

Red lines and compromises: how flexible is public opinion about Brexit negotiations?

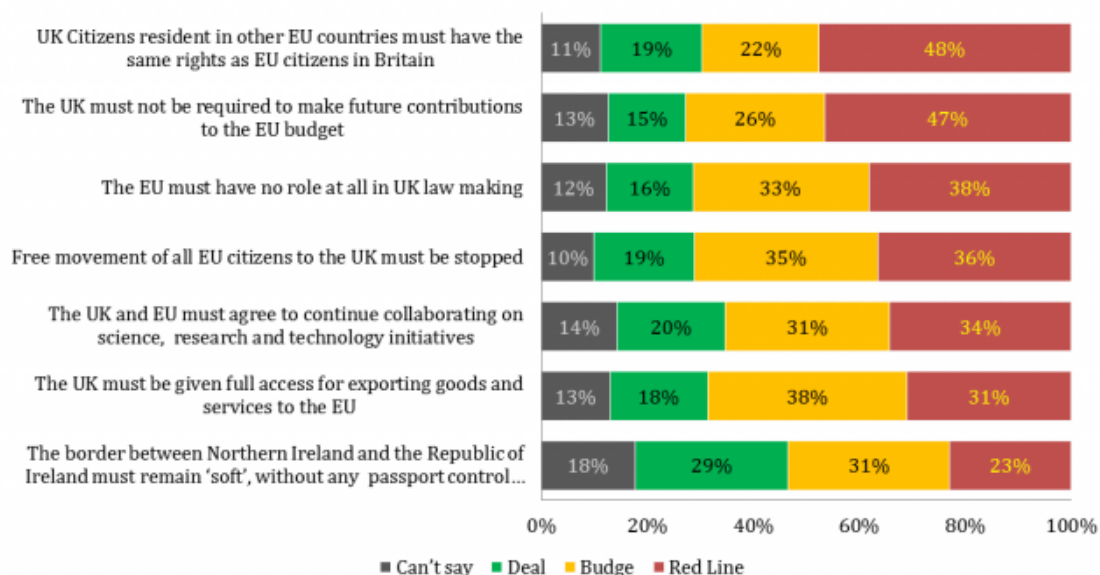


*The heated nature of the public discourse around Brexit suggests that the British public are not in a compromising mood, but is there evidence to back this up? **Lindsay Richards** and **Anthony Heath** (Nuffield College, Oxford) set out to discover what people think about the various aspects of the EU negotiations. Where are people more willing to compromise and what do they say are the 'red lines'? Their results suggest there is more to see than the 'two tribes' politics of leave and remain.*

In our study, we asked 5000 people to imagine themselves at the negotiating table with the EU trying to get the best possible deal for the UK. We provided a list of seven important issues and asked respondents whether they would drop the demand ("deal") or if they would be prepared to negotiate ("budge") or if this was an issue on which they are absolutely unwilling to compromise ("red line").

We find (Fig 1) that people seem to care the most about citizens' rights with 48% naming this as a red line, while 47% mention that future contributions to the EU budget are a no-go. Law-making (aka sovereignty) comes in at third with 38% followed by stopping free movement of people at 36%. People were the least likely to designate the Irish border as a red line. This was also the item with the highest level of 'Can't say', suggesting perhaps that it is just not such a salient issue to most people in the UK (not surprisingly, the majority of our respondents in Northern Ireland say it is a red line – 57%).

Figure 1 People are most likely to mention citizens' rights and budget contributions as the 'red lines' in the Brexit negotiations



Data collected online by Kantar Public in July and August 2017; N = 5,300; post-stratification weights applied

Since the onset of the negotiations, there has been plenty of chatter about "soft" and "hard" Brexit. The so-called "hard Brexit" position is one that prioritizes escaping the jurisdiction of the ECJ and regaining control of immigration. "Soft Brexit" options, on the other hand, might involve staying inside the customs union and/ or the single market, and could involve the continued free movement of people (a bit like the "Norway option" – you can find a helpful summary of the "options" [here](#)).

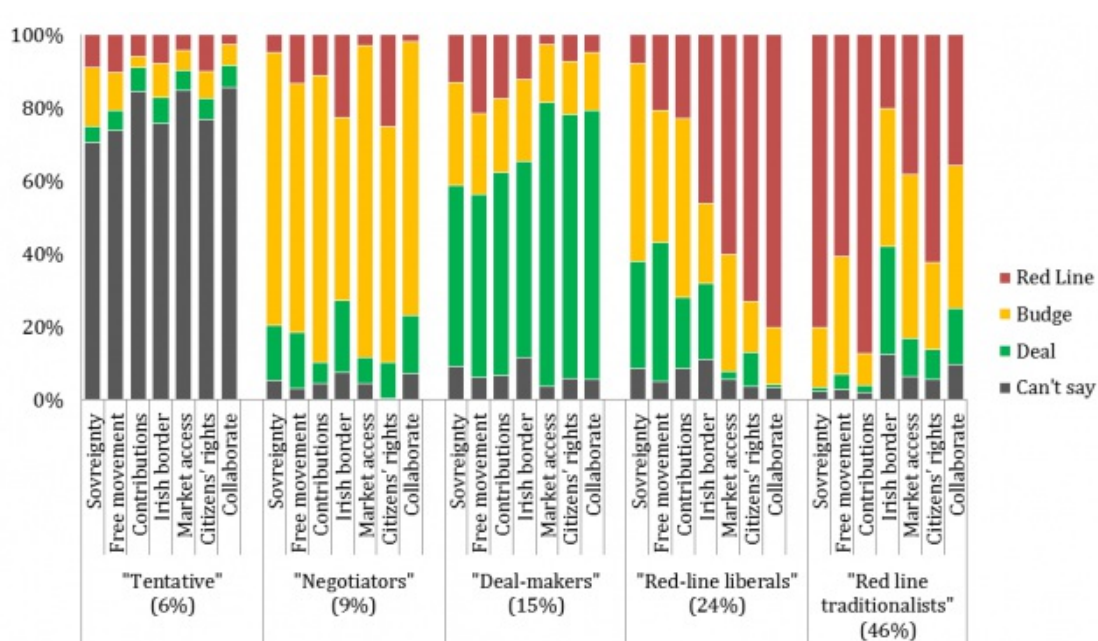


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But do these abstract political positions map onto individual attitudes?

We found five types of attitude cluster (shown in Fig 2). The first of these groups tended to feel they didn't have enough information to say (a quite reasonable position given how complex and heated the whole thing is) but are just 6% of the sample. We have a group of "Negotiators" (9%) who would be willing to budge on most issues, and a group of "Deal-Makers" (15%) who are most willing to drop the UK's demands in order to get a good deal. We have two groups with lots of red lines, but these two groups are differentiated by which particular items they care most about. Our "Red Line Liberals" (24%) are most likely to name collaborations with the EU and citizens' rights as their red lines. The "Red Line Traditionalists" (46%) on the other hand, prioritise budget contributions and sovereignty.

Figure 2 Types of Brexit attitude



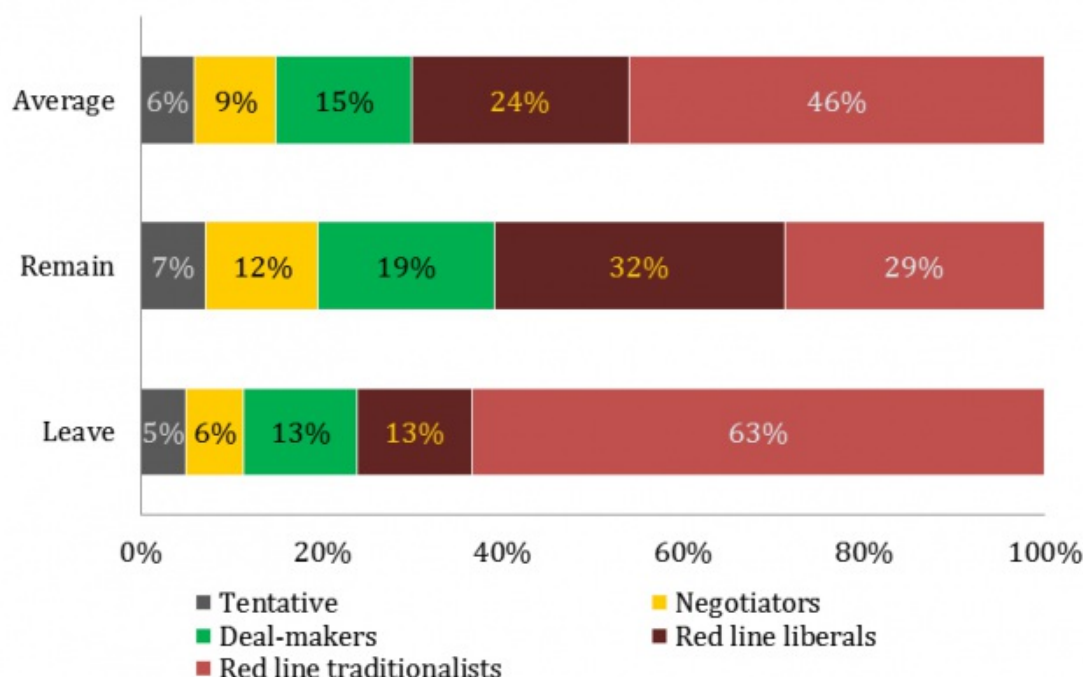
Data collected online by Kantar Public in July and August 2017; N = 5,300. The chart shows conditional probability estimates based on a latent class model

Our Red Line Traditionalists are therefore much closer to the hard Brexit ideal of leaving the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice and so on, while the Red Line Liberals are closer to the soft Brexit option with little concern for stopping the free movement of people. We might think of our Negotiators and Deal-makers as types of 'soft' options too.

It is worth emphasising that none of our groups prioritise access to the single market above all else. In general, it seems, where people feel strongly, they are much more concerned with non-economic aspects of independence and nationalism (the traditionalists) and with closeness of a social kind, i.e. collaboration and shared rights (the liberals).

But do the hard and soft attitudinal clusters map on to how people voted in the EU referendum? See Fig 3. It does not seem surprising that the majority of leave voters are Red Line Nationalists. However, what is perhaps surprising is that one third of leave voters (6+13+13) do not fit the hard Brexit profile. We also find that 29% of remain voters have attitudes that do fit the hard Brexit profile. This may suggest a great deal of variation in attitudes and vote choice... Indeed, vote choice may have been *in spite of*, rather than *because of* preferences on particular issues. It certainly suggests that honouring the will of the people throughout the negotiations is not as straightforward as usually assumed.

Figure 3 Types of Brexit attitude by referendum vote choice



Data collected online by Kantar Public in July and August 2017; Self-reported vote choice, with non-voters dropped. N = 4,900; weighted

These are early findings from a new project at the [Centre for Social Investigation](#), Nuffield College. It is still early days in terms of understanding public opinion on these matters, which are newly salient, complex, and likely to be volatile. To date few studies exist, but for further reading we would recommend [this report](#) by Natcen, [this post](#) by the research team at the LSE, and [CSI's own summary report](#).

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