

Who Dares Use the 'B' Word?

It's time to talk about Brexit again



About Us

NOUS is a think tank dedicated to using psychology to provide fearless and original insight into the challenges facing our times. We aim to guide leaders – from businesses to politics, arts and civil society – to ask bigger, deeper questions about how we can best serve our communities.

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**David Guake**

Former Conservative MP for South West Hertfordshire, previously serving as Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor.

Foreword

For many years, Brexit dominated our politics. It provoked strong emotions and divided our nation. We defined ourselves more by how we voted in the 2016 referendum than how we voted in General Elections. Frustration at the complexities and parliamentary deadlock created a strong desire to put the entire saga behind us, almost regardless of the cost.

Having once talked about little else, our political parties are now reluctant to mention the subject of Brexit at all. Labour is determined to win back those Leave voters who switched to supporting Boris Johnson in 2019 and fears that the re-opening of the issue will only keep those voters away from it. Some Conservatives see that as an opportunity but others recognise that the economic realities of Brexit are proving to be disappointing. Promises of stronger public finances, beneficial regulatory reforms and valuable new trade deals all resulting in a newly self-confident and prosperous nation ring hollow.

The focus of political debate is now on how stronger economic growth can be restored. A sensible debate on this subject should feature prominently on our relationship with the European Union. The polling set out in this report demonstrates that the public recognises this, even if our politicians do not. There is a clear appetite from the public to return to the matter of our relationship with the European Union and address it in a practical and constructive way.

The hard Brexit that ended up being implemented has done more harm to the economy than was necessary to respect the result of the 2016 referendum. A clear majority of the public – faced with the economic consequences – now support a closer relationship. I hope this report gives our politicians the confidence to confront the realities and engage in this vital matter.

Executive Summary

Two years on from Britain leaving the European Union (EU), people still feel closely attached to their referendum votes. The referendum created two very salient new political identities in Britain: Some 77% of people who voted to Remain identify themselves 'Remainers', while 72% of people who voted Leave identify themselves as 'Leavers'.

There is a clear Leave/Remain divide in voters' appraisal of the overall impact of Brexit. Attitudes of Leavers and Remainers indicate strong group biases; 85% of Remainers believe Brexit has had a negative impact on Britain compared to only 27% of Leavers. Similarly, they disagree on the objective facts since we left the EU, including how immigration, trade and availability of goods has changed.

However, the divide is thawing as there is an emerging agreement that Brexit has damaged the economy. The overwhelming majority of the British public (87%) recognise that the economy has suffered since we left the EU. While the clear majority of Remainers (88%) believe that Brexit has contributed to the cost-of-living crisis, a substantial proportion of Leave voters (38%) agree.

People with first-hand experience travelling to or trading goods with the EU are more critical of the impacts of Brexit. People who travelled or imported goods this year are more likely to think travel has gotten harder and that trade with the EU has gone down. They are also more likely to think Brexit has had a negative impact on Britain.

People are not as fatigued with the subject as we think. Contrary to stereotypes that the British people have lost interest in Brexit, most voters (56%) want to hear politicians talking about the opportunities and shortcomings of Brexit, compared to 27% who don't want to hear about Brexit at all.

On the future direction of the nation, retaining the current deal, re-joining the EU and scrapping the Northern Ireland protocol all get net disapproval rates of 22, 4, and 8 percentage points respectively. **But, there is overall and diverse support for a closer relationship with the EU.** Re-joining the single market has a net support of 7 percentage points in the nation as a whole. It is supported in every region of the nation and even has the support of 31% of Leavers.

The status-quo is unpopular. With the recent and up-coming party conferences, political leaders ought to be aware that 91% of Liberal Democrat supporters, 85% of Labour supporters, and 61% of Conservative supporters are also unsatisfied with our current relationship with the EU.

The main report starts here. The following polling research was conducted by YouGov on 8th-9th September 2022. It used a weighted sample of 1749 respondents from across Great Britain. All surveys were conducted online. For the purpose of this report the respondents have been grouped into categories. The 'Leave' and 'Remain' groups respondents based on how they voted in the 2016 European Union Referendum. Rounding decisions may impact totals.

Many people do not feel properly represented by the major political parties.

The Brexit positions of the Labour, Liberal Democrat, and Conservative parties are all unpopular amongst the British public. Only 43% of Labour voters feel well represented by their party's Brexit position, compared to 60% of Conservatives, and 55% of Liberal Democrats.

The British people are calling out for a more practical, reasonable, and inclusive conversation about how to make Brexit work. It's time to move past tribal and ideological politics and draw on the lived experiences of people to make sure we create a Brexit that works for all.

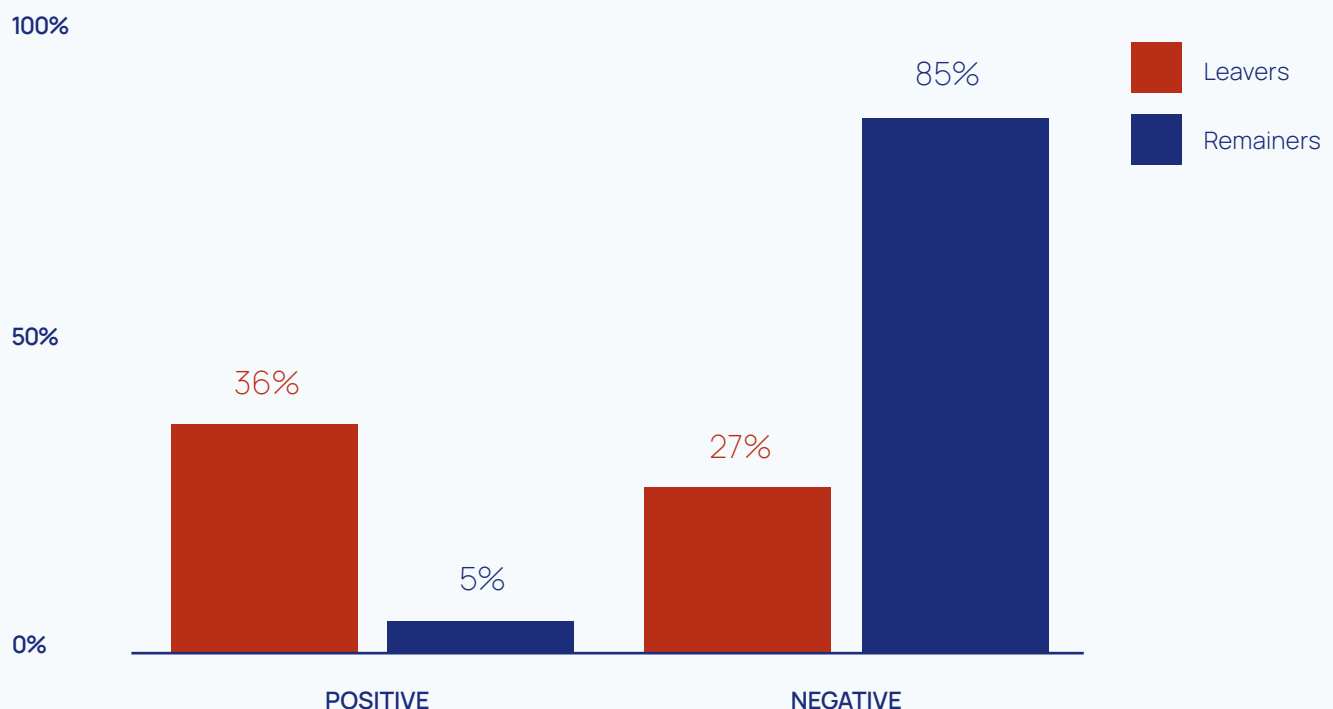


Section 01. Our Perceptions on Brexit are Biased

Brexit has long been a divisive issue in Britain and these divisions are still psychologically prevalent today. It appears that the 2016 referendum on Brexit gave rise to two very salient new socio-political identities: Some 77% of people who voted to remain consider themselves 'Remainers' while 72% of people who voted to leave consider themselves 'Leavers'.

These Leaver/ Remainer identities in turn created entirely new perceptual screens for appraising Brexit's impacts: Remainers are more pessimistic about Brexit whereas Leavers are more optimistic; Only 27% of Leavers believe that Britain has suffered since leaving the European Union (EU), compared to an overwhelming majority of 85% of Remainers.

Figure 01: The percentage of Leavers and Remainers who believe leaving the European Union has had an overall positive or negative impact on Britain



N= 1749. All percentages shown represent percentages of the total sample. Figures don't add up to 100 as we've excluded response percentages to 'no real difference' and 'don't know'.

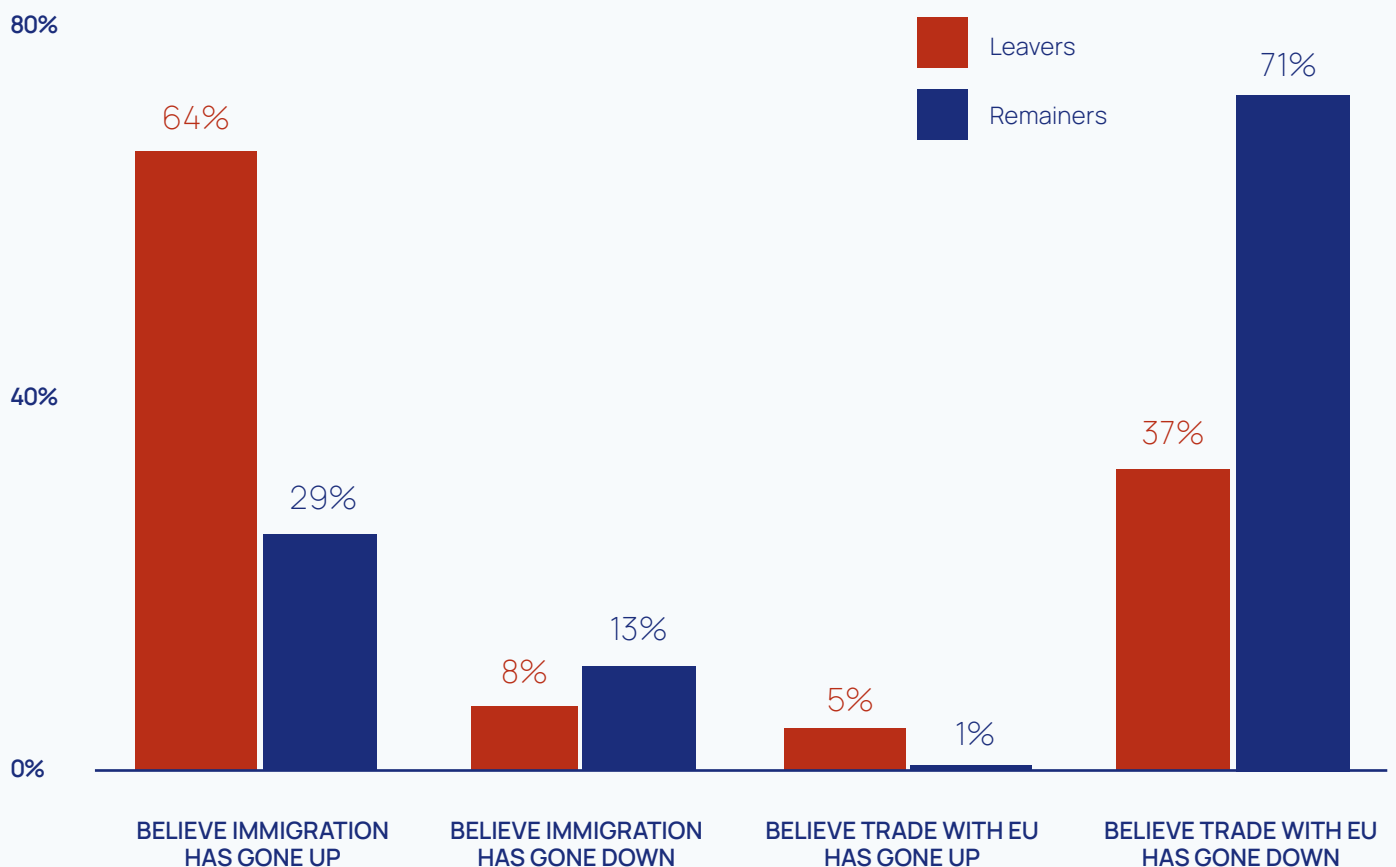
One of these biases (or screens) is confirmation bias and it is especially clear when observing Leavers and Remainers' differing opinions concerning the objective facts. A large majority of Remainers (71%) believe trade with the EU has gone down since we left, compared to a plurality of 37% of Leavers. Eurostat figures show that in 2021 the sum of imports and exports between the EU and the UK fell 4% from the previous year.

Considering immigration, 64% of Leavers believe that immigration has gone up since we left the EU, while only 29% of Remainers are in agreement. In fact, a report written for 'UK in a changing Europe' by Jonathon Portes shows that immigration has increased since we left.

Confirmation bias describes how humans unconsciously and selectively seek out information which conforms with pre-existing beliefs. When information agrees with our attitudes, we readily accept it, but when it is in conflict we refute or avoid it altogether. These attitudes are often derived from our social groups, such as Leave or Remain.

Cognitive dissonance is the motivating force behind these biases. It describes the state of psychological discomfort which arises from having two or more attitudes and beliefs which are in conflict. In this case, and to prevent the discomfort of cognitive dissonance, Leavers and Remainers unconsciously pick and choose the evidence that best suits their beliefs.

Figure 02: The percentage of Leavers and Remainers who believe immigration into Britain and trade with the EU has gone up or down.



N= 1749. All percentages shown represent percentages of the total sample. Figures don't add up to 100 as we've excluded response percentages to 'remained much the same' and 'don't know'.

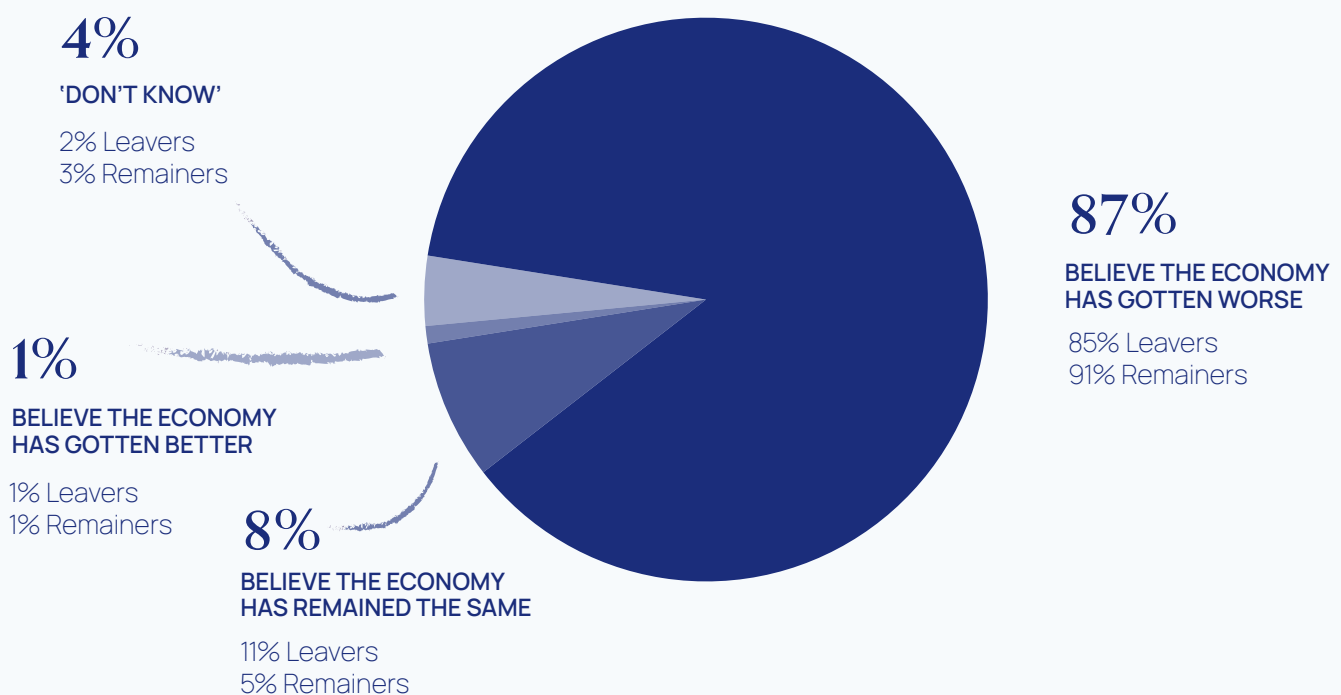
Section 02. Our Divisions are Starting to Thaw

Despite some clear perceptual differences between Leavers and Remainers, in some instances the divide is now thawing.

The economic troubles of the UK have recently been making international headlines. As well as the issues concerning the Chancellor's 'mini budget', we are facing a cost-of-living crisis, and the Bank of England (BoE) predicted that we will enter a recession later this year.

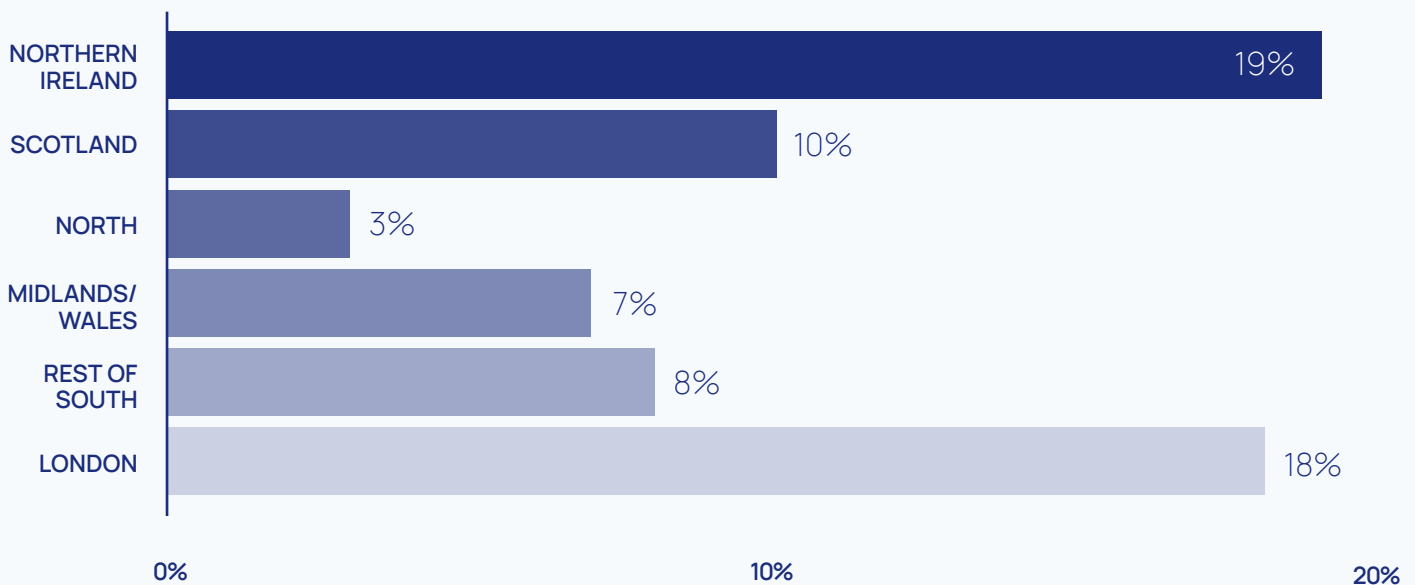
Given this, it is perhaps unsurprising that 87% of the public agrees that the British economy has suffered since leaving the EU. More surprisingly though, a substantial proportion (38%) of Leavers accept that Brexit has played a role in the cost-of-living crisis, and more than one in three believe that Brexit has contributed to the BoE's prediction that Britain will enter a recession.

Figure 03: The percentage of British people who think the British economy has gotten worse, remained much the same or gotten better since January 2021.



N= 1749. All percentages shown represent percentages of the total sample.

Figure 04: Net approval rates of people across regions in the United Kingdom who think Britain should rejoin the single market.



N= 1749. All percentages shown represent percentages of the total sample.

Perhaps as a result of people currently and acutely feeling the impacts of the economy – and contrary to popular belief – Leavers and Remainers are not fatigued by Brexit and want the government to continue working on it. Only one in five people (24%) agree that Britain 'should accept the deal rather than reopening it'. The proportion of people who believe that 'Britain should look again at our relationship with the European Union' is almost double (55%) and made up of a majority of both Leavers and Remainers.

The divide in voters' preferences regarding the future direction the nation should take is also thawing. Retaining our current deal, re-joining the EU, and scrapping the Northern Ireland protocol are all unpopular with Leavers and Remainers; with net disapproval rates of 22, 4, and 8 percentage points respectively. However, there is overall and diverse support for a closer relationship with the EU. Re-joining the single market has a net approval of 7 percentage points. The position

is supported in every region of the nation as well as by 31% of Leave voters.

Lastly, it appears that first-hand experience of travelling or trading leads to a shared, more critical view on the impacts of Brexit too. More people who have had recent experiences travelling blame Brexit for the cost-of-living crisis and the recession (70%, 69%) compared to the general public (63%, 60%). Similarly, 26% of people who have imported think trade with the rest of the world has gone down, compared to 17% of the public.

'Leavers and Remainers are not fatigued by Brexit and want the government to continue working on it.'

Women are experiencing Brexit more negatively than men

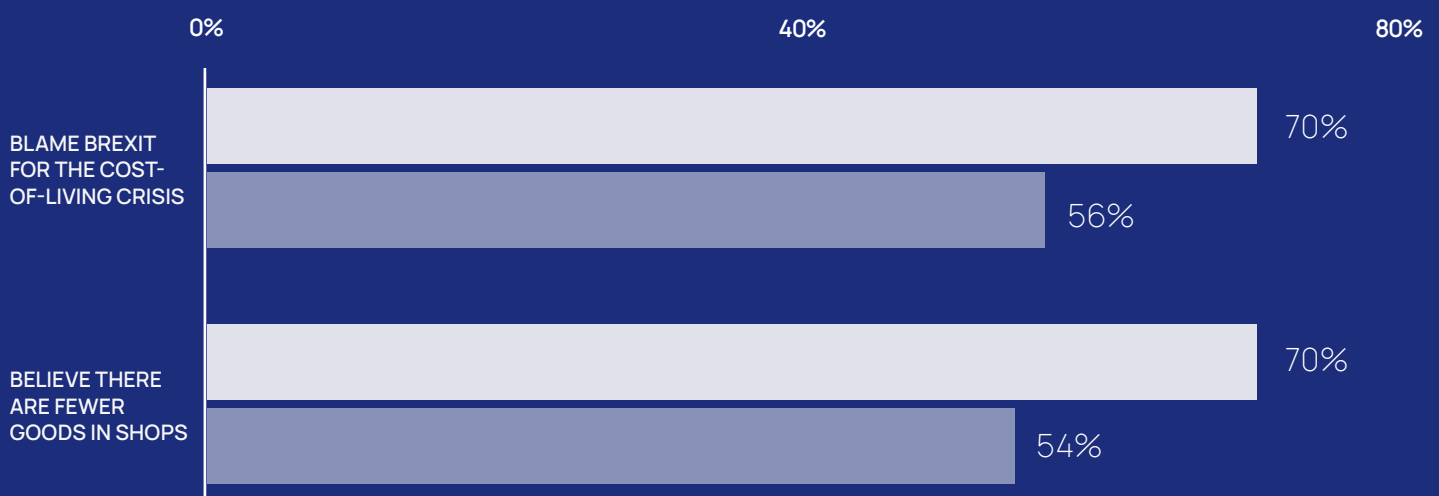
Women consistently report more pessimistic attitudes and negative experiences of Brexit. While the largest majority of people believe that the war in Ukraine is to blame for the cost-of-living crisis, 70% of women blame Brexit compared to 56% of men. In addition, 70% of women also believe that there are fewer goods in shops, while only 54% of men do.

Women's responses could be more pessimistic than men's because women are more likely to be in lower-paid jobs or working in sectors which are heavily dependent on trade with the EU. Women also tend to have less money in investments or savings, and

are more likely to be in part-time or temporary work, and carry out domestic roles such as buying food for the family. Therefore, women (especially those in minority groups) are likely to be feeling more adverse effects of Brexit than men.

Some studies¹ have shown women to be more risk averse than men (especially when it comes to financial risks). This could explain why women are and have also been more pessimistic about Brexit – even if individual circumstances haven't seen them worse off than their male counterparts.

Figure 05: Percentage of men and women who blame Brexit for the cost-of-living crisis and who believe there are fewer goods in shops.



N= 1749. All percentages shown represent percentages of the total sample.

¹ Borghans, L., Golsteyn, B. H. H., Heckman, J. J., & Meijers, H. (2009). Gender Differences in Risk Aversion and Ambiguity Aversion. *Journal of the European Economic Association*, 7(2/3), 649-658. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40282781>

Section 03. Our Politicians Can Learn From Our People

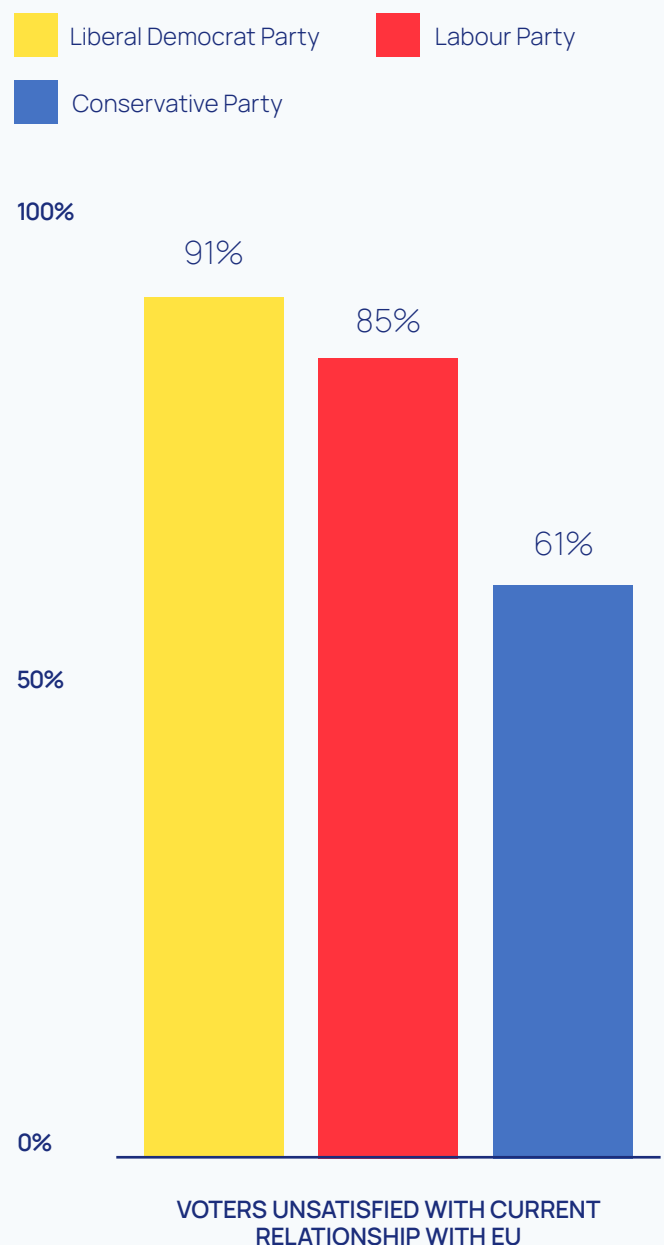
As mentioned in section 02, people are not fatigued by Brexit and instead want politicians to listen and act.

Supporters of all the three major political parties are unhappy with the status-quo. Majorities of 91% of Liberal Democrat supporters, 85% of Labour supporters, and 61% of Conservative supporters are unsatisfied with our current relationship with the EU. This statistic is especially relevant for the Labour party since Kier Starmer's proposed Brexit policy appears closest of these parties to the status-quo.

In light of this, it is perhaps unsurprising that Labour's Brexit policy is the least popular of all of the major parties within their respective voting bases. Only 43% of Labour voters feel that their Brexit positions are well represented by their party, compared to 55% of Liberal Democrats and 60% of Conservatives.

The Conservatives should, however, recognise that there is little appetite amongst Conservative voters to move further away from the EU. Only 27% of Conservatives believe that Britain should negotiate a more distant relationship with the Bloc. This should perhaps serve as a warning to Liz Truss as she adopts a hard-line policy on the Northern Ireland issue.

Figure 06: The percentage of voters who are unsatisfied with our current relationship with the European Union.

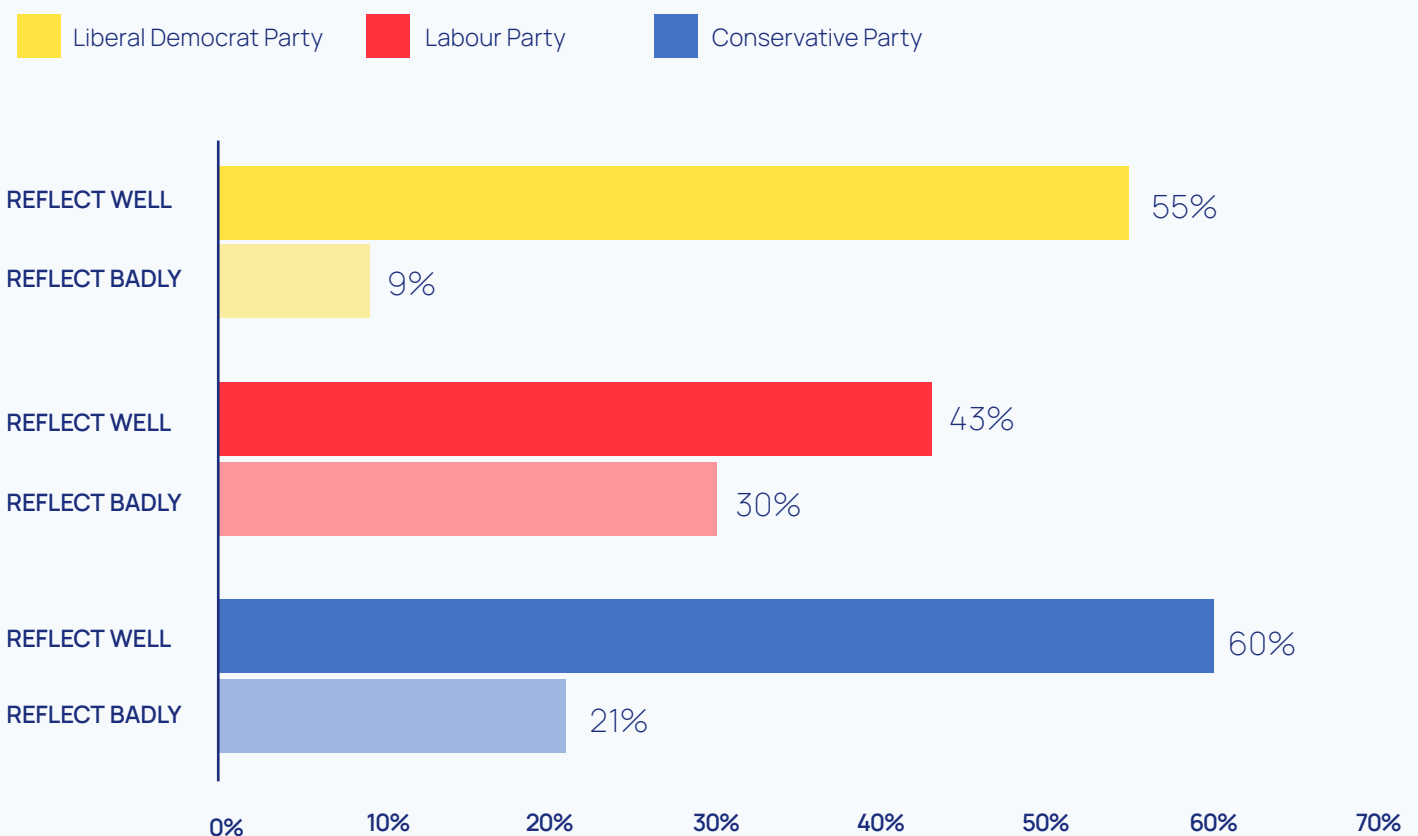


N= 1749. All percentages shown represent percentages of the total sample.

The best way forward for politicians would be to acknowledge the shared concerns of people of all parties about the economy, and to work towards a closer relationship with the EU to try and improve economic conditions for everyone. Whilst this certainly doesn't mean re-opening ideological and dogmatic arguments on re-joining the EU, it does mean having a practical and pragmatic conversation about how we can work more closely with the continent to help solve our current financial problems.

‘The best way forward for politicians would be to acknowledge the shared concerns of people of all parties...’

Figure 07: The percentage of respective party voters who think the Conservative Party, Labour party and Liberal Democrat party reflect their views on Britain’s relationship with the European Union well or badly.



N= 1749. All percentages shown represent percentages of the total sample. Figures don't add up to 100 as we've excluded response percentages to 'don't know'.

We need practical and reasonable progress

It is clear that while being a contentious issue, the British people all want to make Brexit work.

The 2016 referendum led to real divisions in the public's appraisal of Brexit, with Remainers consistently seeing the facts through a negative lens and Leavers perceiving the impacts of Brexit more optimistically. This is particularly reflected in both groups' differing perceptions of how trade and immigration has been impacted.

Despite this, Remainers and Leavers are beginning to agree on some points. Far from being tired of Brexit, the British people acknowledge that the economy has suffered since Britain left the EU and want to discuss how to move forward. There is a starting convergence in how the country should do this, with many people believing we should re-join the single market.

It appears that experience has a powerful impact on opinions as well as group belonging though. This convergence of opinion where the economy is concerned is most likely due to the widespread negative economic impacts that the British people are all experiencing from the war in Ukraine, the fallout of Covid and the consequences of leaving the EU. However, our research also shows that whether someone has travelled or

imported recently causes opinions to differ to the rest also – and tend to be more pessimistic. The same can be seen with women.

Politicians need to be aware that all party supporters are unhappy with Britain's current relationship with the EU, and large percentages do not feel as though their parties reflect their opinions. We therefore need politicians to pursue more practical, reasonable, and inclusive conversations about how to make Brexit work. Politicians must move past tribal and ideological divides and draw on the lived experiences of people to make sure we create a Brexit that works for all.



