

# New research shows freedom of movement is not toxic to Leavers, who are almost as positive about it as Remainers

*There is a widespread assumption that freedom of movement with the EU is highly unpopular among people who identify as Leavers. [Paul Willner](#), [Todd Hartman](#), and [Richard Bentall](#) present data from a large (>2K) sample showing that this assumption is mistaken: freedom of movement is almost as acceptable to Leavers as it is to Remainers. This finding has implications for the positioning of political parties on freedom of movement and membership of the EU Single Market.*

Six years after the EU Referendum, the Brexit project is in disarray. A series of authoritative reports have confirmed predictions that Brexit would inflict serious damage on the UK economy. In June 2022, a report from the [Centre for European Reform](#) estimated that UK GDP is 5.2% smaller than it would otherwise have been, investment is 13.7% lower, and goods trade 13.6% lower; a report from the [Resolution Foundation](#) estimated that Brexit will cost each UK worker £470 every year over the coming decade; and the [Office for National Statistics](#) reported the worst balance of trade figures since records began. An earlier report from the [LSE's Centre for Economic Performance](#) estimated that the cost of Brexit to the UK economy is likely to be more than double that of the COVID-19 pandemic, a view shared by the Chair of the [Office for Budgetary Responsibility](#). And this is without full implementation of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement, which the Minister for Brexit Opportunities has said would be an act of national self-harm.

Meanwhile, the problems over the Northern Ireland protocol appear irreconcilable, and the government's solution (to unilaterally cancel swathes of this international treaty that they signed amid great jubilation and claimed as a diplomatic triumph only two years ago) threatens to shred the reputation of the UK as a trustworthy partner in international affairs. This state of affairs is widely recognised: opinion polls on the question of whether Brexit is going well or badly have shown a steady deterioration in public support, with well over three times as many now thinking that Brexit is going badly than think it is going well ([54% to 16%](#)).

An obvious remedy for this malaise is readily available. Rejoining the Single Market would – at a stroke – overcome the barriers to trade with our European neighbours and solve the problem of Northern Ireland, as well as restore lost rights to UK citizens. But Single Market membership would mean the return of freedom of movement, which, it is believed, would so anger leave voters that they would withdraw support from a party advocating it. ([We argue](#) that this assumption drives Labour Party policy on Europe.)

Here we present evidence that the received wisdom is incorrect: freedom of movement is NOT toxic to leavers. Our data are from the eighth wave of an ESRC-funded nationally representative survey ([grant no. ES/V004379/1](#)), stratified by age, sex, and household income, conducted online on the Qualtrics platform in June 2022. Participants were identified as Leavers, Remainers, or neither from their responses to a questionnaire with three leave-supporting and three remain-supporting items (e.g. 'I identify strongly with people who voted to leave/remain in the European Union'). We then presented participants with a range of different scenarios for the future of the Brexit process. Rather than asking them to identify their ideal or preferred outcome, we aimed to identify outcomes that could be acceptable to both Remainers and Leavers if they were achieved as the endpoint of a process of negotiation between the UK and the EU.

In an [earlier survey](#), conducted with a representative sample of 1,408 adult UK citizens in 2021, we found that, unsurprisingly, a scenario labelled 'An Independent, Sovereign UK' (essentially a hard Brexit) was acceptable to 41% of Leave voters, but unacceptable to 64% of Remain voters; conversely, a scenario labelled 'Rethink Brexit' (calling a second referendum) was acceptable to 65% of Remain voters but unacceptable to 56% of Leave voters. However, a scenario labelled 'A New Deal with Europe' was acceptable to a majority of both Leavers and Remainers, while unacceptable to less than 20% in either group.

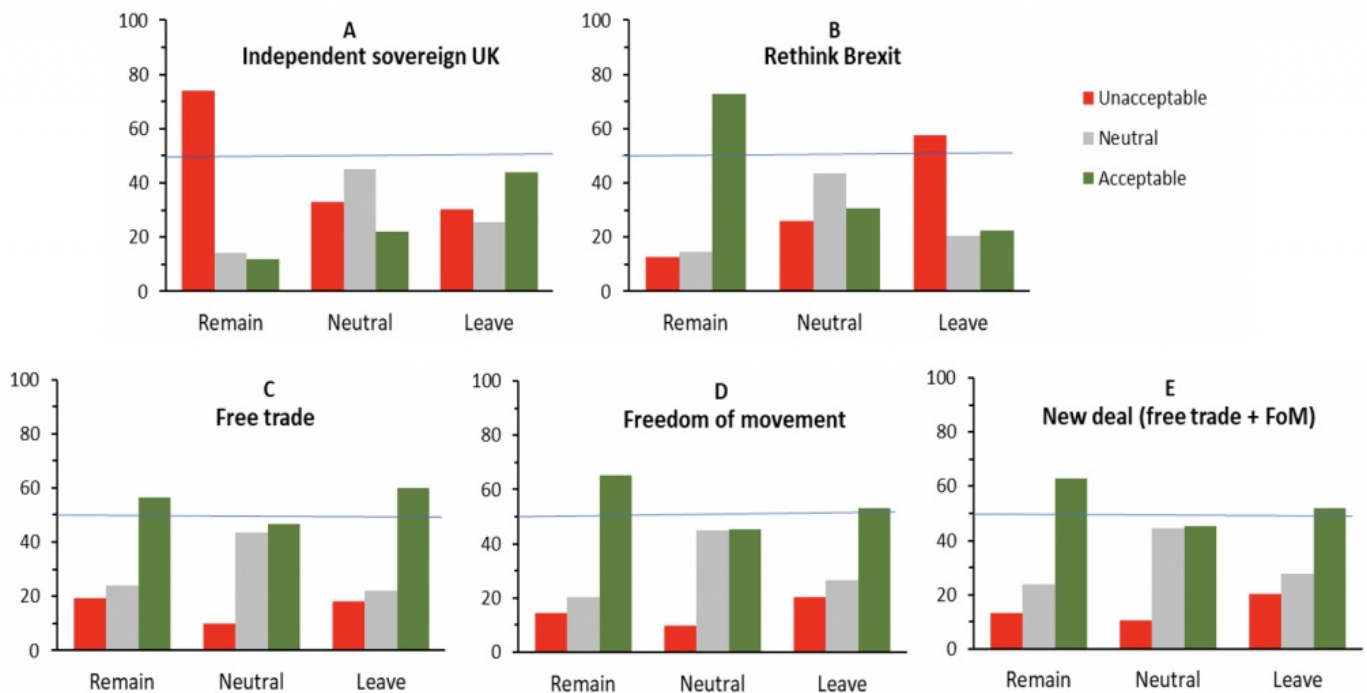
In our new survey, alongside the hard Brexit and second referendum options, we offered three alternative visions of what a new deal with Europe might mean, involving either free trade, freedom of movement, or both. Each scenario was presented with an explanation of what it would mean, and a rationale (see Table 1).

**Table 1:** Five hypothetical scenarios for the relationship between the UK and the EU

Scenario	Explanation	Rationale
<b>An independent, sovereign UK</b>	The UK should cut off all ties with the European Union, even if this means trading is disrupted, economic growth is reduced and there is a hard border in Ireland.	Sovereignty is more important than anything else, including the economy or the fate of Northern Ireland.
<b>Rethink Brexit</b>	If Brexit proves to be economically and socially damaging, once this is the case we should have a referendum on re-joining the EU as a full member.	If Brexit is a failure and badly harms the UK economy, the people of the UK have a right to decide whether to reverse it.
<b>Free trade with Europe</b>	The UK should remain independent of the European Union but cooperate with it wherever possible, aligning our regulations to maximize trade and reduce tensions in Northern Ireland, aiming for completely frictionless trade with no checks at the border in either direction.	It is important for the UK to be an independent nation but the country will be stronger and more prosperous if we cooperate by improving trade with nearby friendly nations.
<b>Free movement with Europe</b>	The UK should remain independent of the European Union but cooperate with it wherever possible, enabling UK citizens to be able to study, work, live or retire in any EU country, and the same for EU citizens to the UK.	It is important for the UK to be an independent nation but the opportunities for our citizens, our children and our businesses will be greater if UK citizens can work in nearby countries and if citizens from those countries can be recruited to work in UK businesses and the NHS.
<b>A new deal with Europe</b>	The UK should remain independent of the European Union but cooperate with it wherever possible, aligning our regulations to maximize trade and reduce tensions in Northern Ireland, aiming for completely frictionless trade with no checks at the border in either direction. While remaining outside the EU, the UK should also restore the freedom of UK citizens to be able to work or retire in any EU country and the same for EU citizens to the UK.	It is important for the UK to be an independent nation but the country will be stronger and more prosperous, and the opportunities for our citizens, our children and our businesses will be greater if we cooperate by improving trade with nearby friendly nations, if UK citizens can go to work in those countries and if citizens from those countries can be recruited to work in UK businesses and the NHS.

A total of 2,166 participants responded to the survey: 587 participants (28%) self-identified as Leavers, 902 (42%) identified as Remainers, and 677 (31%) did not express a Brexit identity. We found that the hard Brexit option was unacceptable to almost 50% of the participants, and acceptable to less than 25%. The second referendum option was somewhat more acceptable (46%), which is unsurprising as significantly more of the sample self-identified as Remainers, but still unacceptable to almost 30% of participants. However, all three 'new deal' options were acceptable to well over 50% of participants, and unacceptable to only around 15%.

In Figure 1, these data are broken down according to participants' Brexit identities. For the hard Brexit and second referendum options, the results from participants identifying as Leavers or Remainers were very similar to those obtained from Leave and Remain voters a year earlier: unsurprisingly, the hard Brexit option was highly unacceptable to Remainers (A), while the idea of a second referendum was highly unacceptable to Leavers (B). However, the three 'new deal' options were all similarly attractive to Leavers as to Remainers (C,D,E): each of free trade, freedom of movement, and the combination of both elements, was acceptable to a majority of both Leavers and Remainers, and unacceptable to less than 20% in either group. Participants who did not express a Brexit identity also reported very low (10%) levels of unacceptability for all of the 'new deal' options. We considered whether, within the Leave-identifying group a stronger Leave identity might be associated with greater antipathy to freedom of movement: it was not (correlation = 0.044).

**Figure 1:** Acceptability (%) of five hypothetical UK-EU futures to participants identifying as Remainers or Leavers

These data suggest strongly that the conventional wisdom is mistaken: when the meaning is spelled out, freedom of movement is not toxic to leavers, who are almost as positive about it as Remainers. Moreover, almost identical levels of support were found for the third 'new deal' option which envisages both free trade and freedom of movement – a close approximation to Single Market membership. It appears that, contrary to received wisdom, the return of freedom of movement with Europe and rejoining the EU Single Market are policies that could command wide support across the Brexit divide.

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