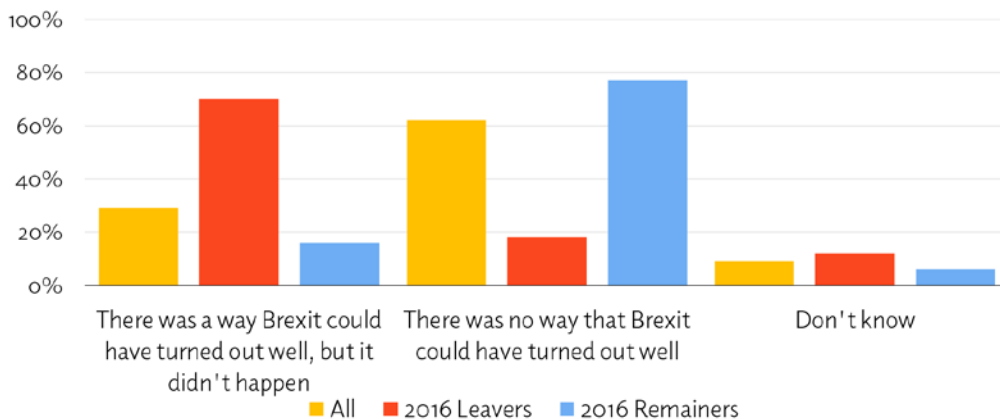
Female voter, 50s, Ashfield

For many of those who voted to Leave and now feel Brexit has not gone well, politicians are at the centre of what went wrong. Of those Leavers who think Brexit has gone badly, many believe there was a path to make it work, but this wasn’t taken because of the ineffectiveness of UK politicians and their folding to EU demands. Nearly half (48%) say that there was a way politicians could have made Brexit work, but they did not even try.

Among the vast majority of Leave voters who feel Brexit has gone badly (70%), but believe there was a way it could have gone well, most blame UK politicians for being ineffective and failing to get a good deal, and for giving in too much to the EU’s demands.

Most voters who think Brexit has gone badly now think there was no way it could have ever turned out well

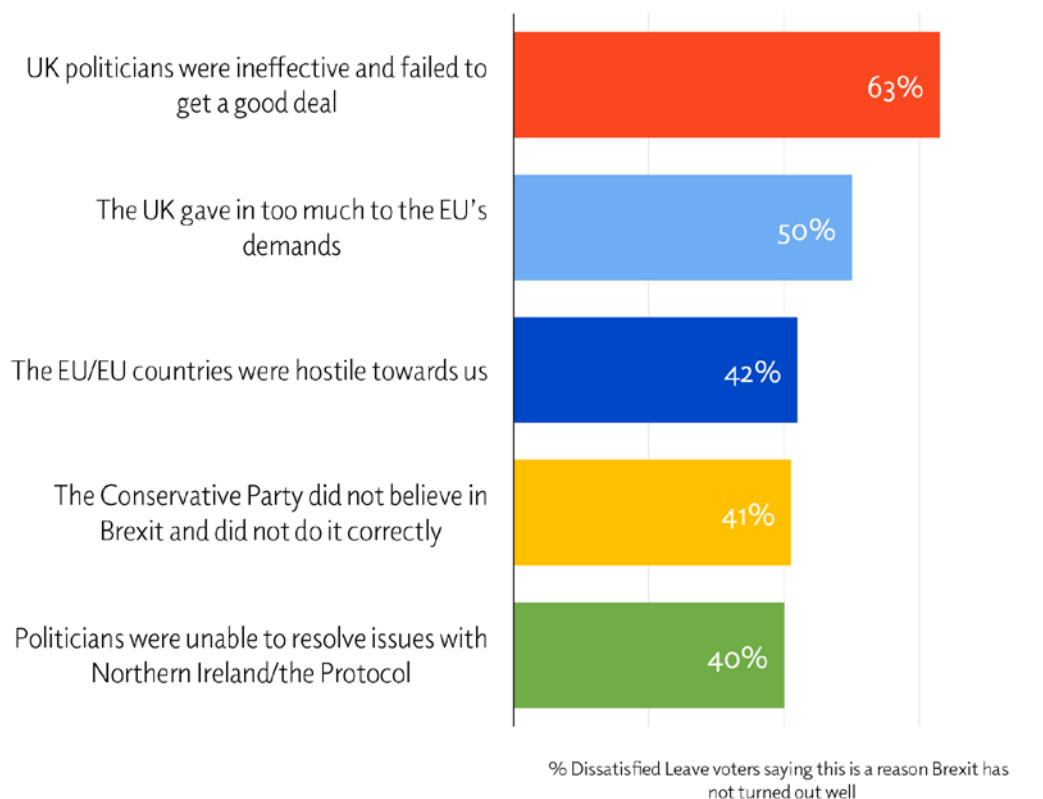
You said that Brexit has turned out badly. Which of the following comes closest to your view? (Base: Respondents who said Brexit has gone badly)



Source: Public First Poll for UK in a Changing Europe, 26 May - 2 June 2023, N= 4005 UK adults.

Leave voters who are unhappy with the course of Brexit blame politicians for being ineffective and giving in too much to the EU's red lines

You said that there was a way Brexit could have turned out well, but this did not happen. In your view, what are the reasons it did not turn out well? Select any which apply. (Base: Leave voters who think Brexit has not gone well)



Source: Public First polling for UK in a Changing Europe, Fieldwork 26th May - 2nd Jun 2023, n=4005

“I feel like them [politicians] actually sticking to what they say they’re going to do would be a great start, which is sort of the government all over, isn’t it? Like selling you a dream and delivering you a nightmare.” –

Female voter, 20s, Bassetlaw

“I feel the government could have made more decisions, better decisions to try and make it work. They’re, I dunno, a bit flappy sometimes on their decision making, they took longer, it took a long time to make decisions.” –

Female voter, 30s, Thurrock

“[Brexit has] changed the way I vote because I don’t trust any of them [politicians], I don’t believe a word.” –

Female voter, 50s, Thurrock

“It’s like splitting up with your Mrs and then she’s very bitter about it... we’re not going into deals with you, we’re not doing this, we’re not doing this...It took that long to happen, the Brexit deal, by the time we’ve split up with them we’re in a one bed flat on our own and we haven’t got a clue what we’re gonna do” –

Male voter, 30s, Ashfield

However, we must also put Leavers’ anger in context. These genuinely angry Leave voters are also relatively small in number. The reality is that most voters are just thinking about other things, like the economy, the health service and crime.

“I don’t know. I’m sort of in the position where I don’t feel passionately enough about it either way, I’m just a bit like hmm.” –

Woman, 20s, Bassetlaw

By far the dominant feeling among former Leave voters- even those unhappy with the course of Brexit- is ambivalence. By this, we mean that most people do not appear to have given the referendum and its aftermath much thought at all.

CHAPTER 4: IMMIGRATION

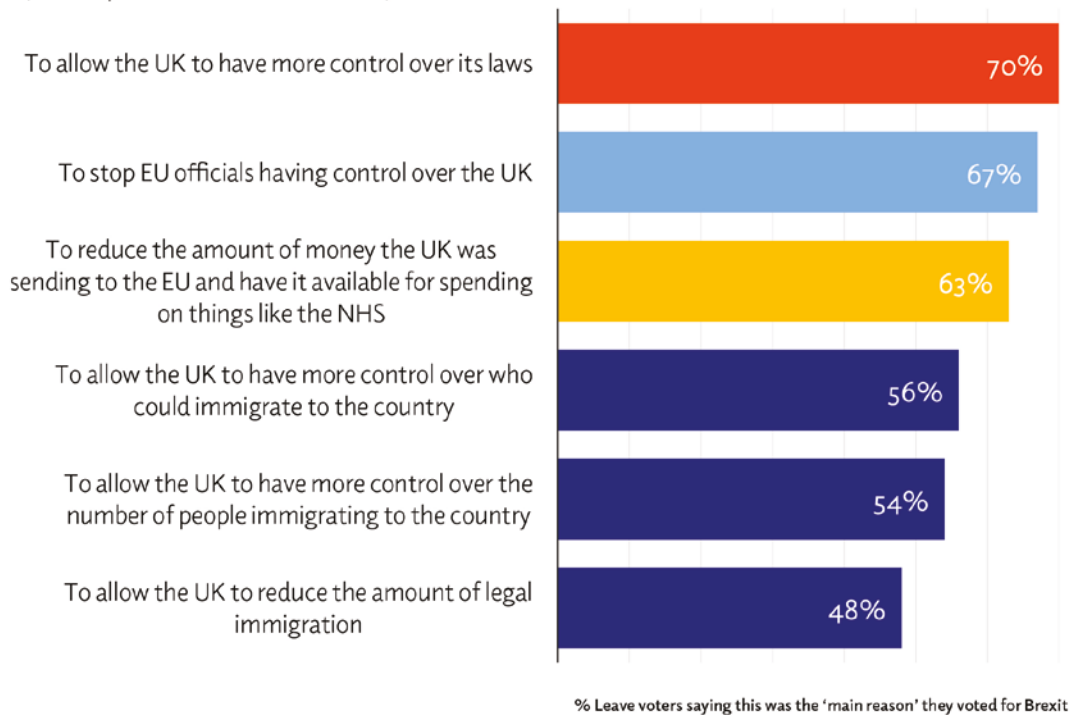
Immigration became the dominant theme of the referendum by its latter stages. Nigel Farage secured massive media coverage for fronting a much-criticised billboard ad featuring large queues of, supposedly, Eastern European migrants preparing to come to Britain. Meanwhile, the official Leave campaign, Vote Leave, released a series of ads tapping into public concern about free movement. These included TV ads which directly suggested that A&E waiting rooms would be quieter – with treatment correspondingly received more quickly – if Britain was outside the EU.

But was immigration really as dominant as suggested? Leave campaigners themselves regularly say that ‘control’ was more important than numbers in the campaign – and that borders were just one of the things over which they wanted to reassert control. Indeed, since the referendum, they have been keen to stress that [they committed to](#) an immigration system that would favour higher-paid migrants, rather than necessarily reduce overall numbers.

Our research suggests there is something to this. Given a list of issues that might explain why they voted Leave back in 2016, the most popular responses amongst voters are those related to control. The most often cited reason for voting Leave by our respondents was ‘to allow the UK to have more control over its laws’, followed by ‘to stop EU officials having control over the UK’, and ‘to reduce the amount of money the UK was sending to the EU and have it available for spending on things like the NHS’, which itself is another ‘control’ message. Immigration features next, but again in the context of control: ‘to allow the UK to have more control over who could immigrate to the country’. Reducing the amount of legal immigration features, but slightly lower down in respondents’ priorities.

When asked their main reason for voting Leave in 2016, Leave voters are more likely to cite ‘control’ than reducing net migration

Some have said the following were reasons they voted to leave in the EU referendum, while others voted to leave for different reasons. How important were the following to your vote to leave, if at all?
(Base: Respondents who voted Leave in 2016)



Source: Public First polling for UK in a Changing Europe. Fieldwork 26th May - 2nd Jun 2023, n=4,005

Though clearly reducing overall numbers was important to a significant portion of Leave voters, respondents in our focus groups often put their concerns in terms of ‘control’.

“I think my motivation from what I remember is about the whole migrant situation. I felt like it was getting a little bit out of control and by leaving, we were going to get more power back to control our own borders and to kind of have more control and power over the immigration of our country.” –

Female voter, 30s, Thurrock

“I feel like the Leave side represented us getting our independence back, being able to make our own rules, take control of the country. I feel like a big thing to do with immigrants was part of the Leave side and we get control of our borders, we get to say who gets to enter and the stay side, I didn’t really, to be honest with you, I didn’t really hear massive amounts of positives about the stay side.” –

Female voter, 20s, Bassetlaw

“I think that they massively portrayed the Leave side was more about controlling borders and I know pretty much 90% of people I speak to that voted to leave was because they thought it was more control of the borders and they didn’t even know what else they were voting for and they didn’t care, it was just that really on its own and that’s how I think that’s what swayed it and it did for me.” –

Female voter, 40s, Bassetlaw

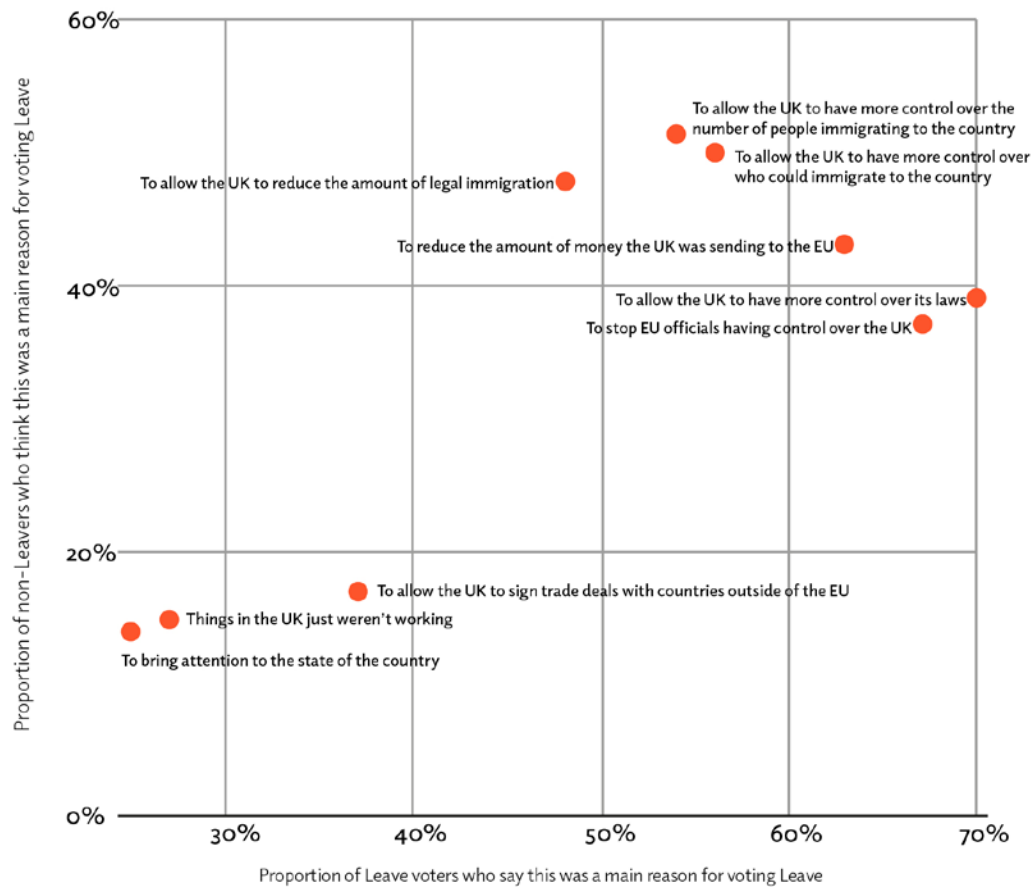
Those who did not vote Leave tend to slightly overestimate the importance of immigration to Leave voters. 51% of non-Leave voters (Remainers and non-voters) say that they believe allowing the UK to have more control over the number of people immigrating to the country was one of the main reasons people voted to Leave.

Indeed, 54% of Leave voters agree that this was one of the main reasons, and our data above shows the importance of both border control and reducing overall numbers to these respondents. Yet interestingly- and in contrast to what non-Leave voters think, this is less than say their main reasons included allowing the UK more control over its laws (70%), stopping EU officials having control over the UK (67%) and reducing the amount of money the UK was sending to the EU (63%).

Non-Leave voters are much less likely to consider these among the main reasons people voted to leave the EU, with 43% believing reducing money sent abroad was a main reason, 39% giving the UK more control over its laws, and just 37% stopping EU officials having control over the UK.

Those who did not vote Leave in 2016 overestimate the relative importance of immigration to Leave voters

Proportion of non-Leavers who think this was one of the main reasons people voted Leave vs the proportion of Leavers voters who say it was one of the main reasons they voted Leave

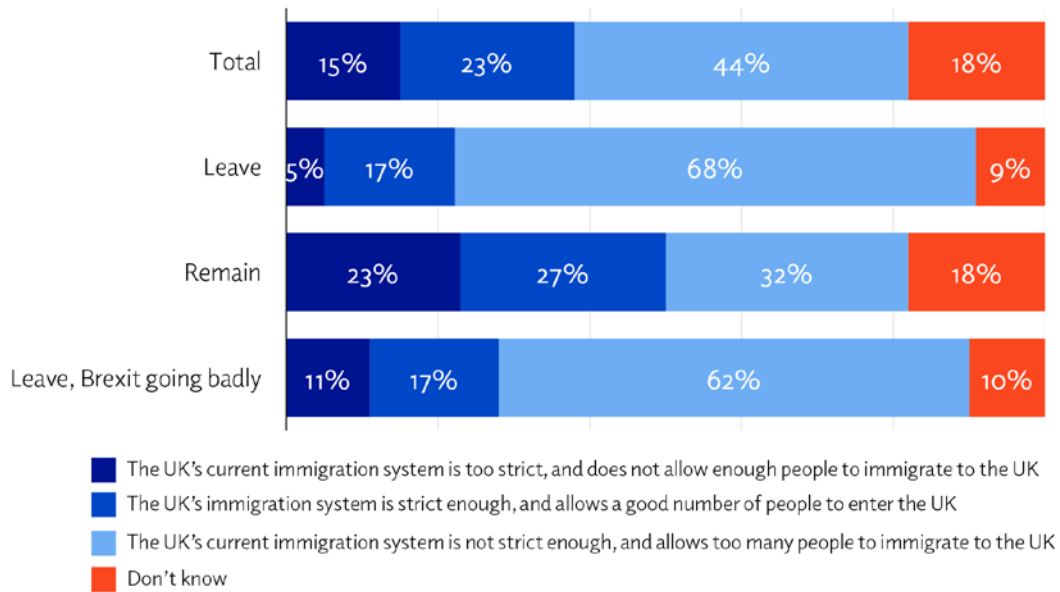


Source: Public First polling for UK in a Changing Europe. Fieldwork 26th May - 2nd Jun 2023. n=4005

That said, this by no means implies agnosticism among voters on levels of immigration. Overwhelmingly, Leave voters thought that border control would lead to reduced immigration levels overall. Reducing net migration was for many the practical demonstration of the substantive benefits of the abstract concept of 'control'. Indeed, in our survey, 68% of Leave voters think Britain's immigration system is not strict enough and allows too many people to come to the UK.

Almost 70% of Leave voters still think Britain's immigration system is not strict enough

Which of the following comes closest to your view?



Source: Public First polling for UK in a Changing Europe. Fieldwork 26th May - 2nd Jun 2023. n=4005

“Yeah, I don’t think we’ve got a handle on immigration at all, I just don’t think we do. I think we just really need to get a handle on it, we need to be looking after our own, we’ve got too much homelessness, the NHS is too full, I think it’s all part of that as well.” -

Female voter, 50s, Thurrock

Since leaving the EU, net migration to the UK has increased significantly. However, Leave voters are divided on whether Brexit is to blame for this, even if they are disappointed that leaving the EU has not delivered border control and lower immigration.

Overall, just 14% of Leave voters think legal immigration has increased because of Brexit, while 34% think legal immigration has increased, but that this is not because of Brexit. 11% say immigration has declined because of Brexit.

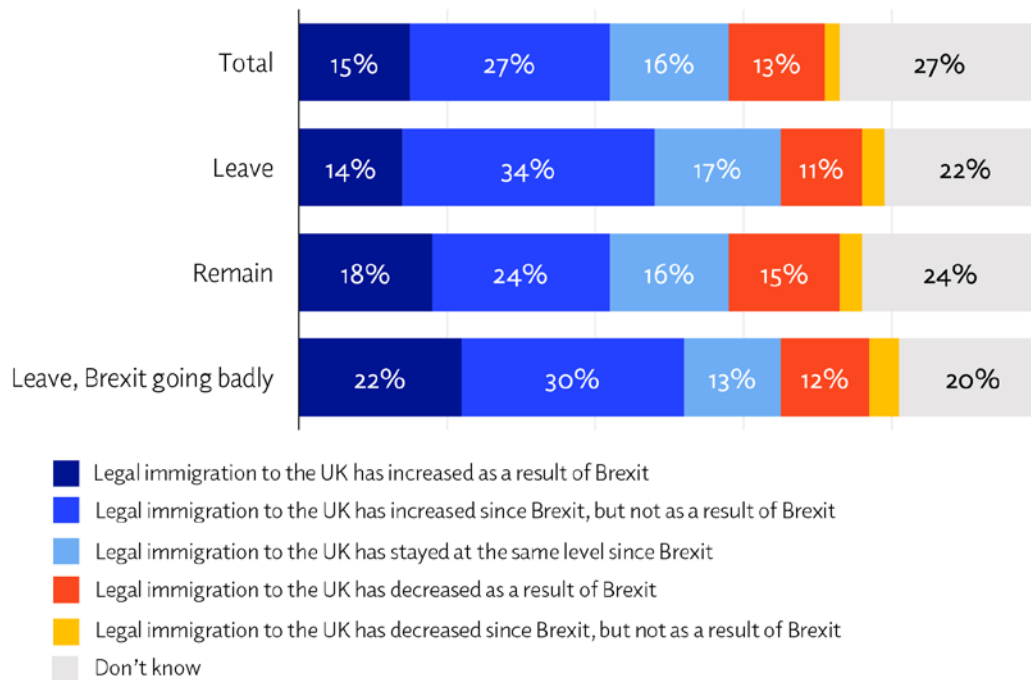
We should note here that this poll was conducted before the extensive coverage of the immigration figures in late May, which showed more than 600,000 migrants, net, arrived in the UK in the preceding year.

Leavers who think legal immigration has increased since 2016 do not solely blame Brexit

Thinking specifically about legal immigration, which of the following comes closest to your view?

Source: Public First polling for UK in a Changing Europe. Fieldwork 26th May - 2nd Jun 2023. n=4005

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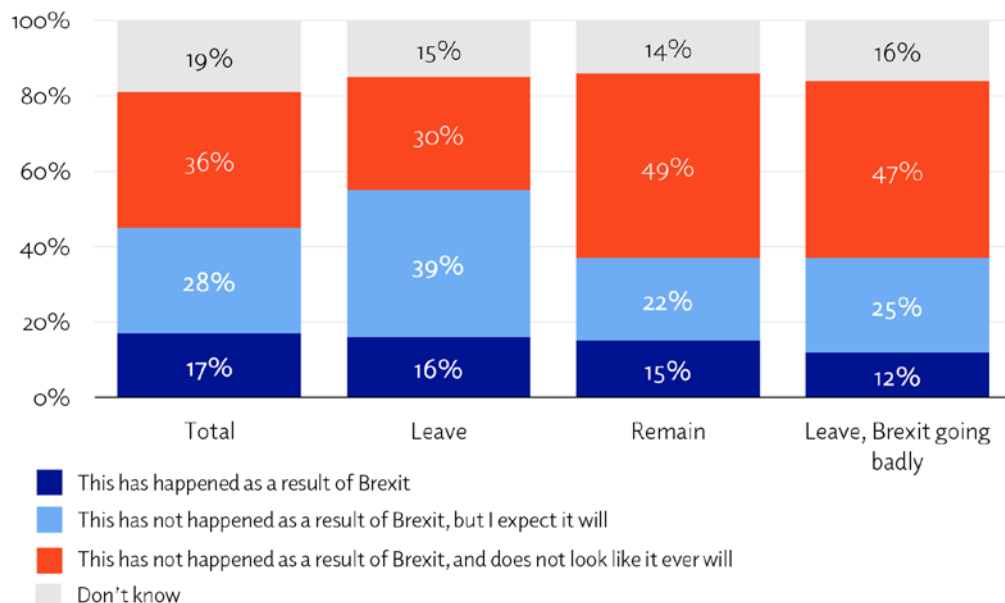


Leave voters are also divided as to whether Brexit will ultimately deliver lower levels of immigration. 39% of Leave voters say it has not yet, but will over time, while 30% say it has not happened and likely never will.

Leave voters who are dissatisfied with Brexit thus far do not think it will ever lead to lower levels of immigration

Looking at each of the following, do you think this has happened as a result of Brexit, or if not will it happen in the future?: To allow the UK to reduce the amount of legal immigration

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Source: Public First polling for UK in a Changing Europe. Fieldwork 26th May - 2nd Jun 2023. n=4005

“One of the things I would think they would look at is control of the borders because that’s one of the massive things that they promised...particularly the elder generation who probably thought in their head, ‘England’s going to go back to the way it was’ and all that kind of thing. That’s obviously one of the big pulls that people voted for it on.” –

Female voter, 40s, Bassetlaw

“I think one of the key things that Brexit highlighted was immigration and they’ve not nailed that yet and that’s still ongoing- battles with France and the EU and the borders.” –

Male voter, 40s, Bassetlaw

“If we were still in the EU, France would probably work a lot closer with us than they are right now with the migrant crossings...now they’re like “you’ve left, you’re on your own”” –

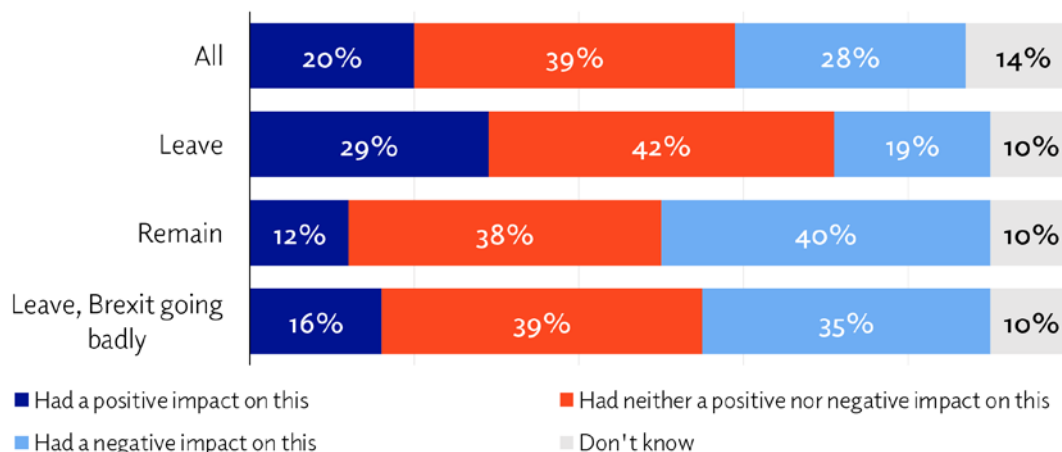
Female voter, 50s, Ashfield

We see a similar split when asking Leave voters whether leaving the EU has given Britain more control over who comes to the UK. While 39% say this has not happened yet but likely will, 28% of respondents say it has not happened and likely never will. Meanwhile, whilst 29% of Leavers think leaving the EU has had a positive impact on our ability to control borders, 19% think it has had a negative impact.

Most voters do not think Brexit has had any impact on the UK's ability to control its borders

What impact, if any, do you think Brexit has had on the UK's ability to control its borders?

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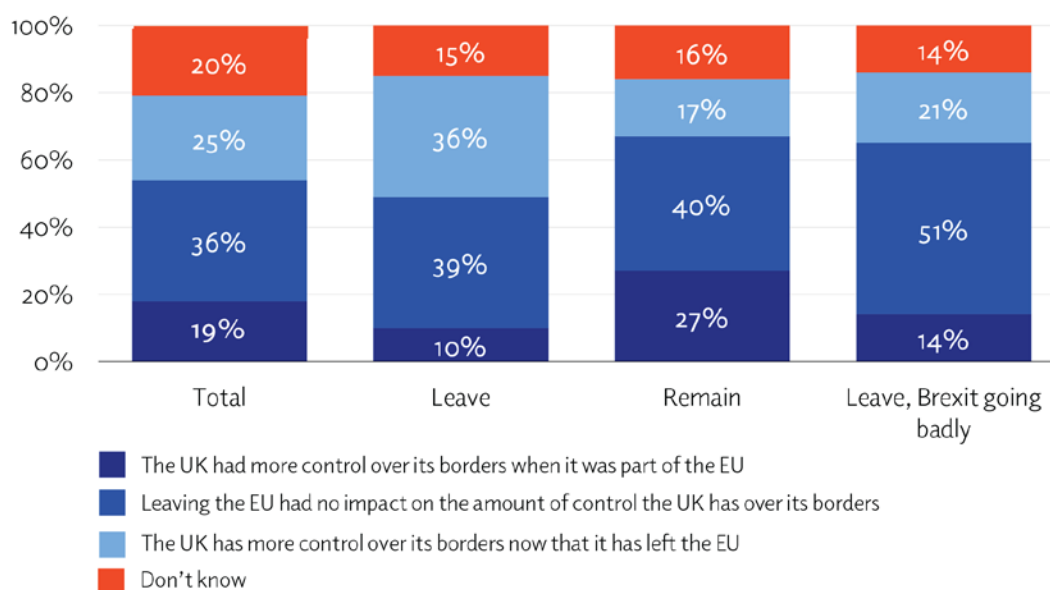
Source: Public First Poll for UK in a Changing Europe. 26 May - 2 June 2023. N= 4005 UK adults.

A majority (51%) of those who voted Leave and now think Brexit is going badly believe that leaving the EU has had no impact on the amount of control the UK has over its border. This disappointment is particularly important given that 51% of these Leave voters who feel Brexit is going badly also listed greater immigration control among the main reasons they voted to Leave in the first place.

Leavers are split over whether leaving the EU led to the UK having more control over its borders

Which of the following comes closest to your view?

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Source: Public First polling for UK in a Changing Europe. Fieldwork 26th May - 2nd Jun 2023. n=4005

The feeling that Brexit had not led to the more stringent border controls campaigners promised came across strongly among some participants in our groups.

“Right, might be a strong view. Immigration, first of all...the party in power has not got full control. We had this accommodation in Rwanda which was vetoed by all the other parties, Europe got involved, nothing happened.” -

Male voter, 60s, Thurrock

“At the moment, they’re [the EU] not playing ball with us, they’re just saying that we’re not part of the EU anymore so we have to deal with our own problems...they could do a lot more trying to stop people from getting onto those boats. But, at the moment, it seems like they just stand there and watch people get into boats because they were like “England will worry about it.”” -

Female voter, 30s, Thurrock

“From what I remember...it didn’t look like Leave was really going to definitely go through. So they sold more and more and more, which made it unachievable but some of us bought into [Brexit]and thought “God, if they can make half of that possible, it’s going to be amazing.” Like immigration...I feel like it actually just went quiet because we didn’t have any major success...I don’t think we’ve had any kind of major positive progress following it, if anything, it’s been negative and so we’ve gone quiet with it.” –

Female voter, 30s, Bassetlaw

There are different ways of reading these results. At one level, most Leave voters’ optimism is surprisingly strong. Despite all the coverage of net migration (admittedly, much more followed the fieldwork for this poll), Leave voters retain significant optimism that Brexit will ultimately have the desired impact of reducing migration and providing a more restrictive migration system.

But on another level, the legacy that the Leave campaign and indeed the government ought to worry about is that so many Leave voters think that nothing has really changed. In fact, many think the UK’s migration system has got ‘worse’, with net migration levels increasing and Brexit making little difference to the UK’s migration system.

Perhaps the best summary of this sentiment comes from a question as to why Leavers think Brexit is not working. Overall, amongst 2016 Leave voters who think Brexit is going badly, their second most-cited justification was that ‘immigration has increased, which is a bad thing’, just below issues with the Northern Ireland Protocol.

CHAPTER 5: THE WAY FORWARD

As part of our research, we explored views on what should happen next when it comes to the relationship between the UK and the EU. We find significant dissatisfaction with the current relationship, which is not solely driven by Remain voters. Leave voters are typically indifferent, rather than actively satisfied with how Brexit has gone thus far.

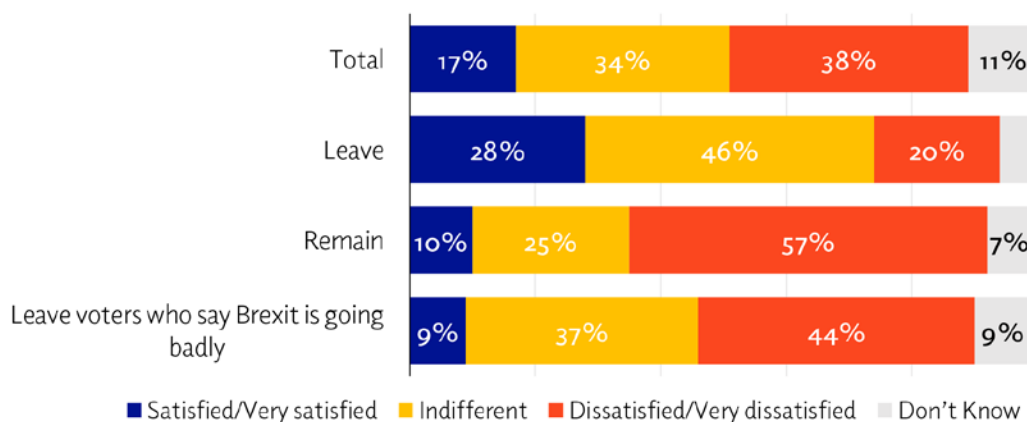
Of the proposals we tested, the least controversial are those focused on strengthening the UK-EU relationship whilst remaining outside of the EU, although for political parties (particularly Labour) the most sensible approach is likely to keep quiet on the issue. Our groups indicate people would sooner see major action to tackle the cost of living and the NHS in advance of the next election than a pursuit of changes to the UK-EU relationship.

Indeed, many people are indifferent when it comes to the relationship between the UK and EU. 45% either describe themselves as such, or say they do not know how satisfied they are with the relationship as it stands. Those who do have a view tend to be dissatisfied; over a third (38%) of the public is dissatisfied, and under a fifth (17%) satisfied. Much of the dissatisfaction predictably comes from Remain voters. 57% are dissatisfied with the current relationship, compared to just 19% of Leave voters.

Many voters are indifferent to the current state of the UK-EU relationship

To what extent are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the UK's relationship with the EU today?

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Source: Public First Poll for UK in a Changing Europe, 26 May - 2 June 2023. N= 4005 UK adults.

It is interesting, however, that so much of the Remain voting group is indifferent. Though only 11% of Remain voters are satisfied with the UK and EU's current relationship, 32% are indifferent or unsure of how they feel about it. This indifference is even starker among Leave voters: only 28% describe themselves as satisfied, and the vast majority of Leave voters (53%) are indifferent or unsure.

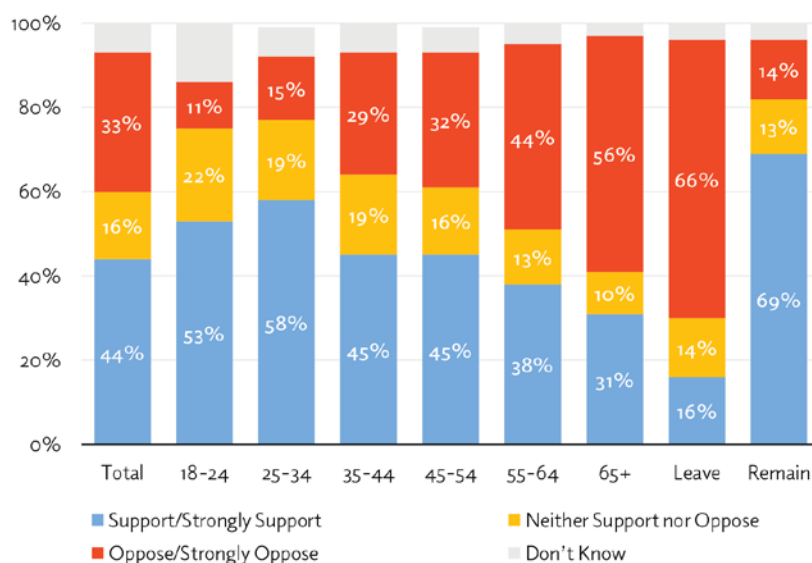
Looking at those who voted for Leave and now believe that Brexit is going badly, only 45% describe themselves as dissatisfied with the relationship between the UK and EU as it stands.

In the context of this low satisfaction, proposals for a second referendum (or indeed, 'rejoin') might be expected to be popular. The reality is more complicated; the suggestion that the UK should hold another referendum is supported by a plurality of voters, but is divisive overall (44% support, 33% oppose). The level of support is roughly the same as the overall support for rejoining the EU, which 46% of voters support and 32% oppose. Among Leave voters only 12% support rejoining, as opposed to 75% of Remain voters.

The prospect of holding another referendum on EU membership is a divisive issue amongst voters

Would you personally support or oppose the following proposals on the UK's relationship with the EU?: The UK holds another referendum on whether to rejoin the EU

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Source: Public First Poll for UK in a Changing Europe. 26 May - 2 June 2023. N= 4005 UK adults.

Many respondents shared concerns about the possible division a second referendum could cause. It was evident from these discussions that, while many voted Leave and were dissatisfied to the point of saying they would have voted Remain if they knew what they know now, this did not stretch to a desire for a new referendum.

“I’d like to give people the opportunity now they know how severely they were lied to and how bad it actually was. I think if you put forward another referendum now and turn around and said, “Right, this is now what’s happened because you were lied to, would you like another chance and another say?” It’s not a case of, oh, we’re ignoring those people’s votes ... I think there’s millions of people out there that are now going, you know what, I wouldn’t mind another shot at this.” -

Male voter, 40s, Bassetlaw

“I think we end up back in the same position that we [were] immediately post-Brexit, you end up with that division, that lack of unity ... I think some of the potential benefits and I’d use that term cautiously, are probably very, very long term, so they’re not things that we’re going to see within five or 10 years of Brexit, they might be much longer...I think people would vote differently, I sit in that camp...but I’m also not keen to overturn a democratic decision, I think that’s dangerous and I think that could be quite harmful in society, I think you’ll create quite widespread division.” -

Male voter, 30s, Bassetlaw

“We’ve made our bed, lie in it, make the most of it.” -

Female voter, 40s, Thurrock

“I think it’s done, put it to bed, we’re now on the up of sorting things out and getting everything straight, we know where we are, we don’t want to go through all that upheaval again and the uncertainty and not knowing. Been there, done that, move on” -

Male voter, 40s, Bassetlaw

It was notable how often these discussions returned to the points that the country should own its decision and try to make it work, and that taking the question back to the country would cause more upheaval and chaos.

48% of our survey respondents indicated they would vote to rejoin the EU in a hypothetical second referendum, while 32% say they would vote to stay out. 59% of those aged 18-24 would vote to rejoin, while 51% of those aged 65 and over would vote to stay out of the EU.

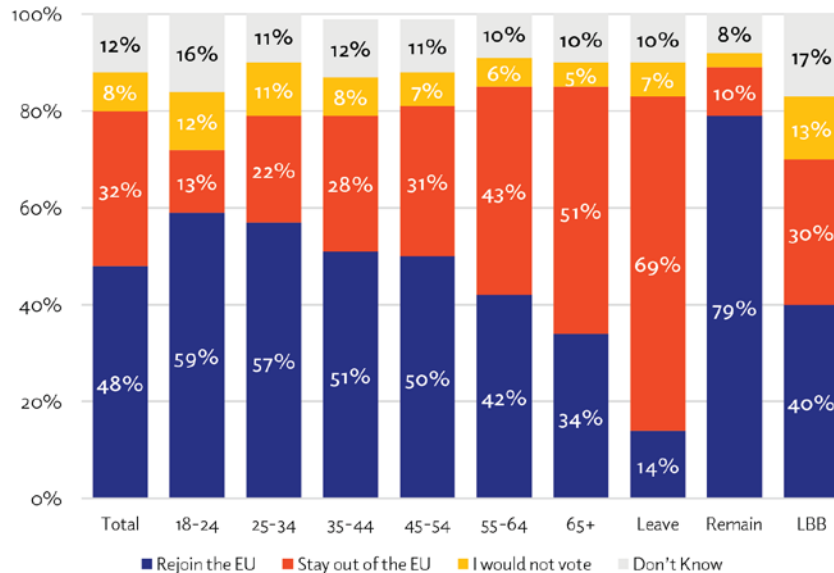
Notably, only 40% of those who initially voted Leave but believe Brexit is going badly would now vote to rejoin, while 30% would vote to stay out (and 30% would not vote or are unsure). This indicates that dissatisfaction with Brexit

- ‘Bregret’, even - does not automatically translate into support for a second referendum, let alone rejoining the EU.

Dissatisfaction with Brexit does not automatically translate into support for a second referendum or rejoining the EU

If there was another referendum on EU membership, with the question being whether the UK should rejoin the EU or remain, how would you personally vote, if at all?

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Source: Public First Poll for UK in a Changing Europe, 26 May - 2 June 2023. N= 4005 UK adults.

Interestingly, 47% of respondents believed that ‘rejoin’ would win such a referendum. Of those who would personally vote for rejoin, 83% believed it would win. Similarly, of those who would personally vote to stay out in a second referendum, 77% believed rejoin would win.

In our qualitative work, we used some groups to explore the views of those who had been disappointed with the outcome of their Leave vote. Many said they would have voted Remain in 2016, knowing what they do now. However, there were dissenting views when it came to ‘rejoin’, with respondents believing rejoining the EU would be embarrassing, or would lead to much uncertainty.

“Personally, if we were to have another referendum, I’d still vote leave, I’d still stick to exactly as we are now because I wouldn’t want to see our country weakened further by trying to crawl back into the EU, I think that’d just be even more embarrassing than the situation was in the first place. -

Female voter, 30s, Bassetlaw

“We know what we know now, so it’s a bit hard to say....But if you rejoin then will it go back to how it was? Or you don’t know what’s going to happen. So even rejoining it could end up being probably worse, it’s hard to say.” –

Male voter, 20s, Thurrock

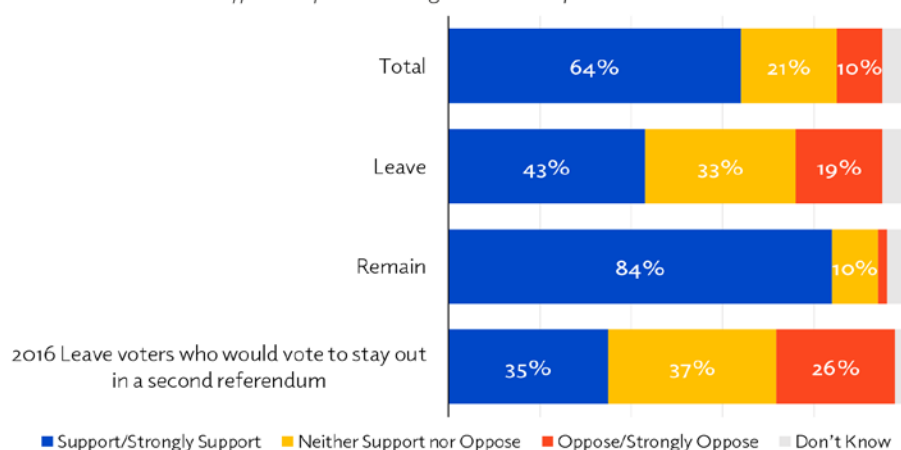
While support for another referendum is mixed, the public is largely supportive of the idea that the UK should ‘make efforts to form a stronger relationship with the EU’. 63% would support this, and only 10% oppose. 44% of 2016 Leave voters would support this approach, and 20% oppose.

Among Leave voters who would choose to stay out of the EU in a second referendum, 35% support a proposal to make efforts to form a stronger relationship while 26% would oppose.

Voters are largely supportive of the prospect of a stronger relationship with the European Union

Would you personally support or oppose the following proposals on the UK’s relationship with the EU?: The UK makes efforts to form a stronger relationship with the EU

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Source: Public First Poll for UK in a Changing Europe, 26 May - 2 June 2023. N= 4005 UK adults.

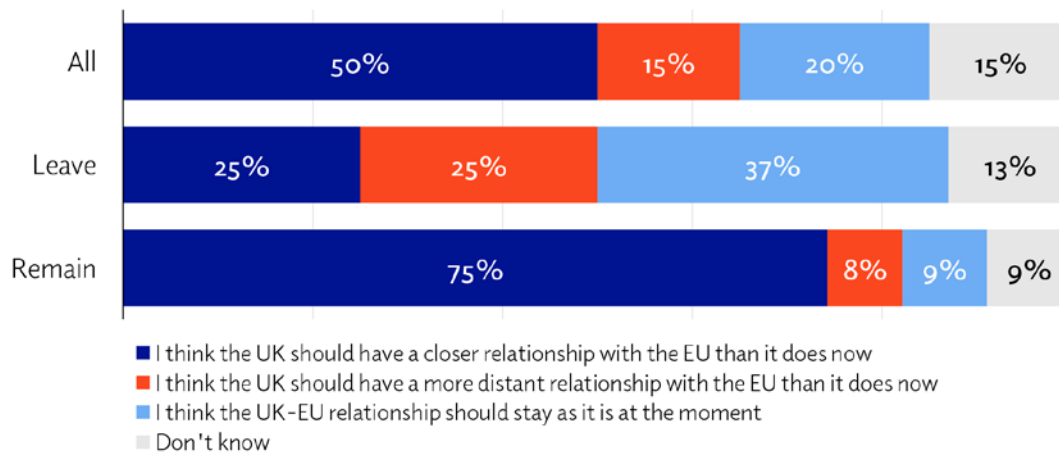
Overall, 50% of the public believes the UK should have a closer relationship with the EU than we do now, rather than a more distant relationship (15%) or maintaining the current relationship unchanged (20%). Among those who voted Leave in 2016, a plurality would opt to maintain the current relationship (37%), although as many would opt for a closer relationship (25%) as would opt for a more distant one (25%). Predictably, 75% of Remain voters would like to see a closer relationship.

Attitudes on the future relationship between the UK and the EU have implications for political parties. In our survey, we tested specifically how Labour should approach the UK-EU relationship amongst voters.

Half of voters think that the UK should have a closer relationship with the EU than it currently does

Which of the following comes closest to your view?

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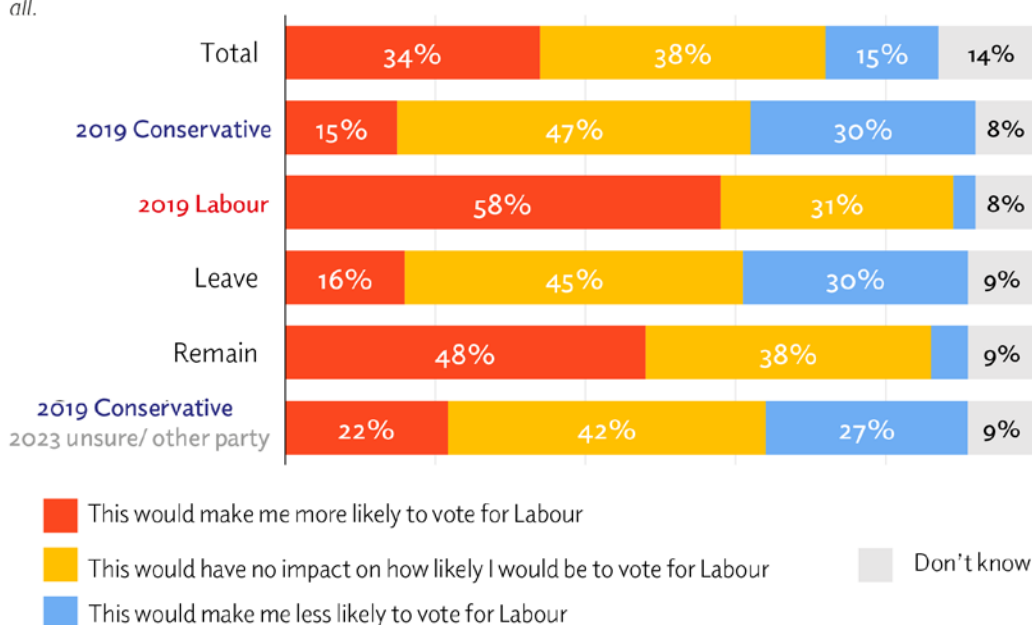
Source: Public First Poll for UK in a Changing Europe, 26 May - 2 June 2023, N= 4005 UK adults.

The most popular option was for Labour to propose a closer relationship between the UK and EU; 34% of voters say this would make them more likely to vote for Labour. However, more say it would have no impact on their vote (38%) and 15% say it would make them less likely to vote Labour. Crucially, the proportion who feel this would make them less likely to vote for Keir Starmer is larger among the voters who are currently switching to a different party or to 'don't know' (27% would be less likely to vote Labour).

Most voters are indifferent towards the prospect of Labour proposing a closer relationship with the EU

Imagine at the next general election, Keir Starmer, the current leader of the Labour party, proposes a closer relationship between the UK and the EU. Please indicate whether the pledge would make you more or less likely to vote for Labour, if it would have any impact at all.

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Source: Public First Poll for UK in a Changing Europe, 26 May - 2 June 2023, N= 4005 UK adults.

In contrast, proposing to renegotiate the Brexit deal makes a fifth of voters (20%) less likely to vote Labour, and proposing a new referendum a quarter (25%). Again, this loses crucial votes for Labour among those switching from voting Conservative in 2019, 32% of whom would be less likely to vote Labour if they proposed renegotiating the Brexit deal, and 47% if they proposed a second referendum.

Our results indicate that a pro-EU stance would increase support among those who already look sure to support Labour in the next election (60% of those who would be more likely to support Labour if they proposed a second referendum already intend to vote Labour at the next election). However, it might alienate a significant proportion of those yet to be convinced to vote for the Party.

There were some clear feelings from our groups that neither of the major political parties were being straight on their current stance on Brexit.

“I think Labour are keeping the cards close to their chest...they’re saying, “Oh no, we are not going to overturn a democratic vote because at that time it was the will of the people.” I think the Conservatives, sometimes it just feels like they’re just doing that, “if we don’t talk about it, it’s going to go away”. We’ve got a Brexit minister, we hear very little about what he’s doing.” -

Male voter, 40s, Bassetlaw

The focus group indicated that the parties have a long way to go to gain the trust of voters again, and in that context there is a clear risk to making a bold move on Brexit.

“I’ve lost a lot of trust in the government, especially sort of over Covid...I know Covid’s a completely separate matter...I’ve just lost complete faith in them. So I think I’ve just taken a real backseat with my interest, which is probably a hard pill to swallow but yeah, I’ve stopped looking into them and I don’t really take interest in the manifestos and things like that, whereas I probably should.” -

Female voter, 20s, Bassetlaw

“At the minute, the quality and the calibre of all the PMs, all the MPs, I mean look at how many MPs have quit, they’ve been in scandals, it’s laughable. There’s no one particularly strong, there’s no one person that I think is a particularly strong leader, whether they’re in whatever party they’re in.” -

Female voter, 30s, Thurrock

Further, the parties' stances on Brexit are now less important than their approach to other current issues like the cost of living crisis and the challenges facing the NHS.

“Brexit now is kind of like a past issue subject, it’s kind of been dealt with, voted on and I think there’s a lot more pressing issues like cost of living, inflation, all linked, interest rates, which need immediate attention. I think Brexit is always going to be there in the background, but there’s a lot more pressing issues now than Brexit.” –

Male voter, 40s, Bassetlaw

Despite their relative apathy about UK-EU relations, only around 38% of the UK public expect that Britain’s current approach to the EU will be maintained over the next 20 years, and 26% for the next 50 years. 27% of voters expect another referendum in the next 20 years, and 10% expect the UK to rejoin without a referendum.

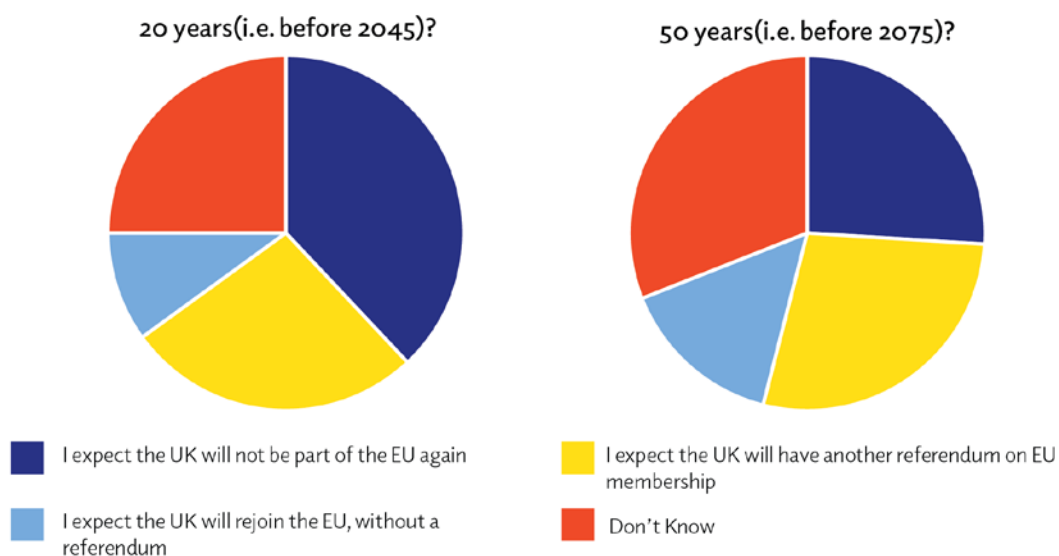
A majority of Leave voters expect that the UK will not become a member of the EU again in the next 20 years, but this falls to a third when asking Remain voters (33%).

Interestingly, only 39% of Leave voters expect the UK to not be in the EU in fifty years’ time.

Most voters think that the UK’s approach to UK-EU relations will change in the next 50 years

Which of the following comes closest to your view of what will happen in the next...

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Source: Public First Poll for UK in a Changing Europe, 26 May – 2 June 2023, N= 4005 UK adults.

Some in the groups raised their view that a new referendum was likely in the near future.

“I can guarantee you in the next general election, if we get a new party, they’ll have another referendum on Brexit, I can guarantee that. I think they will anyway. I think if we get a new party in power, they will have another Brexit representative to say, are you sure that’s what you want?” –

Female voter, 30s, Thurrock

But many of the discussions we had placed Brexit firmly in the past, believing change in the relationship was not much of an immediate priority, and that we had to see our decision to leave the EU through.

Overall, this research demonstrates the challenging stasis facing the Brexit debate. While many voters on both sides of the 2016 vote are dissatisfied with how things are, this does not translate neatly into support for rejoining.

While a second referendum is more popular than it was a couple of years ago, the idea is still highly divisive. However, the concept of closer and friendlier relations with the EU is popular with a number of Leave voters.

CHAPTER 6: BREXIT FATIGUE, POLITICAL DIVISIONS, AND TRUST IN POLITICS

The Leave/Remain split was key to understanding voting behaviour in both the 2017 and 2019 elections. However, recent research has shown declining attachment to referendum identities. Indeed, when asked what they perceive to be the main division in UK society, the public as a whole is more likely to say this is between political parties, as opposed to those who voted for different sides in the referendum.

Respondents in our focus groups similarly stated that although they believed Brexit had caused some division, the country has moved beyond this.

“Would I say we’re more divided? I don’t know. I think we’ve gone through a cycle since Brexit. (...) I think since post-Covid we’ve gone back to probably normal, I don’t really see a division as such”-

Male voter, 30s, Bassetlaw

However, respondents show similar levels of identification with Leaver/Remainer labels as they do with party identities (e.g., Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat). Leavers are somewhat more likely to express an affiliation with referendum-based identities than with political labels, whereas Remainders respond the opposite way.

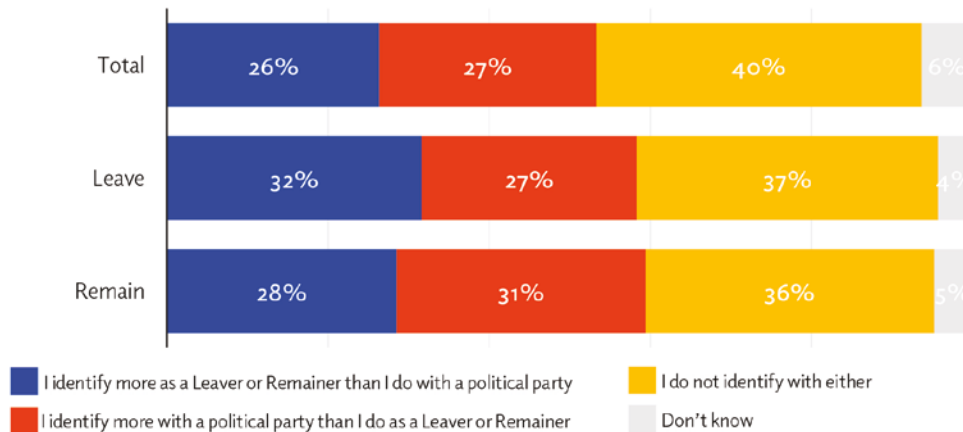
Only around a quarter of the public express any identification with either; respondents (including a majority of Leavers and Remainders) are much more likely to say they feel no attachment to any political label. More widely, the desire to talk about Brexit is fading. 54% of voters wish we would stop talking about the issue all together and move on to something else; even a plurality of Remainders (42%) and a majority of those who voted for Leave and think Brexit is going poorly (63%) think the same.

“Brexit now is a past issue subject, it’s been dealt with, voted on and I think there’s a lot more pressing issues like cost of living, inflation, all linked, interest rates, which need immediate attention. I think Brexit is always going to be there in the background, but there’s a lot more pressing issues now than Brexit” -

Male voter, 40s, Bassetlaw

Most voters neither identify with a political party, nor as a Leaver or Remainer

Which of the following comes closest to your view?



Source: Public First polling for UK in a Changing Europe, Fieldwork 26th May - 2nd Jun 2023, n=4005

Our survey illustrates that the referendum, and subsequent Brexit process engendered distrust in politicians and the political process. Voters' cynicism can be traced back to the reasons the vote was called in the first place: over four in ten think there should never have been a referendum. Half of these respondents say this is because the referendum was called for political reasons; they recognise that the initial catalyst for calling the vote was to appease Conservative backbenchers and neuter the threat of UKIP. 30% say it ultimately prevented politicians from focusing on more important things.

“It was a Tory infighting thing. It was all about the Tory party and two different sides of it and they brought that to the public forum and formed these two big groups, one went one way, one went the other.”-

Male voter, 40s, Bassetlaw

This scepticism has continued throughout the Brexit process. When asked why they think Brexit did not turn out well, over half of respondents blame the ineffectiveness of British politicians. Over a third cite other various defects of the political class; their lack of a viable plan, an inability to resolve key issues such as the Northern Ireland Protocol, and a push towards the 'wrong' form of Brexit. It's little wonder, then, that almost 80% of respondents say they have lost faith in politicians in recent years.

“I think there were a lot of political instability created around Brexit and then subsequent leaders were interesting, some more charismatic than others, and then some were just hopelessly ineffective” -

Male voter, 30s, Bassetlaw

“We’ve never had a government that’s properly tried to make it work. That’s a big one because I don’t think they’ve really stuck to anything, they haven’t got a backbone, they didn’t do what they said they was going to do” –

Female voter, 50s, Thurrock

“I’ve been through different governments, Labour run, Conservative run, and to be honest there’s nothing in it. I find I’ve lost a lot of faith in them, because they never do what they say they’re going to do” –

Female voter, 50s, Ashfield

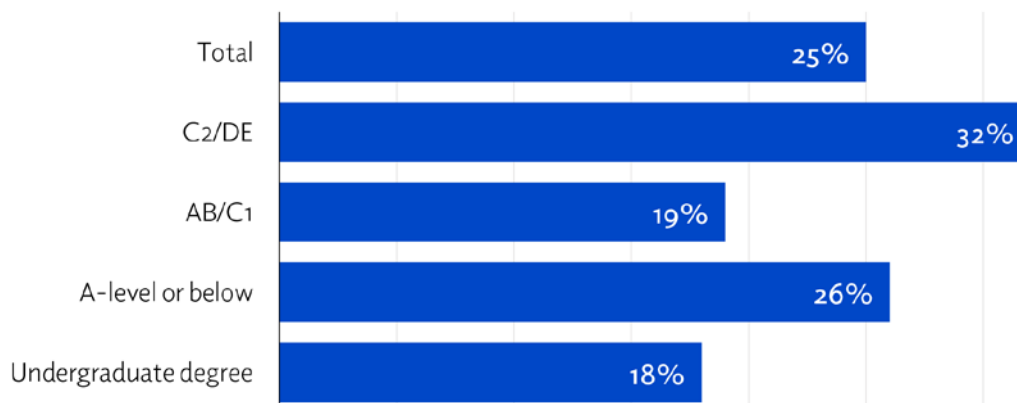
That being said, the referendum did increase interest and participation in politics amongst a population which has traditionally been disengaged. Indeed, during the referendum, record levels of trust in politicians among those with A-level qualifications or below were noted.

For many of those voters who traditionally abstain from the democratic process, the referendum was an opportunity to draw politician’s attention to their concerns. Although only 25% of Leave voters said that ‘bring(ing) attention to the state of the country’ was one of their main reasons for voting for Brexit, the equivalent figure for those in C2/DE social grades was 32%, compared to 19% of AB/C1 Leave voters. This response was also popular among those with an education level of A-levels or below (26%, compared to 18% of those with an undergraduate or postgraduate degree).

Many voters from less affluent socioeconomic backgrounds voted Leave to draw attention to the state of the country

How important were the following to your vote to leave, if at all?: To bring attention to the state of the country (Base: Leavers belonging to the following categories)

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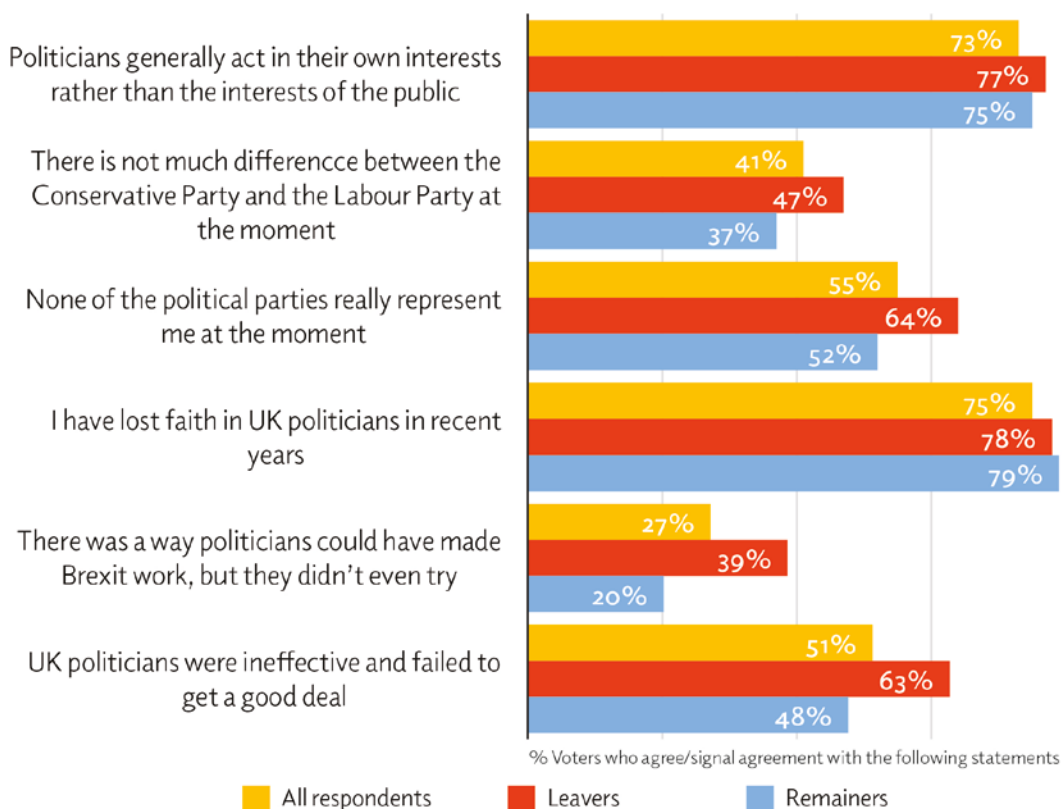


Source: Public First Poll for UK in a Changing Europe, 26 May – 2 June 2023, N= 4005 UK adults.

Seven years after the referendum, for all the talk of ‘levelling up’ and taking politics outside of the Westminster bubble, just 13% of Leavers think Brexit has drawn attention to inequalities in the country. Only 12% think it has made politicians pay attention to ‘people like me’. Coupled with the fact that a large proportion of Leavers feel that the Leave campaign ultimately failed to deliver on its promises, Brexit may have led to a swell of apathy amongst those voters it initially energised.

Indeed, in addition to the general lack of faith in politicians outlined above, there is a perception that politicians generally act in their own interests. We also see that voters believe there is a minimal difference between the UK’s two main political parties, and over half (Leave voters in particular) feel unrepresented by the party system.

Regardless of how they voted in 2016, the public shows low levels of identification with political parties and trust in politicians



Source: Public First polling for UK in a Changing Europe. Fieldwork 26th May - 2nd Jun 2023. n=4005

Brexit certainly seemed to provide an opportunity to revitalise trust and involvement in politics amongst populations which had long been disengaged. Yet this optimism - and the trust and faith of many of these voters - has seemingly been squandered. Though the Leave/Remain division may be fading away, there is a risk that the perceived failures of Brexit will continue to feed into a climate of distrust towards politicians and the political process.

CHAPTER 7: VOTERS WHO WERE TOO YOUNG TO VOTE IN THE REFERENDUM

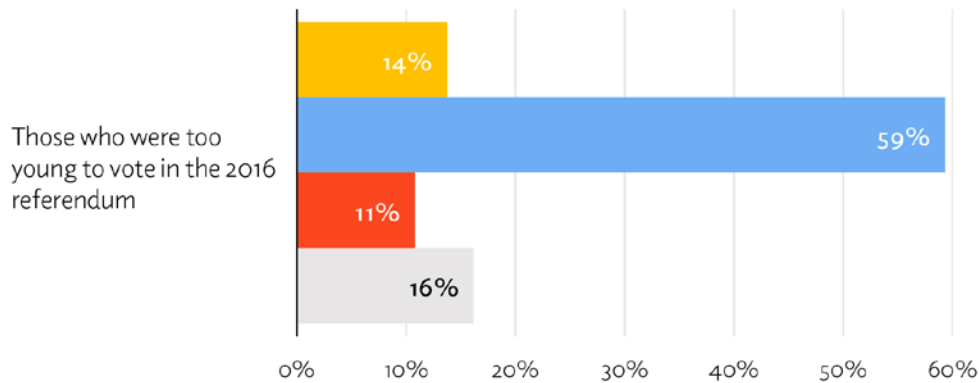
This chapter examines the views of young people who couldn't vote in the Brexit referendum due to their age, but have since been enfranchised. Their voices offer important insight into the impact that Brexit has had and will continue to have for future generations, as well as the political landscape of the post-Brexit question.

As previous research had [already shown](#), younger generations tend to take a much more pro-EU stance, and are more likely to lean Remain. This was true of our 'too young to vote' sample too, with 59% saying they would have voted Remain if they could have voted in the referendum, compared to 11% who said they would have voted Leave. Excluding 'Don't Knows' and those who wouldn't have voted, this would translate into an 85/15 effective vote split in favour of Remain.

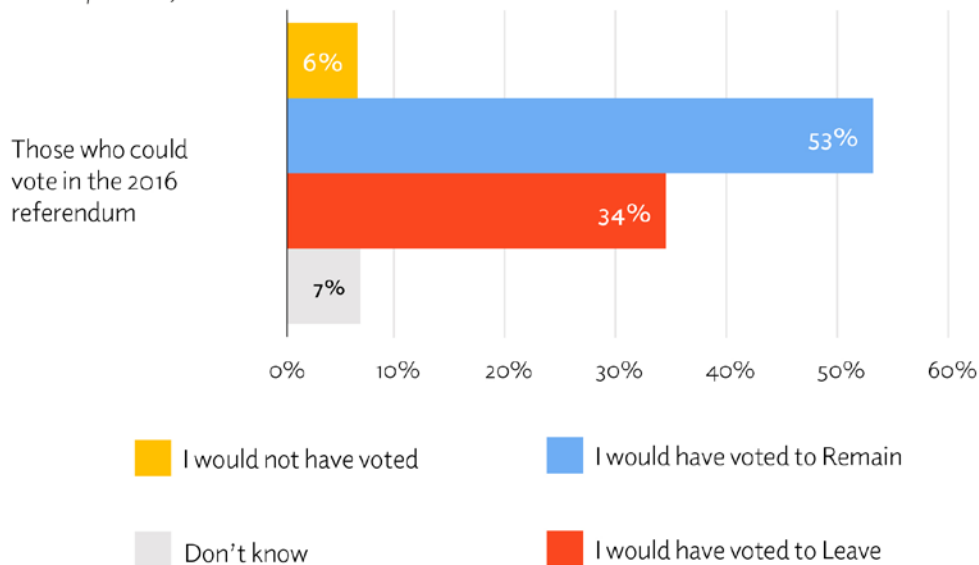
By comparison, 53% of those who got to vote in 2016 said they would have voted Remain if they knew what they knew today at the time of the vote, and 34% said they would have voted Leave (a 60/40 effective vote split in favour of Remain).

Those who were too young to vote in 2016 tend to be more pro-Remain than the general population

You were too young to vote in the EU referendum. If you had been able to vote, how do you think you would have voted? (Base: Respondents aged 18-24)



If you knew what you knew today, how would you have chosen to vote in the 2016 EU referendum, if at all? (Base: All respondents)



Source: Public First polling for UK in a Changing Europe. Fieldwork 26th May – 2nd Jun 2023. n=4005

Interestingly, those who didn't get to vote were also more likely to say they would have voted Remain, even when most of their close relatives tended to vote Leave (60%). By comparison, less than a third (27%) of those who voted in the referendum and whose close relatives tended to vote Leave said they would vote Remain knowing what they know today. This further reinforces how stark the generational divide is on this issue.

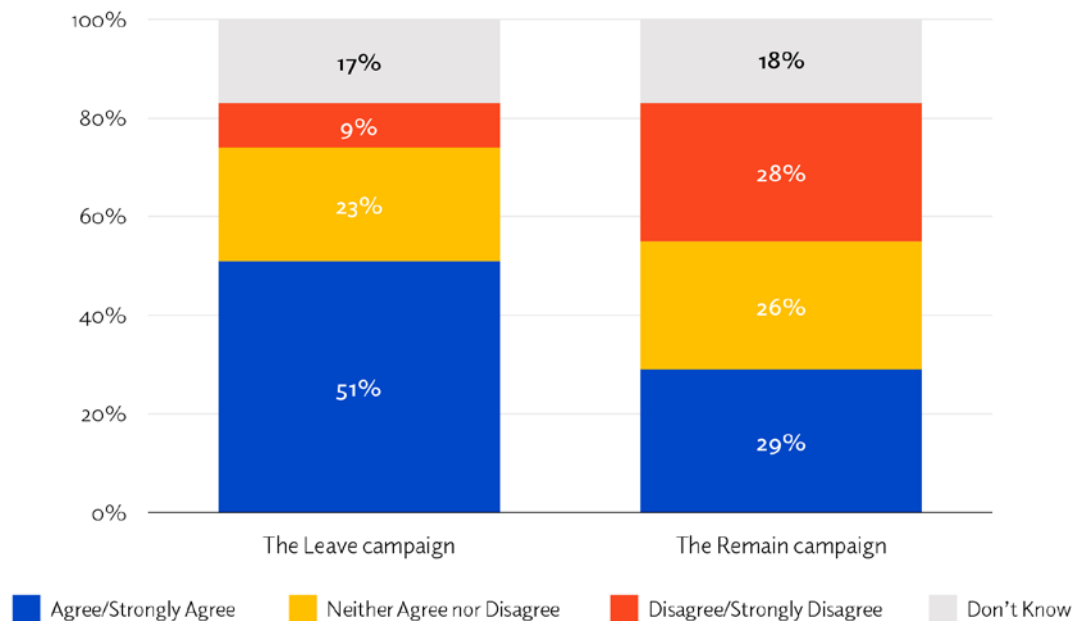
It is also striking to note that a fifth (20%) of this generation of voters identify more closely with a side of the Brexit spectrum than a political party, despite not having taken part in the vote at the time.

A common criticism of Brexit is the fact that its long-term impact will be most felt by those who most oppose it, in particular those who would have been too young to have a say in the referendum. Overall, there is a clear tendency for this group to think that the Leave campaign ignored the interests of their generation, rather than the Remain campaign (41% net agreement for Leave campaign vs 2% net agreement for Remain campaign).

This does not mean that those who were too young to vote expected to be given a vote at the time. In fact, of those who are now of voting age but weren't then, only about a quarter said they had a strong view on the matter back in 2016 (24%), and another 34% said they did not have a view at the time but do now. Yet only 20% said they still do not have a strong view on the matter today. This perhaps explains why a plurality, but not an overwhelming majority, agrees that 'it is unfair that they did not get to vote in the EU referendum' (27% net agreement).

Over half of young voters think that the Leave campaign ignored the interests of their generation

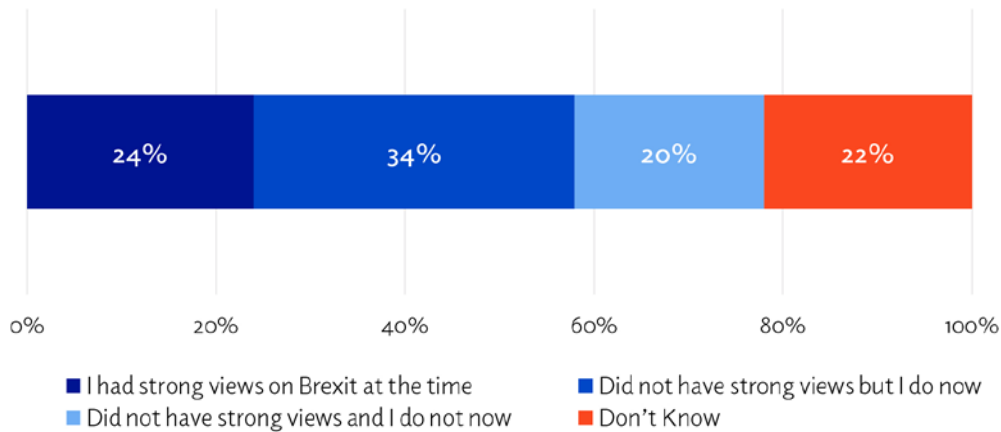
Do you agree or disagree with the following?: "The X Campaign ignored the interests of my generation" (Base: Respondents aged 18-24)



Source: Public First polling for UK in a Changing Europe. Fieldwork 26th May - 2nd Jun 2023. n=4005

A quarter of those who were too young to vote in the referendum say that they did not have strong views on Brexit at the time of the vote

Which of the following comes closest to your view? (Base: Respondents aged 18-24)



Source: Public First polling for UK in a Changing Europe. Fieldwork 26th May - 2nd Jun 2023, n=4005

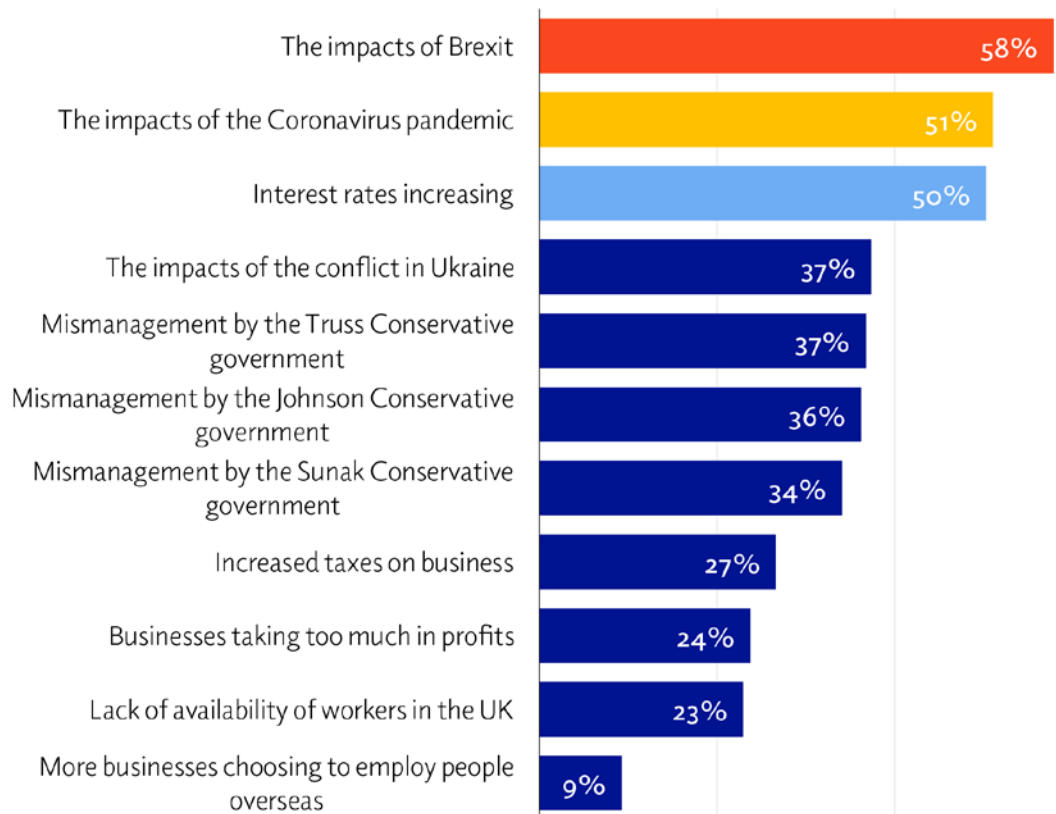
Rather, many of these voters feel their voices should be heard when it comes to choosing what direction the country should take in its relationship with Europe today, now that they are of voting age. Over half of them think that the debate over Britain's EU membership and Brexit is not settled (although they do not all agree on whether or not we should have a referendum again), and only 9% think the debate is settled.

This generation of voters is overwhelmingly of the view that the economy has got worse in the last year, in part because of Brexit (58% who think the economy has got worse cited Brexit as a reason). They are also more likely than any other age group to think that it is fully or partially to blame for shortages of food and the increased cost of goods in shops. (41% and 40% of those who noticed shortages or costs increased fully blamed it on Brexit, compared to 26% of the general population).

They also express pessimism when thinking about what its impact will be over time. Over half of voters aged 18-24 (54%) think Brexit will turn out badly in the long term, more than any other age group, and well above the national average of 43%.

Voters aged 18–24 are overwhelmingly of the view that the economy has got worse in the last year at least in part because of Brexit

You said that the UK economy has got worse over the last year. Which of the following best explains why this is? (Base: Respondents aged 18–24 who believe the economy has got worse)



Source: Public First polling for UK in a Changing Europe. Fieldwork 26th May – 2nd Jun 2023. n=4005

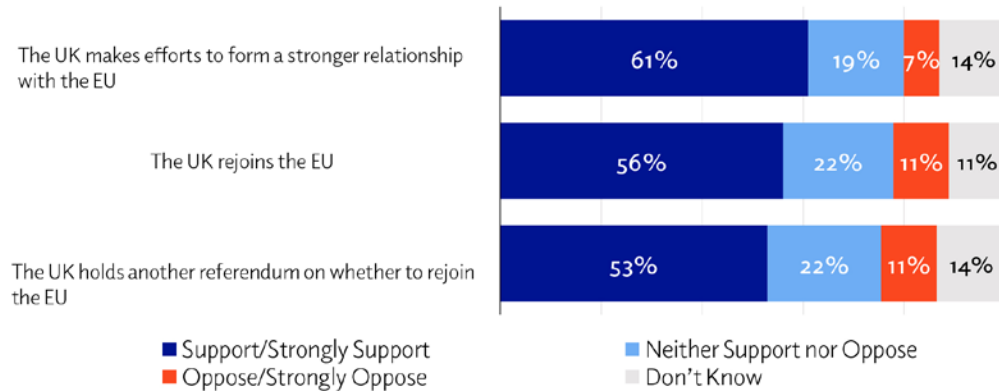
With regards to what they expect of the future, this group is most optimistic about the prospect of another referendum. A third think another referendum on EU membership will be held in the next 20 years, and 36% think it will happen in the next 50.

With regards to what would happen if another referendum was held, those who were too young to vote are much more likely than others to say they would vote rejoin (59% rejoin vs 13% stay out), and would expect rejoin to win (54% rejoin vs 18% stay out). Interestingly, this optimism doesn't make them unrealistic about what can be achieved in the meantime. As we've highlighted previously, there is a real sense of voter fatigue when it comes to the Brexit debate. Although this is less than for older voters, this group tends to agree with the statement 'I wish we stopped talking about Brexit' (27% net agreement, vs 37% nationally).

This is perhaps why of the three proposals we tested (rejoining, new referendum, and a closer relationship), and despite a general support for all of them, efforts to form a closer relationship was most popular (54% net support, compared to 45% for rejoining and 42% for another referendum).

The most popular proposal for the future of the UK-EU relations amongst young voters is the formation of a closer working relationship

Would you personally support or oppose the following proposals on the UK's relationship with the EU? (Base: Respondents aged 18-24)



Source: Public First polling for UK in a Changing Europe. Fieldwork 26th May - 2nd Jun 2023. n=4005

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