

# Why a clear, confident espousal of soft Brexit is less risky than Labour fears



*The vast majority of Labour MPs would personally prefer to stay in the Single Market – but the party appears to be committed to leaving it, chiefly on the basis that voters want to curb immigration. **Rob Johns (University of Essex)** highlights three concepts from voting research – the median voter, issue ownership, and valence – that offer the Labour party a rationale for embracing a softer Brexit.*

Neither Her Majesty's Government nor Her Majesty's Most Loyal Opposition seems able to offer Her Majesty or anyone else a coherent line on Brexit. Yet the splits that seem to preclude coherence differ across the two parties. The Conservative divide cuts roughly down the [middle of the parliamentary party](#). By contrast, the overwhelming majority of Labour MPs voted Remain and, even if now resigned to Brexit, would ideally prefer it very soft. Granted, the fact that Labour's skinny Eurosceptic rump includes its leader and his Shadow Chancellor does complicate matters. Still, the key Labour split is between its MPs and its voters – or, rather, between what its MPs want and what they think potential Labour voters will accept.



Shadow chancellor John McDonnell marches with striking Serco workers, July 2017. Photo: [Steve Eason](#) via a [CC-BY-NC-2.0 licence](#)

There is not much psephology can do for the Conservatives here. However, a brief introduction to three key concepts from voting research could prove useful for Labour. This free online course is targeted especially at Labour MPs who would personally welcome something like the Norway option, but fear that voters will demand something altogether [more Canadian](#). The message attentive students will take home is that a clear, confident espousal of soft Brexit is less of an electoral risk than they fear.

## 1. The median voter

Suppose that everybody who voted in the 2016 referendum were to form a huge line in strict order. It would start (in [North London](#), for convenience) with the most avidly pro-Remain and end (in Skegness) with the most ardently pro-Brexit. Exactly halfway along that line (marooned somewhere just off the A1) stands the median voter.

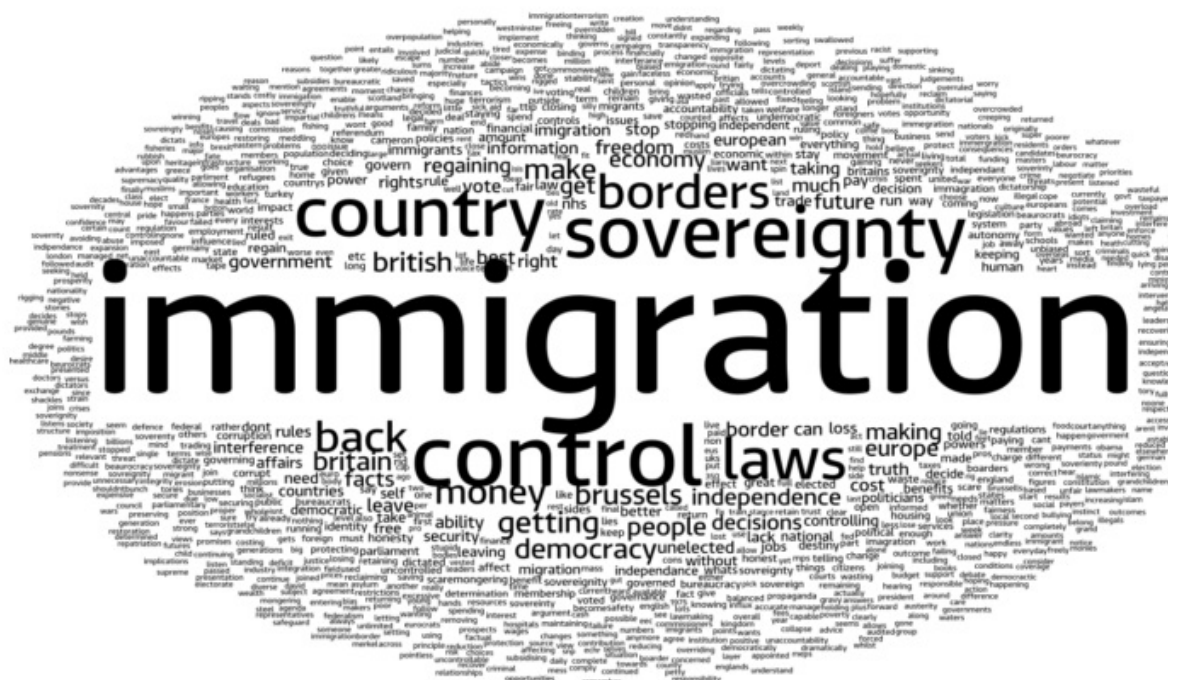
We know from the referendum result that that median voter chose Leave. We also know, however, from the 52%-48% margin that he or she is not so distant from plenty of Remainers – indeed, may even have considered voting that way. If Brexit options are measured on a kind of [Mohs scale](#), the median voter is right at the soft end. Translated into country examples, the median voter is closer to Norway or Switzerland than to Canada. None of this is to dispute (as some disingenuous Remainers tend to) that most Leave voters believed Brexit meant leaving the single market – and regarded that as a price worth paying. Most did, and still do. The point here is that the median voter, much closer to Remain than was the average Leaver, is also likely to be comfortable with a Brexit option more similar to remaining in the EU.

Who cares what the median voter thinks? For one thing, there is a long tradition in the study of politics of treating them as representing the popular will. Imagine that the referendum had gone the other way, but by the same margin. Given how openly the electorate had flirted with leaving, there would be no mandate whatsoever for further integration – if anything, the mandate would be for more like the kind of [‘special status’](#) sought by David Cameron in his renegotiation. On this account, the Norway option is no betrayal of the ‘will of the people’. It may be as accurate an expression of it as an in/out referendum allowed.

However, this is not mainly about salving Labour MPs’ democratic consciences. For what should be obvious reasons, hovering around the median voter is generally a good place to be electorally. Of course, as [careful British Election Study analysis](#) shows, moving in either direction on Brexit would win Labour some votes and lose them others. But the median voter is a good place to be – and is closer to most Labour MPs than many of them seem to think.

## 2. Issue ownership

The obvious riposte to all this is one word:



Since immigration was so [central to Leave voters'](#) concerns, it might seem suicidal to back a Brexit option that does not restore UK control over its EU borders. Certainly, Norway is not an obvious stopover if Labour's final destination is to win over those voters for whom reducing immigration is the overriding political priority. But is that feasible anyway? It would involve Labour being regarded as more willing and able than the Conservatives to reduce immigration. And that seems unlikely because the Tories own the immigration issue.

Everyone understands what ownership here means, even if they didn't know the jargon: a longstanding association between a party and an issue (as, for example, Labour has with the NHS) such that voters for whom it is the top priority are much more likely to support that party. Admittedly, the Tories' grip on immigration loosened over recent years, but it was [UKIP](#) who threatened to take it from them. This only underlines how different Labour's stance would need to be in order to win over the voters most opposed to a Norway option. Labour MPs don't want that sort of policy or rhetoric, and anti-immigration voters know that they don't want it.

Hence, whatever else Labour's 'constructive ambiguity' in the 2017 election gained them, it was not voters for whom immigration was the most important issue ([who voted Conservative over Labour in a ratio of over 3 to 1](#)). Nor was it many of [those](#) for whom, in the Brexit shake-up, controlling immigration matters more than staying in the single market. In short, the right's ownership of the immigration issue means that Labour doesn't have much to lose from the Norway option.

### 3. The valence dimension

Does it have much to gain? Yes, potentially, when we bear in mind that most issues have a valence (or performance) as well as a positional component. In other words, even on issues as hotly contested as Brexit, some voters care less about precisely what the parties want and more about whether they seem remotely capable of achieving it. This is particularly true of the median voter and his or her neighbours, who are by definition less opinionated one way or the other than those at the extremes. (It is also true, for similar reasons, of those who did not vote in that referendum but might in an election.)

Given that they don't do the negotiating, Labour cannot really demonstrate capability and competence here – they can only project them. [Party unity](#) around a clear position would go a long way to doing so. The fact that the vast majority of MPs would actually believe in that position can only help to project trustworthiness on the issue. It would also create and accentuate a contrast with the Conservatives in both unity and clarity.

Of course, there is no ideal solution here. Going 'full Norway' would lose any immediate prospects Labour has of winning hard Brexit votes. It can be attacked as a 'Brexit in name only' option (although that is hard to square with Norway having had its own [hotly-contested referendum](#) in which, in neat symmetry, 52% of its voters saw enough of a difference to reject joining the EU). And it has already proven difficult to get Messrs Corbyn and McDonnell to swing enthusiastically behind single market membership, and one could forgive MPs in strongly Leave-inclined seats for hesitating too. But electoral research suggests that there is much less to lose and more to gain than Labour thinks.

*This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE.*

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