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British public opinion on Brexit: Controversies and contradictions

Sofia Vasilopoulou and Liisa Talving

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Abstract

What does Brexit really mean? We examine what people expect from the Brexit deal, highlighting three key findings. First, while trade is the key policy priority among the British electorate, opinion is divided on whether the UK should leave the customs union. Second, the public is split on the potential trade-off between remaining in the European single market and the ability to control free movement of people across the borders. Third, Britons are opposed to sharing welfare benefits with others, but tend to support EU citizens living, working and doing business in the UK. However, they expect greater access to welfare for UK citizens in European countries compared to EU citizens in the UK.

Introduction

On 29 March 2017, the United Kingdom (UK) government triggered article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty, signalling the start of the two-year negotiations on the country's departure from the European Union (EU). Since then, a key issue has occupied most Brexit observers: What does Brexit really mean? Or, in other words, what would be the nature of the UK's future relationship with the EU? Would a 'soft' or a 'hard' version of Brexit be the most acceptable outcome to the British electorate?

The Brexit referendum result arose from a combination of factors, ranging from political disillusionment and the weak credibility of party elites to concerns related to the economy, immigration and welfare (e.g. Hobolt, 2016). This has led to different interpretations regarding the public's view on the specificities of the UK-EU relationship post-Brexit (Menon and Fowler, 2016). Adding to this complexity, the British electorate was asked to indicate their general position on remaining or exiting the EU, rather than their preferences on specific areas of UK-EU cooperation. This has opened up long discussions regarding what type of Brexit British voters may prefer and what kind of Brexit the government should deliver. The fact that EU membership entails close cooperation in a number of different policy areas makes it even more difficult to assess which Brexit model is more likely to receive greater citizen support.

While we cannot answer specifically what kind of Brexit the UK will deliver following its negotiations with the EU, as this depends on a variety of factors, our contribution presents a first attempt at understanding what people expect from the Brexit deal. We examine the British public's key policy priorities during the Brexit negotiations, focusing specifically on two key aspects of the debate, i.e. (1) economy and trade and (2) immigration and citizenship. We do so through the use of data from a YouGov survey we ran on a sample of approximately 1700 individuals, fielded on 29 June 2017, a few days following the start of the official Brexit negotiations. The sample was representative of the general British population in terms of age, gender, education, social grade, region, political attention, and EU referendum vote.

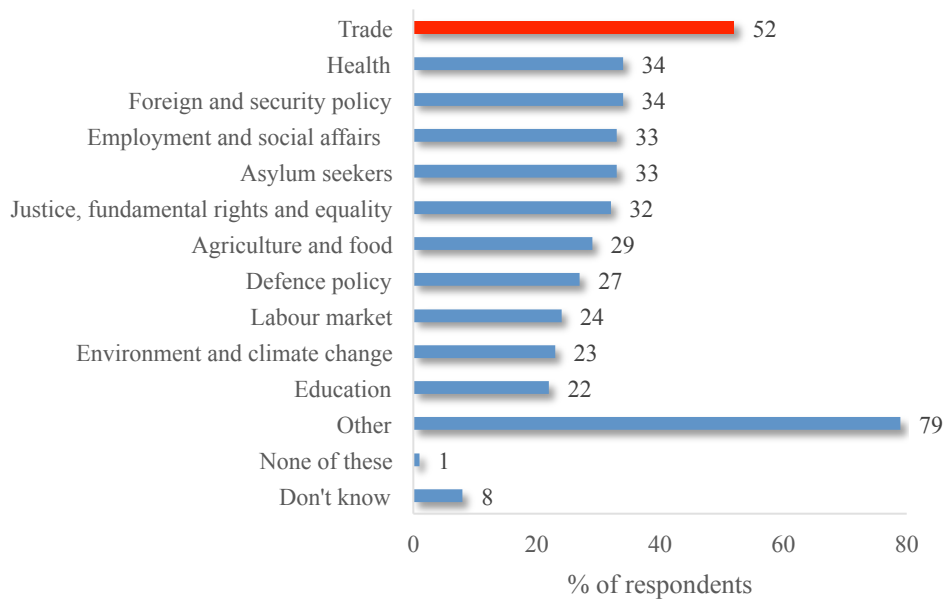
Our findings point to several contradictions in British public opinion. First, although economics and trade are distinctly the key policy priority among the British electorate, opinion is divided on whether the UK should leave the customs union and introduce customs checks on British imports and exports to the EU. Second, the public views trade and free movement of persons as a trade-off, albeit one that may turn out to be difficult for the UK government to address. Third, the key concern when it comes to EU freedom of movement relates to access to welfare, rather than the right of EU citizens to live, work and do business in the UK. However, the public expects greater access to welfare for UK citizens in European countries compared to EU citizens in the UK.

Trade as a policy priority in Brexit talks

To probe respondents' views on the type of UK-EU relationship post-Brexit, we asked them to indicate which specific policy areas should be a priority for the UK government in the Brexit negotiations. Respondents were presented with a selection of nineteen policy areas related to existing frameworks of cooperation with the EU, and were invited to select up to five most important ones. Figure 1 displays the top policy priorities among the electorate. Areas of lower concern, e.g. sustainable development, digital security and development policy, are combined in the category 'other'. The survey findings demonstrate that trade is by far the highest policy priority for the UK public in the Brexit negotiations compared to other policy areas, such as health, foreign and security policy, employment, justice, agriculture, defence, and climate change. Altogether, 52 per cent of respondents selected trade as one of the top five priority areas for the UK government in the Brexit talks. The results seem to

suggest that the partisan and media focus on the post-Brexit trade agreement also coincides with public opinion.

Figure 1: Key policy priorities in Brexit negotiations



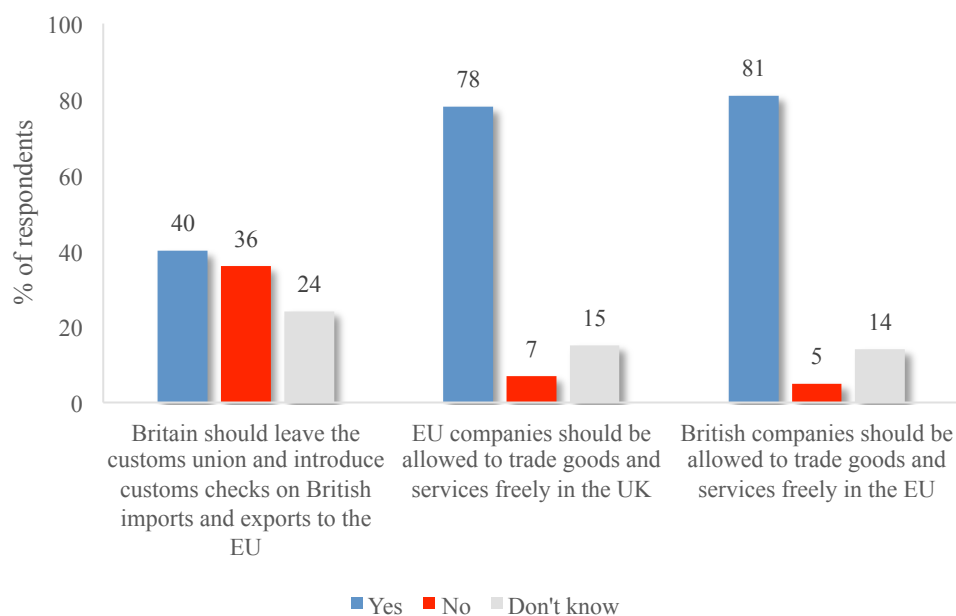
Source: Authors' survey, YouGov, 29 June 2017.

But what exactly are the public's expectations in this most important policy area? While there appears to be a consensus that trade should be the dominant issue in Brexit negotiations, citizens are much more divided in their support for the customs union. On average, 40 per cent of respondents agree and 36 per cent disagree that as part of the Brexit deal, the UK should leave the customs union and introduce customs checks on its imports from and exports to the EU (Figure 2). A noteworthy 24 per cent of respondents did not express a clear opinion on this question. In other words, although there is no strong public inclination towards either side, slightly more people prefer leaving rather than staying in the trade bloc. This implies that parts of the

population tend to believe that a free-trading UK can prosper after leaving the EU and that the UK will be able to strike its own global trade deals.

Considering the polarisation on whether or not the UK should seek a clean break from the customs union, it comes as a certain surprise that an overwhelming majority of the citizens want free trade with the EU to continue, insisting that companies should still be able to trade goods and services freely after the UK's exit. Specifically, 78 per cent of the respondents support the freedom for European companies to trade freely in the UK as part of the Brexit deal, and 81 per cent wish for similar rights for British companies trading in the EU (Figure 2). The implies that while the majority of the British public want their country to maintain a strong trade relationship with the EU, a large part of the population support free trade with the EU but also want the UK to be able to negotiate its own trade deals with third countries.

Figure 2: Public preferences on trade in Brexit negotiations



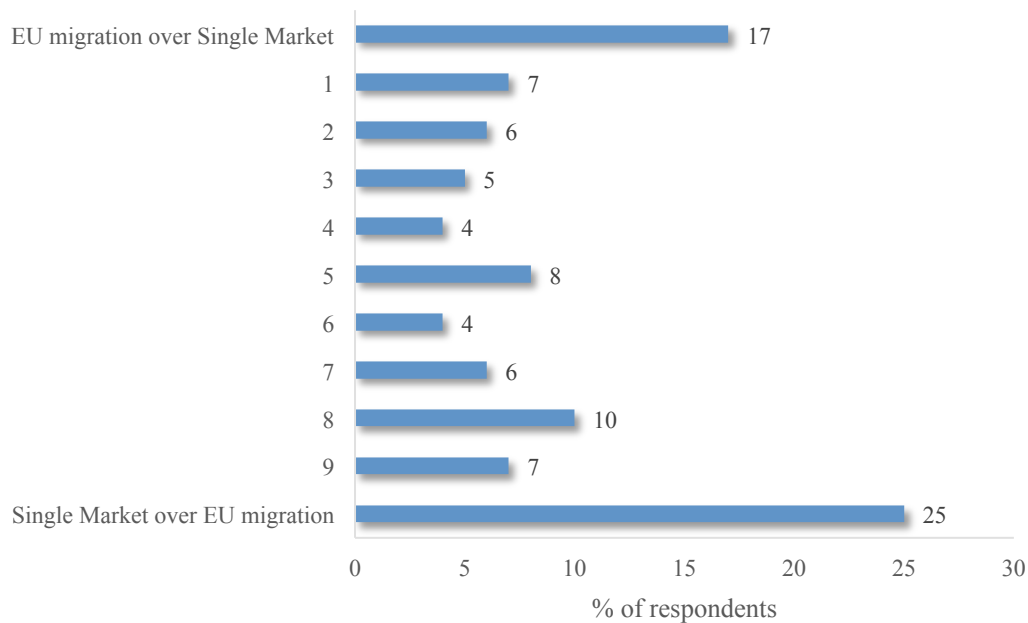
Source: Authors' survey, YouGov, 29 June 2017.

Single market and EU migration: A potential trade-off?

Given that the focus of the UK's Brexit negotiations is primarily economic, i.e. to strike a deal that would establish a strong economic partnership with the EU, how do British citizens view the balance between retaining the right to access the EU's single market on the one hand and placing restrictions on the free movement of people across their borders on the other? Our data indicate that the two are viewed as a trade-off: the public remains divided, with more people wanting access to the European internal market over curbing EU migration into the UK. More specifically, 39 per cent of the respondents fall on the lower and 52 per cent on the higher half on an 11-point scale, where 0 indicates favouring the control of EU migration into the UK over access to the single market and 10 refers to preferring access to the single market over curbing EU migration (Figure 3). 8 per cent remain in the middle, demonstrating no clear disposition towards either side.

Citizens, then, seem to be aware that it is unavoidable to accept certain levels of free movement of people in exchange for access to the largest economic bloc in the world. With both of these topics being highly political and highly contested, the majority of the respondents are apprehensive that a lot is at stake with regard to the country's economy and tend to prioritise the post-Brexit trade agreement compared to controlling migration. For many others, however, the latter is too high a price to pay for full access to the single market.

Figure 3: Public preferences on access to the EU’s single market vs controlling EU migration into the UK



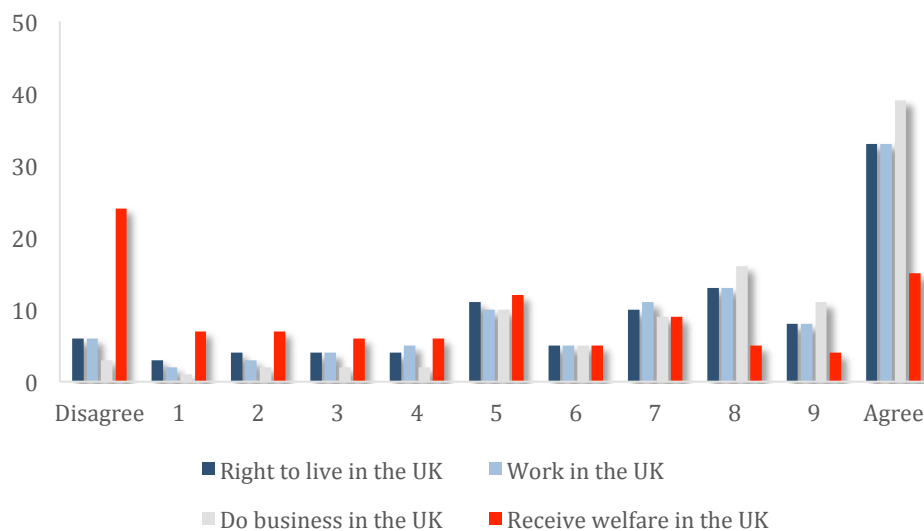
Source: Authors’ survey, YouGov, 29 June 2017.

The question of citizenship: EU and UK citizens’ rights compared

Focusing next on freedom of movement, our survey assessed the British public’s attitudes towards the rights of EU citizens in the UK and compared them to preferences regarding the rights of UK citizens in the EU. Starting with the former, we may witness that British public opinion is dispersed on EU-27 citizens’ rights in the UK (Figure 4). There is much more support for EU citizens doing business in the UK as opposed to working and living in the UK. The least support is observed on the question of access to welfare where we find comparatively much more disagreement and potentially a level of polarisation among the electorate. On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 denotes full disagreement and 10 full agreement, approximately a quarter of

the respondents (24 per cent) fully disagree that EU citizens should be allowed to claim welfare benefits in the UK. If we were to add those who have responded below 5, i.e. the middle of point of the scale, then the proportion reaches 50 per cent of the respondents. This shows that opposition to EU citizens accessing welfare benefits in the UK is much higher than opposition to EU citizens' right to live, work and do business in the UK, which is at 21 per cent, 20 per cent and 10 per cent respectively. Put differently, the majority of British citizens tend to be in favour of EU citizens living, working and doing business in the UK, but are not as happy for them to claim welfare benefits in their country.

Figure 4. Public attitudes towards the right of EU-27 citizens to live, work, do business and claim welfare benefits in the UK

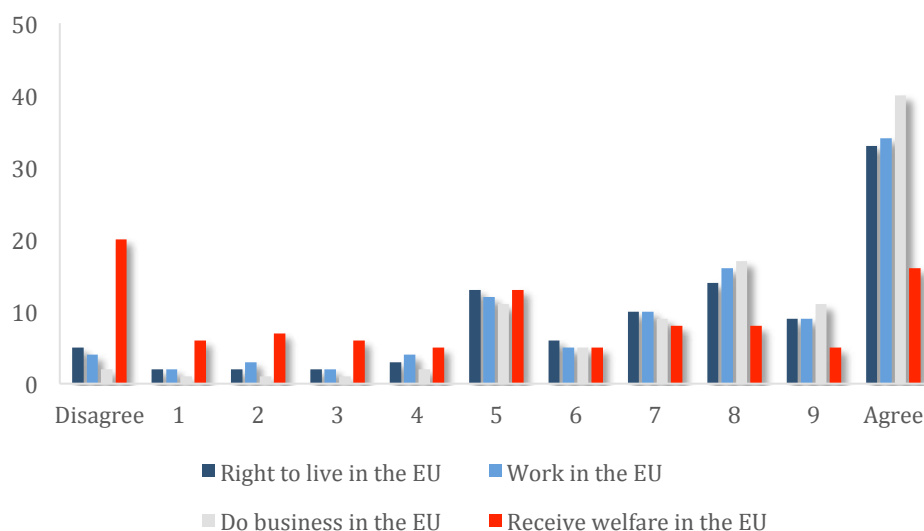


Source: Authors' survey, YouGov, 29 June 2017.

How do these findings compare to how the British citizens view their own rights abroad? Here the picture is slightly different. Figure 5 shows that, on average,

respondents are more supportive of their own rights abroad compared to EU-27 citizens' rights in the UK. Overall, less people disagree that UK citizens should have the right to live, work, do business and claim welfare benefits in other EU countries (responses below point-5 on the scale). These percentages range from 14 per cent disagreeing that UK citizens should have the right to live in an EU country, 15 per cent opposing the UK citizens' right to work in the EU, only 7 per cent disagreeing that UK citizens should be able to do business in other EU countries, and 44 per cent arguing that UK citizens should not receive welfare abroad. The latter number on UK citizens' welfare rights in other EU countries is about 6 percentage points lower to those who oppose EU citizens' welfare access in the UK. This indicates that Britons tend to expect greater access to welfare for themselves in European countries than they are willing to accept for Europeans residing in the UK. That being said, however, British citizens remain polarised on the question of welfare access even if this concerns their own nationals abroad.

Figure 5. Public attitudes towards the right of UK citizens to live, work, do business and claim welfare benefits in other EU countries



Source: Authors' survey, YouGov, 29 June 2017.

Discussion

In summary, our survey examining British public opinion on Brexit demonstrates that trade policy is the most important issue in negotiations with the EU. More than half of the respondents list trade among the top five policy priorities for the country in the context of the Brexit deal. Citizens remain polarised as to whether the UK should leave the customs union, but firmly support securing strong commercial and economic ties with the EU. The population is also divided on the potential trade-off between remaining in the European single market and the ability to control free movement of people across the borders, with more people nevertheless prioritising the former. The issue of EU freedom of movement appears controversial in itself: Britons are opposed to sharing welfare benefits with others, but tend to support EU citizens living, working and doing business in the UK. At the same time, the expectations regarding their own benefits in the EU exceed those that they are willing to accept for foreigners residing in the UK.

The results point to an interesting contradiction where an independent UK trade policy on the one hand is expected by many to be compatible with preserving a close relationship with the country's biggest trading partner on the other. This signals the widely-discussed 'have its cake and eat it' attitude in the UK where a desire to shape its own trade agenda is intertwined with a reluctance to let go of the advantages of tariff-free trade (see e.g. Goodwin, 2017). That being said, British citizens do not necessarily view the negotiations as a clear choice between a 'soft' and a 'hard'

Brexit, as they tend to endorse key elements of both approaches (BBC, 2016). While they tend to support free trade with the EU, they are split on the general question of whether the UK should have access to the single market. Leaving the full customs union while still negotiating some form of access to the EU's internal market seems to be the most preferred option in the public's view. Theresa May has promised a hard Brexit (see e.g. Borrelli, 2017), but needs to square this position with the reality of pressures towards maintaining strong commercial and economic ties with Europe. Considering the contradictions of the British public's political expectations of the Brexit deal, the challenge for the UK government would be to address the voters' concerns in its Brexit negotiations. This is important both in terms of government accountability and policy responsiveness, and might present a real difficulty to the government especially given that the gap between the UK's expectations and the EU's negotiating line.

Our findings also suggest that although the question of EU migration is very important to the public, and contributed to how people voted in the Brexit referendum in 2016 (Vasilopoulou, 2016), it is much more nuanced and potentially contradictory than we had previously thought. First, British nationals may be perceived as having 'double standards', viewing non-nationals not having equal rights to themselves. This might undermine the UK government's popularity following a Brexit divorce deal that would guarantee equal rights for both UK nationals in EU member states and EU-27 citizens in the UK. Second, the British public is much more agreeable to EU citizens' living, working and doing business in the UK, but are considerably less comfortable with sharing welfare. This suggests that the social aspect of EU citizenship, i.e. social integration and justice through access to the welfare state, is the

key issue featuring in the hearts and minds of the British public. This could be because the anti-EU campaigns, parties and individuals heavily politicised the welfare aspect of EU integration during the referendum, by for example associating EU membership costs with deficit in the NHS. It might also be because citizens perceive a fundamental incompatibility between the transnational nature of the EU's freedom of movement on the one hand and the national character of welfare states on the other. This might present another problem to the UK government given that the EU-27 citizens that will remain in the UK post-Brexit will continue to have access to welfare.

More broadly, the above conclusions are instructive with regard to the future of the academic study of public opinion in the EU. Political attitudes and citizen preferences are now more than ever before at the heart of EU politics with rising public Euroscepticism constraining the actions of both domestic governments and EU institutions. Thus far scholars have examined public support for, and opposition to, European integration (for an overview of key theories, see Hobolt and De Vries, 2016). Going beyond the analysis of Europeans' general view of EU membership and integration, more work needs to be done to understand how citizens view specific EU policies and the extent to which they apply 'double standards' when comparing themselves to other Europeans. In addition, we still do not know what may explain potential contradictions in people's attitudes towards different aspects of EU cooperation. Future work should thus address these theoretical and empirical gaps by developing novel frameworks and asking more precise questions in public opinion surveys.

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