What UK Thinks EU

HARD – BUT NOT TOO HARD: MUCH MORE ON WHAT VOTERS WANT FROM BREXIT

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INTRODUCTION

Now that she has the necessary legislative authority to do so, the Prime Minister is expected next week to give formal notice to the EU that the UK wishes to leave, only a few days before her self-imposed deadline of the end of March. This move will instigate what are expected to be some 18 months of intense negotiations with the EU over the terms of the UK's withdrawal, in the expectation that these talks will pave the way for the UK to take its leave exactly two years hence. The 'will of the people', as registered by the outcome of the referendum on June 23 last year, will begin to take effect.

So there could not be a more opportune time to assess what 'the people' are hoping will emerge from the Brexit negotiations. We first reported on this issue last November when we looked the responses to a dozen or so survey questions that addressed what are likely to be some of the key issues in the negotiations (Curtice, 2016). In this new report, we follow this work up with the findings of a second round of interviews that were conducted in recent weeks. Some of the questions we asked this time were repeats of those we first asked last autumn, thereby giving us an indication of how stable or otherwise opinions about Brexit have been. Other questions address issues we were not able to cover first time around. Between them, these two rounds of survey work represent by far the most in-depth study of what the public wants from Brexit.

OUR DATA

We should begin by describing how we obtained our results. The process began with interviews conducted for the 2015 and 2016 British Social Attitudes (BSA) surveys, the latest in this series of annual high-quality surveys for which potential respondents are selected at random and those who are successfully contacted are interviewed face to face (Clery et al., 2016). At the end of each interview participants were asked whether they would be willing in future to answer further (short) surveys that would usually be administered over the internet, but, if necessary, by phone. Of the 7,270 people who were interviewed for either the 2015 or the 2016 BSAs, 4,205 agreed to be re-contacted, 3,872 of whom were still members of the panel of potential

respondents when the fieldwork for this research started on 2nd February. When interviewing stopped just over four weeks later, on 5th March, 2,322 panellists had been successfully interviewed.

This approach to undertaking survey research is unique in the UK. It combines the relative speed and low cost of internet surveys with the traditional approaches of random sampling and the use of an extended fieldwork period designed to ensure those interviewed are as representative a sample as possible. At the same time, those who do not have access to the internet are not excluded. For the record, after the data have been weighted to take into account what is known about the pattern of non-response, 50% of our respondents who voted in the EU referendum said they voted to Leave the EU while 50% stated that they voted for Remain; our sample therefore reflects quite closely the actual outcome in the referendum of Leave 52%, Remain 48%. Meanwhile it should be noted that this latest exercise is much bigger than the one on which we reported last autumn. That was based on only those respondents who had initially been contacted for the 2015 BSA, and interviewed just 1,391 people.

Larger though it may be, the questions posed in our more recent round of interviewing were designed in exactly the same spirit as in the initial round. More familiar though such terms may be becoming as a result of the debate about Brexit, we eschew all technical terms such as 'single market', 'freedom of movement' or 'customs union' on the grounds that we cannot assume that they are always well understood by respondents. Rather than focusing on such abstractions, we have, wherever possible, referred to aspects of the Brexit debate that are likely to affect people's ordinary lives, and thus about which they might feel more confident about offering an opinion. At the same time, we make no prior assumptions about the structure of public opinion – we do not, for example, presume that the public think, as many EU politicians do, that there has to be a trade-off between remaining in the EU single market and being able to control immigration from the EU. Our purpose is to find out what people want, irrespective of whether or not any particular combination of preferences is thought to be feasible, and in so doing provide for policy makers as rich and as accurate a portrayal of public opinion as possible.

A QUICK RECAP

Indeed, the importance of this last aspect of our approach was underlined by the results we obtained from the initial round of interviewing we conducted last autumn. We found that a majority of voters supported both propositions that could be regarded as potential components of a 'hard' Brexit, such as immigration control, and possibilities that could be considered more akin to a 'soft' Brexit, such as maintaining free trade. Moreover, in many instances potential constituents of a 'hard' Brexit were backed by a majority of Remain voters, while equally many of the possible components of a 'soft' Brexit were supported by most of those who voted Leave last June. The commonly held presumption that Remain supporters wanted a markedly different Brexit from the one envisaged by most Leave voters seemed seriously to oversimplify the true position. At the same time, the structure of British public opinion was sharply at odds with the presumption in the EU that free trade and freedom of movement have to go together.

A SOFT BREXIT?

As in our previous research, we offered respondents both components that might form part of the deal between the UK and the EU that might be characterised as a soft Brexit, and some that might be thought more akin to a hard Brexit. The various 'soft' and 'hard' possibilities were interleaved with each other in the order in which they were presented to respondents. The complete set of 'hard' and 'soft' items was introduced as follows:

Following the decision to leave the European Union, the UK will have to negotiate a new agreement with the EU. For each of the following things, to what extent would you be in favour or against it being part of that agreement?

The specific soft Brexit propositions that we presented were as follows:

Allowing banks located in EU countries to provide services to people living in Britain while allowing British banks to provide services to people living in the EU

Allowing companies based in the EU to sell goods and services freely in Britain in return for allowing British companies to sell goods and services freely in the EU

Requiring British-owned airlines to follow EU rules that require them to pay compensation to passengers who have been seriously delayed

Britain continuing to follow EU regulations which set minimum standards for the quality of the water at beaches where people swim

Britain continuing to participate in EU programmes for funding cross-national university research

Requiring British mobile phone companies to follow EU regulations that limit what they can charge customers for calls made abroad

Included in our items are references to two sectors of economic activity where there are particular concerns about the possible implications of leaving the EU – universities (in respect of the funding of research) and the City (in respect of 'passporting', that is the ability of UK banks to do business across the EU). Also included are references to three aspects of EU regulation that might be thought to have a particular impact on ordinary voters, that is, the quality of the sea water on Britain's beaches, the rules that require airlines to compensate passengers for severe delays, and the regulations that mean that, as from this summer, mobile phone users will not be charged extra for using their device in another EU country. At the same time, we refer to one of the key components of being part of the single market, that is, allowing tariff free trade in goods and services between Britain and the EU.

As Table 1 shows, all of these possibilities are relatively popular. All are backed by around two-thirds of voters or more, while in each case less than one in ten are actually against. The principle of free trade in particular seems to be almost universally accepted. In contrast, voters are a little less likely to support the particular

sectoral concerns of universities and the financial world than they are any of the other items on our list, but even here there is little sign of much opposition. At first glance then, it would seem that the British public are minded to pursue a soft Brexit.

Table 1 Attitudes towards Possible Contents of a 'Soft' Brexit

	In Favour	Neither	Against
	%	%	%
Free trade	88	9	3
Swimming water	73	17	9
Mobile phone charges	71	19	9
Airline delays	68	22	8
University Research	67	23	9
Bank passporting	65	26	7

A HARD BREXIT?

However, as we have already noted, one of the key findings of our first round of research was that support for the potential components of a soft Brexit was not necessarily incompatible with that for a hard Brexit. So we need to examine separately how voters feel about the potential components of what might be thought to be a harder deal. The possibilities that we presented to respondents in our latest survey were as follows:

Requiring people from the EU who want to come to live here to apply to do so in the same way as people from outside the EU

Reintroducing customs checks on people and goods coming to Britain from the EU

No longer requiring farmers in Britain to follow EU regulations on the use of pesticides

No longer allowing people from Britain who are visiting a EU country to get health treatment for free

Requiring people from Britain who want to live and work in a EU country to apply to do so in the same way as anybody else from outside the EU has to do.

Ending the ability of the EU to determine the minimum level of annual leave to which workers in Britain are entitled

No longer allowing migrants from other EU countries to claim any welfare benefits in Britain

Three of our items refer to immigration. We asked both whether Britain should no longer make it easier for EU migrants to enter the UK than it is for non-EU migrants

to do so and whether British citizens seeking to move to the EU should have to go through the same hoops as anybody else. In addition, we address whether EU migrants in the UK should be able to access welfare at all. Two of our items refer to aspects of the regulatory work of the EU - the use of pesticides and employees' annual leave entitlement. Meanwhile we also ask about the re-imposition of customs checks (which is a likely consequence of leaving the EU customs union) and ending the ability of British citizens to access free health treatment when visiting a EU country. Together with our item on how potential British migrants to the EU should be treated, this last item enables us to assess how voters in Britain respond to the possibility that they might no longer have some of the rights that they currently enjoy as EU citizens.

Table 2 Attitudes towards Possible Contents of a 'Hard' Brexit

	In Favour	Neither	Against
	%	%	%
Treat British emigrants like non-EU migrants	70	15	15
Customs checks	69	15	16
Treat EU immigrants like non-EU migrants	68	16	15
No migrant welfare	63	15	22
Minimum annual leave	45	26	29
No free health for British visitors	37	22	41
End EU pesticide regulations	35	26	37

As we might by now have anticipated, a number of our hard Brexit items are relatively popular. This is especially true of those items that refer to migration and border control, for all of which support is within three or four points of two-thirds. Two points in particular stand out. First, there appears to be widespread acceptance that British citizens should no longer enjoy freedom of movement to the EU, and to that extent at least attitudes towards freedom of movement appear to be consistent. Voters, it seems, appreciate that ending the automatic right of EU citizens to come to the UK to live and work also means that British citizens will no longer be able to do the same in the EU. Second, while there may be widespread support for allowing EU citizens already resident in the UK to stay here (as our previous research has shown (Curtice, 2016)), it cannot be assumed that the public necessarily believe that those EU citizens should retain all the rights, such as access to some welfare benefits, that they currently enjoy.

However, other aspects of a potential hard Brexit are not so popular. While more are in favour of than against ending the ability of the EU to determine the minimum level of annual leave to which employees are entitled, the proportion in favour is still, at

45%, somewhat less than half. Meanwhile, when it comes to no longer requiring farmers to follow EU regulations on the use of pesticides, and, especially, ending the ability of British citizens to access free health care when they are in the EU, opponents of the proposition are somewhat more numerous than proponents. In short, it appears that there are limits to how hard a Brexit voters want, not least it seems when it might be their own health or safety that might be thought to be at risk.

HOW STABLE AND CONSISTENT ARE ATTITUDES?

Of course, one key consideration for any policy maker in deciding how best to take account of survey data such as those reported here, is whether voters' preferences for the kind of Brexit that they want are stable or not. Satisfying public opinion on the shape of Brexit might be thought to be an elusive goal if voters are inclined to change their minds quite easily. To assess how far this might be the case, four of the items that we included in our latest survey we can compare the responses this time around with what was obtained when they were included in our first round of interviewing.

Table 3 The Stability of Attitudes towards Brexit

% in favour	Sept. 2016	Feb. 2017
Soft Brexit Questions	%	%
Free trade	90	88
Bank passporting	63	65
Hard Brexit Questions	%	%
Customs checks	71	69
Treat EU immigrants like non-EU migrants	74	68

Table 3 suggests that public opinion towards the possible shape of Brexit is very stable. Only on the question of whether potential EU migrants should have to apply to come to Britain in the same way as their non-EU counterparts is the proportion in favour more than two or three points apart from what we recorded last autumn, and then only by six points. This means that it is also quite likely that attitudes towards those aspects of a potential Brexit deal about which we asked last September but did not repeat this time around are also unlikely to have changed. We can therefore have reasonable confidence that an outcome to the Brexit negotiations that reflected the pattern of attitudes reported here – and in that earlier research - can be expected to prove relatively popular.

However, that still leaves the question of how consistent voters are in their attitudes. Perhaps their attitudes vary depending on how an issue is posed – and, above all, perhaps on whether a proposition refers to the rights and interests of people in Britain or those in the EU. A question wording that focuses on a possible reduction in the rights of UK citizens might be less popular than one that refers to a possible restriction on what EU citizens can do.

In this round of interviewing we tried to address this issue by asking in respect of two subjects, a different question from the one we asked in our previous round of interviewing. The first of these topics was the EU's reciprocal health agreement, which permits visitors from another EU country to access health care on the same conditions as citizens of that country. In our first round of interviewing we addressed the topic in terms of the rights of EU citizens by asking respondents whether they were in favour or against:

No longer allowing people from EU countries who are visiting Britain to get NHS treatment for free

In contrast, this time we asked:

No longer allowing people from Britain who are visiting a EU country to get health treatment for free

As we have already seen, this latter proposition secured the support of just 37%, while 41% were opposed. In contrast the proposition we put forward in our previous round of interviewing was backed by no less than 62%, while only 25% were opposed. It would seem that some voters are unaware that the ability of EU citizens to secure urgent treatment under the NHS is part of a reciprocal agreement and that therefore their opposition to the continuation of such an arrangement might well be tempered if it is linked to the continued ability of British citizens to access health treatment while in the EU.

However, there are limits to voters' willingness to accept a reciprocal arrangement. As we have already noted, our respondents are just as keen on requiring British citizens to have to apply to live and work in an EU country as they are on expecting EU citizens to have to do so. This perhaps is further indication, if one were needed, on the relative importance of the immigration issue in many voters' minds.

The second subject where we asked a differently worded question was in respect of the cost of mobile phone calls made and received in another EU country. EU regulations have been gradually reducing the cost of such calls, and as from June this year they should cost no more than they do than if they were made or received at home. In our first survey we asked whether the Brexit deal should include:

Britain continuing to follow EU regulations on the cost of mobile phone calls made abroad

Somewhat surprisingly, perhaps, only 45% said they were in favour, though only 18% were opposed. As many as 35% said they were neither in favour nor against. We suspected that this might have reflected a lack of awareness as to the effect of the regulations that have gradually been implemented by the EU. Thus this time we asked a question that referred explicitly (but in deliberately modest language) to the effect of the EU regulation, while also making it clear that the regulations impose a requirement on 'British' companies. It asked whether the deal should include:

Requiring British mobile phone companies to follow EU regulations that limit what they can charge customers for calls made abroad

As we saw in Table 1, as many as 71% support this proposition and only 9% are opposed. Voters may not be very aware of the EU regulations on the cost of mobile phone calls but they would seem unlikely to object if these were to continue to apply to the costs of the calls that they make when they are abroad.

Finally, we should note that two other ways in which attitudes as registered across our two surveys appear to have been consistent. First, we have asked two different questions about abandoning EU regulation of the terms and conditions of employment. As we have already seen, this time around 45% said they were in favour of ending adherence to the EU regulation of annual leave, while 26% were opposed. Last time we asked about ending EU regulation of the maximum number of hours that someone can be expected to work. The response to that question was not dissimilar, with 53% in favour and 24% opposed. We can probably conclude that, broadly speaking, around half of voters are in favour of ending adherence to EU regulation of employment conditions and around one in four opposed, suggesting that it is regarded as a less pressing issue for many voters than immigration.

Second, across our two waves of interviewing we have also referred to two aspects of consumer protection. In our earlier survey we asked whether firms in Britain should have to 'comply with EU regulations on the design and safety of all the goods that they make'. We found that as many as 65% were in favour of this proposition. Meanwhile, this time around we have found that only 35% think that farmers should no longer have to comply with EU rules on the use of pesticides. It would seem that voters are quite sympathetic to EU regulation when it might be thought that their own health and safety is at stake.

THE TRADE-OFF

One consequence of this stability is that once again most voters are found to be in favour of ending the UK's adherence to the freedom of movement provisions of the EU but are also almost unanimous in wanting to retain free trade with the EU. Yet we are not, of course, oblivious of the fact that the EU thinks that freedom of movement and freedom of trade should go together (Cadman and Tetlow, 2016). Indeed, the UK government has accepted this position. In a white paper outlining the kind of Brexit deal that it would like to secure, it has indicated that the UK will not seek to remain in the single market because it no longer wishes to retain freedom of movement - although at the same time it still wishes to secure an 'ambitious and comprehensive Free Trade Agreement' with the EU (HM Government, 2017). However, it remains to be seen whether it will be able to obtain such a free trade agreement while not permitting freedom of movement. Consequently, where the public stands if the UK were to face a trade-off between being able to trade easily with the single market and immigration control could still prove to be important.

On this subject we asked the same question that we posed in our previous wave of interviewing. It assumes (as is evidently the case) that most voters wish to maintain free trade and that thus the key question is whether they would be willing to accept

freedom of movement if the EU insisted on this as a quid-pro-quo for free trade. The question reads:

It has been argued that when Britain leaves the EU, British firms will only be allowed to continue to sell goods and services freely to people in the EU if people from the EU are still free to come here to live and work.

Do you think Britain should or should not allow people from the EU to freely come here to live and work in return for allowing British firms to sell goods and services freely in the EU?

Definitely should allow people from the EU to come here to live and work
Probably should allow people from the EU to come here to live and work
Probably should not allow people from the EU to come here to live and work
Definitely should not allow people from the EU to come here to live and work

As Table 4 shows, when we asked the question last autumn voters appeared to be almost exactly evenly divided on whether the UK should or should not allow freedom of movement in return for keeping free trade. Forty-nine per cent said that the UK should either 'definitely' or 'probably' make such a deal while 51% were opposed. Now, however, it seems as though public opinion may have moved slightly in favour of allowing freedom of movement if necessary, with 54% saying the UK should 'definitely' or 'probably' make such a deal. This, of course, is consistent with the fact that, as reported in the previous section, there has also been a slight drop in the proportion who think that potential EU-migrants should have to apply to come to Britain in the same way as non-EU ones. Public opinion is, in truth, still heavily divided on the issue and most would still like freedom of movement to end, but it appears that slightly fewer voters are insistent that this should happen than did so a few months ago.

Table 4 Attitudes towards allowing EU freedom of movement in return for UK access to free trade, Sept 2016 and Feb. 2017

Allow people from EU freely to come and live and work in return for allowing UK firms to trade freely with the EU?	Sept. 2016	Feb. 2017
	%	%
Definitely should	21	22
Probably should	28	32
Probably should not	29	24
Definitely should not	22	20

BUDGETARY MATTERS

One of the most controversial claims made during the EU referendum was the Leave campaign's suggestion that the UK would have £350 million a week more to spend on the NHS if it left the EU. Amongst the assumptions that this calculation made was

that, following Brexit, the UK would no longer be making any kind of financial contribution to the EU budget. However, if the UK is still to participate in, for example, future EU-wide programmes for funding university research, a possibility we have seen a majority of voters appear to support, it will be expected to make a contribution to the cost of that programme, a point that the UK government appears to have accepted in its white paper on Brexit (HM Government, 2017, para. 8.51).

In order to ascertain whether voters are in favour or against the UK still having some kind of financial relationship with the EU, we asked the following question:

Which of the following comes closest to your view about Britain making payments into the EU Budget once it leaves the EU?

Britain should not make any payments into the EU Budget
Britain should only make payments for specific EU programmes, such as university student exchanges or grants for small businesses, in which it decides to participate
Britain should make a regular payment into the general EU Budget

In the event, only making payments for specific EU programmes was by far the most popular option, being supported by no less than 61%. Only 27% felt that the UK should not be willing to make any kind of financial contribution at all, although at the other end of the spectrum just 11% felt that the UK should still be making a regular contribution to the EU budget. Of course, there is no guarantee that any two voters will agree on the programmes in which the UK should get involved, and the wording of our question might in any event be thought to imply no more than a quite restricted financial relationship, but it would seem that voters are not necessarily insistent that the UK should not have any financial relationship with the EU at all.

REMAIN AND LEAVE VOTERS

One of the criticisms that is sometimes made about the UK government's plans for Brexit, and in particular the priority it gives to ending freedom of movement, is that they take too little notice of the views of the 48% of those who voted to Remain. But this criticism assumes that, when it comes to the specifics of Brexit, those who voted to Remain have very different views from those who voted to Leave. However, as we noted at the beginning of this report, our previous research raised questions about how far this is the case.

Table 5 begins our comparison of the attitudes of Remain and Leave supporters by looking at their views on the soft Brexit items in our survey. As we might anticipate, given that the idea is backed by around nine in ten of all voters, Remain and Leave voters barely differ at all in their level of support for free trade. However, the difference of outlook between them on the other items is also relatively modest, and as a result most of them are even backed by a clear majority of Leave voters. The only issue on which there is rather greater disagreement between Remain and Leave voters is the funding of university research. As has by now been well established, those from different educational backgrounds voted very differently in the EU referendum, with university graduates being especially keen on remaining in the EU and those with few, if any, qualifications mostly backing Leave (Swales, 2016). It would appear that this social division is reflected in attitudes towards this

aspect of Brexit, though even so, it is still the case that just over half (54%) of Leave voters think that the UK should still participate in EU university research programmes.

Table 5 Support for Possible Contents of a 'Soft' Brexit by Referendum Vote

	EU Referendum Vote		
% in favour	Remain	Leave	Difference
Free trade	91	88	3
Swimming water	83	67	16
Mobile phone charges	80	67	13
Airline delays	77	64	13
University Research	80	54	26
Bank passporting	72	62	10

Disagreement between Remain and Leave voters is, however, rather more in evidence on the possible components of a hard Brexit that we addressed in our latest survey. As Table 6 shows, while around four in five or so of Leave voters are in favour of tighter immigration rules and back customs checks, for the most part only just over half of Remain voters are of the same view. Still, that said, this means that it remains the case that many a Remain voter would like to see the end of freedom of movement, and to that extent the priority that the UK government appears to place on this issue is not necessarily at odds with the views of those who voted for Remain in the EU referendum (HM Government, 2017).

But there are some potential components of a hard Brexit for which there is decidedly little enthusiasm amongst Remain voters. Only around a quarter or so back an end to the ability of British citizens who are visiting another EU-country to access free health care or and end to the requirement on farmers to follow EU rules on the use of pesticides. But in truth, these possibilities are not especially popular amongst Leave voters either, with slightly less than half of them backing either proposition. It seems that even for many voters who backed Leave there are limits to how hard a Brexit the UK should wish to pursue. Indeed, the only potential component of Brexit that was supported by most Leave voters (56% are in favour) but not by most Remain voters too (only 35% of them back the idea) is ending the ability of the EU to specify the minimum level of annual leave to which employees are entitled.

Table 6 Support for Possible Contents of a 'Hard' Brexit by Referendum Vote

% in favour	EU Referendum Vote		
	Remain	Leave	Difference
Treat British emigrants like non-EU migrants	54	86	32
Customs checks	54	86	32
Treat EU immigrants like non-EU migrants	58	82	24
No migrant welfare	51	77	26
Minimum annual leave	35	56	21
No free health for British visitors	28	46	18
End EU pesticide regulations	23	49	26

Thus, as we discovered in our first round of research, for the most part Remain and Leave voters do not have diametrically opposed views of what Brexit should entail. Nearly all Leave voters back free trade and at least some aspects of EU regulation that affect the lives of ordinary voters, such as the quality of sea water and compensation for airline delays. And while the two groups of voters disagree much more about immigration and about customs checks, even on these subjects, at least a half of Remain supporters appear to back what could be regarded as a hard Brexit. Of course the fact that a majority of both Remain and Leave voters want both free trade and immigration control just serves to underline the likely importance of achieving this combination if the eventual deal is to be regarded favourably by the British public.

Remain and Leave voters' views are not even diametrically opposed to each other on the question of the UK's future financial relationship with the EU. Even amongst Remain voters only 18% believe that the UK should continue to make regular payments into the EU budget. As many as two-thirds of them (67%) believe that the UK should only make payments into specific programmes in which the UK participates. That view is shared by over half of Leave voters (55%), of whom only 42% take the view that the UK should not make any financial contribution at all.

Table 7 Attitudes towards allowing EU freedom of movement in return for UK access to free trade by Referendum Vote

Allow people from EU freely to come and live and work in return for allowing UK firms to trade freely with the EU?	EU Referendum Vote	
	Remain	Leave
	%	%
Definitely should	37	9
Probably should	37	27
Probably should not	18	28
Definitely should not	6	36

However, Remain and Leave voters do not agree on everything. Where in particular they do disagree is on what should be the priority should the UK be faced with a choice between access to the single market and immigration control (see Table 7). Nearly three-quarters (74%) of Remain voters would 'definitely' or 'probably' maintain freedom of movement in return for free trade, whereas only just over one in three (36%) of Leave supporters would do so. This gap between the two groups of voters is of much the same size as it was in our first round of interviewing last autumn. Evidently, it is on this issue of the relative importance of free trade and immigration control that the debate about the shape of Brexit is replaying the division in the referendum between Remain and Leave voters.

PARTY DIFFERENCES

As we have already noted, the UK government has outlined the broad parameters of its likely negotiating stance in the talks about the UK's withdrawal from the EU in a white paper published in February, a paper which followed a major speech by the Prime Minister on the subject in mid-January (HM Government, 2017; May 2017). It set out twelve major objectives, with ending freedom of movement but maintaining as much free trade as possible the two most notable aims. Nearly all Conservative MPs have been willing to back this position during the passage of the legislation that was required before the Prime Minister could formally serve notice to the EU of the UK's withdrawal.

Labour, however, has been more divided on the subject. The party attempted to modify the legislation in a way that might help pave the way for a somewhat softer Brexit than the government seemingly has in mind. However, although those attempts were thwarted a three-line whip was imposed on Labour MPs, instructing them to vote in favour of the Brexit legislation. This resulted in a significant rebellion. While some MPs felt that the party had to be seen to be respecting the 'will of the people' as expressed in the outcome of the referendum ballot (not least because many working class voters voted to Leave), others felt that to do so would fail to

reflect the fact that the majority of Labour voters (and in the case of some Labour MPs a majority of all their voters) voted to Remain (Swales, 2016; Curtice, 2017).

But to what extent do these differences between and within the country's two largest parties reflect differences of view amongst their supporters? Table 8 would appear to suggest they do not. Across all of our potential components of a soft Brexit, the proportion of Conservative supporters (that is, those who say they would vote Conservative in an election held tomorrow) in favour is in every case almost identical to the equivalent proportion amongst Labour voters. Moreover, in so far as there is a difference between the two sets of supporters, it is Conservative voters who are the more likely to be in favour of a soft Brexit, most notably in respect of free trade and bank passporting.

Not that there are not some discernible differences in Table 8. But it is in the tallies for Liberal Democrat and UKIP supporters that they are to be found. Free trade apart, it is Liberal Democrat voters who are most likely to be in favour of our soft Brexit items, while it is UKIP supporters who are consistently the most opposed. It would appear that it is these two body of supporters who come closest to representing the two poles of the Brexit debate, though we should note that even amongst UKIP supporters only in one instance, the funding of university research, do less than half (48%) support the idea.

Table 8 Support for Possible Contents of a 'Soft' Brexit by Party Preference

	Current Vote Intention				
% in favour	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	UKIP	Conservative/Labour Gap
Free trade	93	84	92	78	+9
Swimming water	75	72	88	66	+3
Mobile phone charges	73	70	85	66	+3
Airline delays	69	69	75	59	0
University Research	68	66	84	48	+2
Bank passporting	72	61	78	50	+11

However, there are clear differences between Conservative and Labour supporters when it comes to many of our hard Brexit items, and especially those that address the issues of immigration and border control. As Table 9 shows, Conservative voters are much keener than Labour supporters on requiring potential EU migrants to apply to come to Britain in the same way as non-EU migrants have to do, on denying these migrants welfare, on accepting that British citizens wanting to live in the EU should

have to apply to do so, and on introducing customs checks. In each case the difference between Conservative and Labour supporters in their level of support for the proposition is well over 20 points. Moreover, on these issues – and indeed on nearly all of the other items in Table 9 too – the proportion of Conservative voters who are in favour is similar to the equivalent figure for UKIP supporters, while opinion amongst Labour voters appears to be very similar to that amongst Liberal Democrat supporters. Even so it is still the case that around half of Labour and Liberal Democrat voters express support for our propositions on immigration and customs control. The partisan difference about Brexit is a relative rather than an absolute one.

Table 9 Support for Possible Contents of a 'Hard' Brexit by Party Preference

% in favour	Current Vote Intention				
	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	UKIP	Conservative/Labour Gap
Treat British emigrants like non-EU migrants	80	56	54	78	+24
Customs checks	80	56	49	87	+24
Treat EU immigrants like non-EU migrants	81	57	48	81	+24
No migrant welfare	80	46	49	81	+34
Minimum annual leave	56	35	32	51	+21
No free health for British visitors	44	28	28	45	+16
End EU pesticide regulations	42	32	23	49	+10

That, of course, suggests that Labour and the Liberal Democrats may need to tread warily on the debate about free trade on the one hand and immigration and border control on the other. But at the same time, the contrast between the pattern of results in Table 8 and those in Table 9 also highlights a potential difficulty for the Conservative government. For it means that it is their voters above all who want Brexit to deliver what the Conservative government says it wants to deliver, viz. free trade and immigration control, and who thus might be at particular risk of being

disappointed if the government is eventually thought to have been unable to deliver both.

Moreover, it is Conservative voters who are the most divided when it comes to the question of whether the UK should concede freedom of movement in return for free trade. As we might anticipate, as many as 78% of Liberal Democrat voters would 'definitely' or 'probably' maintain freedom of movement in return for keeping free trade, while as many as 79% of UKIP supporters take the opposite view. Meanwhile, although more divided than the supporters of those two smaller parties, the balance of opinion amongst Labour voters is clearly in favour of being prepared to concede freedom of movement; no less than 63% of them back this position. In contrast, Conservative supporters are not far from being evenly divided; 44% would be prepared to exchange freedom of movement for free trade but 55% who would not. If the negotiations with the EU start to become sticky on this issue, the government could find itself faced with some politically difficult choices to make.

EVALUATIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

Still much will also depend on how high voters' expectations are of what Brexit will bring. At present they are more or less evenly divided on the subject. While 37% think that the UK will eventually get a bad deal out of the negotiations about Brexit, 33% think it will get a good deal, while 27% reckon it will be neither good nor bad. As we might anticipate, Leave voters (50%) are much more likely than Remain voters (17%) to think Britain will get a good deal, though apparently even many of them are not sure about the outcome. This may in part reflect doubts about how well the government is thought to be handling Brexit at this early stage in the process. Just 29% of all voters think that the government is 'handling Britain's exit from the EU' well, while 41% feel it has been doing so badly. Another 28% reckon it has been performing neither well nor badly. Even amongst those who voted Leave, only 42% reckon the government has been handling the Brexit process well. It would appear that the government has yet to persuade many a Leave voter let alone the rest of the electorate that it will be able to deliver the kind of Brexit for which they are hoping.

Nevertheless, the government is so far getting better marks for its handling of the process than is the EU. Only 17% think the EU has so far been handling Brexit well, while 46% reckon it has been doing so badly. Another 35% reckon it has performed neither well nor badly. Of course, it might be suggested that, as the UK is only about to give formal notice of its intention to leave, the EU has not had a great deal to do and thus has had little opportunity to convince voters in Britain that it is capable of doing a good job. But it is perhaps also a reminder that, if the negotiations do prove difficult, voters may not necessarily point the finger of blame at the UK government; they may reckon it is the EU's fault instead.

CONCLUSION

As it has been outlined so far, the UK government's negotiating stance in the forthcoming negotiations with the EU has widely been characterised as indicative of a wish to achieve a 'hard' Brexit (Oltermann et al., 2017). It prioritises ending freedom of movement and accepts that, consequently, the UK cannot remain a member of the EU single market. In this the government's stance echoes the

position of a wide range of public opinion. Although Remain and Leave voters disagree more with each other on this issue than they do on most other aspects of Brexit, even amongst Remain voters at least half are in favour of ending freedom of movement.

Yet once we move on from the subject of immigration and border control – and perhaps paying into the EU's coffers – the tone of public opinion seems to be much softer. Even amongst Leave voters, there appears to be a widespread wish to retain various aspects of Britain's EU membership that might be thought to impinge upon ordinary voters, such as the quality of sea water, airline delay compensation, the cost of mobile phone calls made abroad, and probably reciprocal health care too. Collaboration with the EU over university research seems to be acceptable too, while there appears to be considerable support for complying with EU rules on consumer protection (if somewhat less so in respect of labour market regulation). But above all, nearly everyone would like to maintain free trade with the EU, including in respect of financial services. It is then, perhaps, little wonder that, while no longer seeking membership of the single market, the UK also wants a comprehensive free trade agreement with the EU. Most voters seem to be taking it for granted that such an agreement should be put in place.

British public opinion on Brexit might then be portrayed as hard on the outside, but rather softer in the middle. It is, however, a combination that potentially presents the UK government with a considerable challenge. For the EU, free trade and freedom of movement are meant to go together. For British voters they do not, and above all, especially for Conservative voters. Meeting their expectations for Brexit could thus prove difficult – and if the UK is faced with a choice between more immigration control and more single market access, it is amongst Conservative voters above all that either choice is likely to prove most controversial. Mrs May could well face a hard task at home keeping voters on side as she pursues her supposedly hard Brexit in Brussels.

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