

A DURABLE MAJORITY?

**HOW PUBLIC OPINION
ON THE EU PERFORMS
UNDER PRESSURE**

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October 2026

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank colleagues Laura Chappell, Rosie Okumbe and Mihir Sharma, collaborators Steve Akehurst and Morgan Jones at Persuasion UK, and Fintan Smith and Dylan Spielman at Convergent for their support on this work.

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Walden T (2026) *A durable majority?: How public opinion on the EU performs under pressure*, IPPR.

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SUMMARY

A decade on from Brexit, Andy Burnham has signalled that a reassessment of the UK's relationship with the EU might be around the corner. The UK faces new challenges - a constrained fiscal pot and an increasingly unstable geopolitical environment. A closer relationship with Europe is firmly on the table as part of the solution.

Advocates for EU membership argue that public opinion has shifted, but if the 2016 referendum showed us anything, it is that a seemingly safe majority can be softer than it first appears. If any government is going to stake its political capital on reopening the Europe question, it needs to be sure that there is clear potential to build a durable majority.

New polling by IPPR and Persuasion UK asks how soft or otherwise public support is, where the country's red lines are, and what potential exists for Burnham's government to build a positive case for a genuinely different relationship with Europe.

We tested two options: a rejoin platform, and a closer economic relationship which would involve budgetary contributions and customs union but no freedom of movement or access to the single market. We dug into baseline attitudes to the EU, before trying to surface some of the more concrete trade-offs of a new settlement. We then ran attack lines on pro-EU positions, including in a 'realistic information environment' – read social media feed – to see whether a pro-EU campaign could withstand pressure.

Our results show that for any government seeing a substantively different relationship with the EU as key to its broader political strategy, a durable majority of public support exists to build upon. However, there is currently no option on Europe that commands an overwhelming or unsinkable majority. Whatever new settlement is proposed, a strong campaign would be crucial, and any campaign must tell a new story on Europe, speaking to voters' present concerns around security and the economy.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Raw support for a rejoin position was 52 per cent (join the EU) vs 29 per cent (stay out of the EU). This left 10 per cent choosing 'don't know' and 9 per cent choosing 'I didn't vote'. If these were stripped out, headline support for rejoin was a sizeable 64 per cent vs 36 per cent.
2. In a separate conjoint experiment, voters were shown different combinations of benefits, costs, and arguments for and against joining the EU. They were given only two options: to accept the deal, or not. In this, average support for EU membership was 52 per cent vs 48 per cent, a reversal of the 2016 result.
3. A 'closer relationship' option, where further economic sovereignty is ceded while some of the benefits gained from Brexit are retained, held at a more secure average of 58 per cent vs 42 per cent. Most of this gap came from 2024 Conservative and Reform voters.
4. Any campaign to fundamentally alter the UK's relationship with the EU faces different conditions to 2016.
 - Any opposition campaign will not succeed on a platform that simply rehashes old arguments – free movement is less salient an issue than before.
 - Any prospective campaign to join is vulnerable to new trade-offs, in particular around joining the Euro and exiting post-Brexit trade-deals. In a time of fiscal constraint, EU budgetary contributions are a significant concern.

A DURABLE MAJORITY: WHERE IS THE PUBLIC ON THE REJOINING THE EU?

Ten years on from the vote that split the country 52-48, calls for a reassessment of the UK's relationship with Europe have strengthened. Advocates for EU membership argue that public opinion has shifted: the British people think Brexit was a mistake and want to reverse it. Headline figures seem to support this argument, with one poll turning out a 60 per cent majority in favour of rejoining the bloc.

But if the 2016 referendum showed us – and Cameron's Conservatives – anything, it is that a seemingly safe majority can be softer than it first appears. This history continues to haunt the UK political establishment and makes policymakers wary of advocating in favour of substantive change. There is a persistent sense that when faced with the trade-offs inherent in membership – or when put through the wringer of the British media environment – support would collapse. And a government advocating for change could be at risk as a result.

These dynamics mean that the EU has remained an 'elephant in the room'. But the size, shape, and political risk attached to this European elephant are unclear.

The need to start looking directly at the elephant and defining its contours is growing. First, a lot has changed since 2016. The UK in 2026 is under persistent fiscal pressure, with less safety and security promised from across the Atlantic. These changing circumstances strengthen the argument for pursuing a substantively closer relationship with the EU.

If any government is going to stake its political capital on reopening the Europe question, it needs to be sure that there is clear potential to build a durable majority. Are societal and economic changes affecting the UK reflected in new priorities and new concerns for the voting public?

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Our results show that there is no option on Europe that commands an overwhelming or unsinkable majority. Our closer relationship option garnered stronger headline support across a wider coalition, picking up more votes from the right of the political spectrum. Support for rejoin was more stable and reflected a strong voter coalition spanning the centre-left.

For any government seeing a substantively different relationship with the EU as key to its broader political strategy, a base level of public support exists to build upon. In either case, a strong campaign would be crucial to securing a new mandate. Our polling shows that any campaign must tell a new story on Europe, speaking to voters' present concerns around security and the economy.

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4. Any campaign to fundamentally alter the UK's relationship with the EU faces different conditions to 2016.
 - Any opposition campaign will not succeed on a platform that simply rehashes old arguments – free movement is less salient an issue than before.
 - Any prospective campaign to join is vulnerable to new trade-offs, in particular around joining the Euro and exiting post-Brexit trade deals. In a time of fiscal constraint, EU budgetary contributions are a significant concern.
5. Any party hoping to build a durable coalition in favour of a substantively closer relationship must find new ways to face these questions and to communicate the benefits. Travel friction, the economic damage of being outside, regulatory fragmentation and administrative barriers, and the absence of US support on defence and security all shift the dial amongst the electorate.

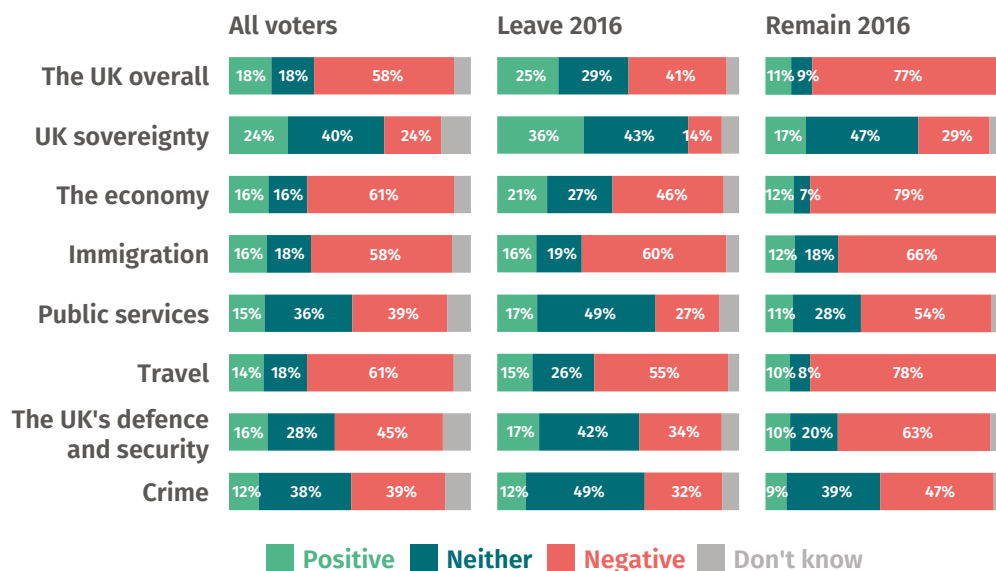
EVERYONE THINKS BREXIT HAS BEEN A FAILURE, BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN EVERYONE WANTS TO REJOIN

The first thing we can say is that the British public is broadly united in believing that Brexit has been a failure. Across almost all indicators – apart from sovereignty – perceptions of the impacts of Brexit are overwhelmingly negative.

FIGURE 1

Both leave and remain voters are united in their view on the negative impact of Brexit so far, except on the issue of sovereignty

Responses to the question: "This year marks 10 years since the UK voted to leave the European Union in June 2016. What impact, if any, would you say Brexit has had on these things?"



Source: IPPR and Persuasion UK polling

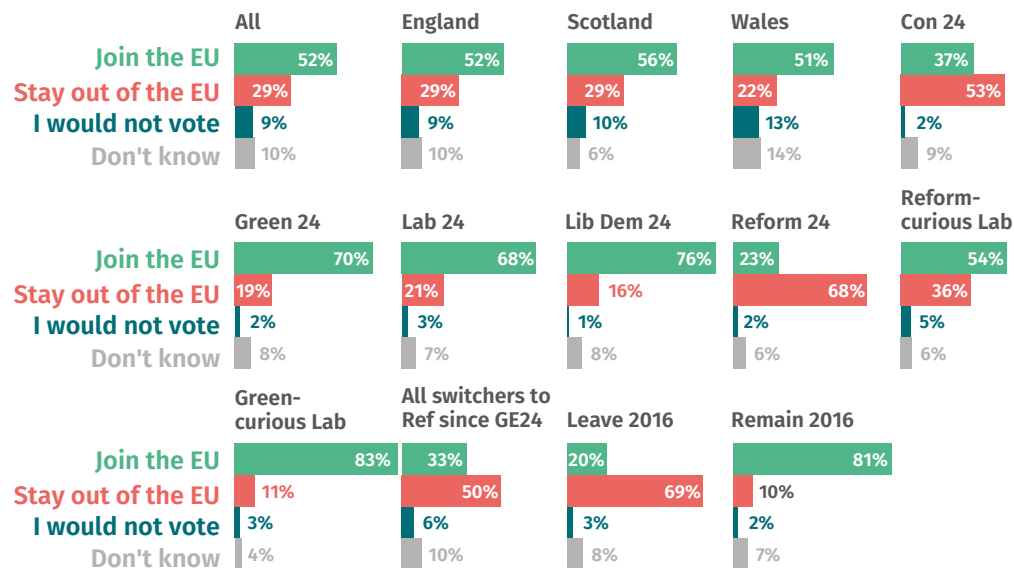
However, advocates should not be hasty to draw an immediate line between the perceived failures of Brexit, and appetite to rejoin as a full member. Many people believe Brexit 'failed' because of poor implementation, rather than seeing the original reasoning for Brexit as being misguided. While very few people believed that the promises of the Vote Leave campaign have been delivered, in focus groups a lot of blame was attributed to the government at the time.

The difference between believing Brexit was a failure, and supporting rejoining is important. It goes some way to explaining the fact that despite 41 per cent of 2016 leave voters saying the overall impact of Brexit was negative, 69 per cent would prefer to stay out. If the new government are going to consider a change in position on Europe, they will need to do more than point to Brexit's failures.

FIGURE 2

There is clear top line support for rejoining the EU, even among Reform-curious Labour voters

Responses to the question: "Imagine there was a referendum tomorrow on whether the UK should rejoin the European Union or stay out. How would you vote?"



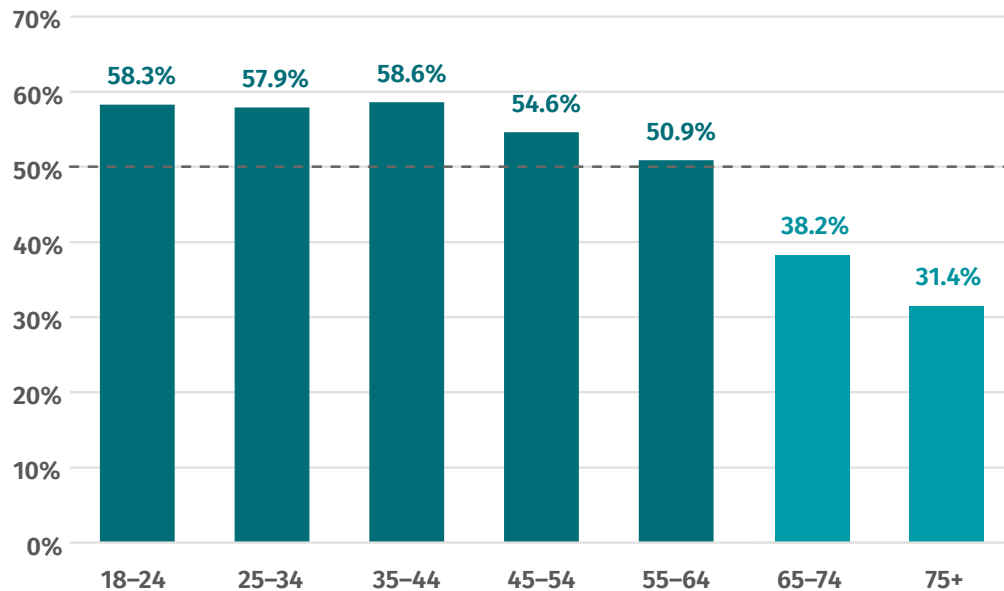
Source: IPPR and Persuasion UK polling

AGE ISN'T JUST A NUMBER – OLDER GROUPS REMAIN THE MOST EU-SCEPTIC

Despite some familiar faultlines, a lot has still changed. Demographic change has reduced the size of the 2016 leave electorate (Kellner 2025). Our polling shows that age demographics remain a significant factor in the EU debate. If we break down the headline numbers for rejoin, support is relatively flat all the way from 18 to 64 before collapsing in the final, oldest, two age brackets. This age split persists regardless of party alignment. This suggests that support for rejoin may be expected to continue to strengthen over time, as the demographic makeup of the UK shifts.

FIGURE 3

Support for rejoin is essentially flat from 18-64, then falls drastically at retirement age
Percentage who would vote to rejoin the EU 'on previous terms, tomorrow'



Source: IPPR and Persuasion UK polling

Among Labour's voter base, and 2017 vote share, it is estimated that 30 per cent voted to leave (Fieldhouse 2019). Our headline polling shows that now only 21 per cent would vote to remain out, while 68 per cent would vote to rejoin. Rejoin sentiment is even stronger among Labour's left flank where the new government is looking to regain ground.

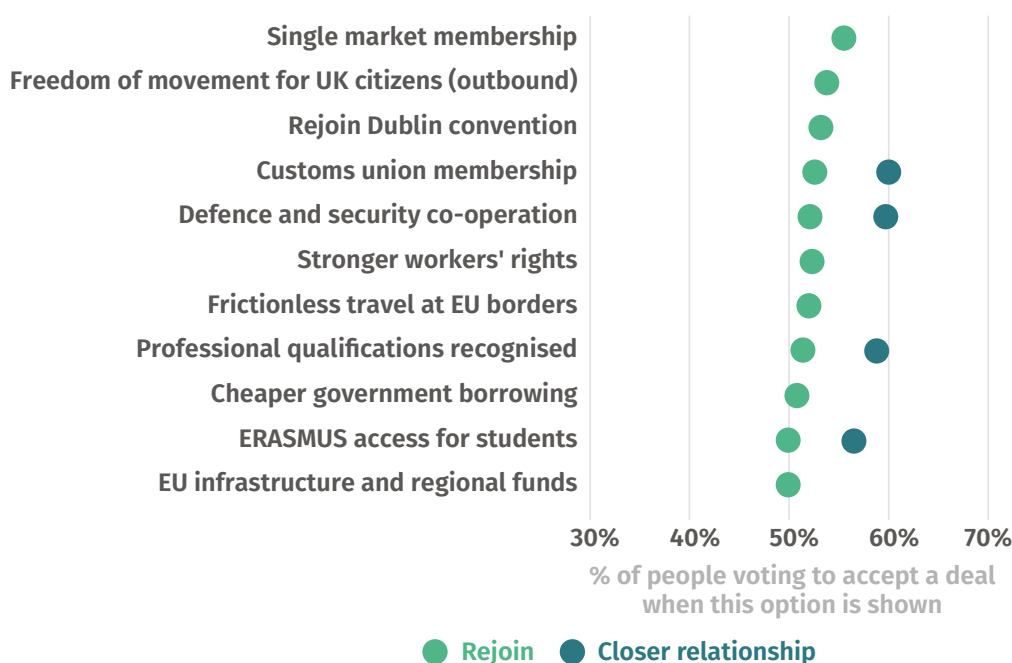
PEOPLE LIKE THE EU'S MOST OBVIOUS BENEFITS, BUT THEY STILL DON'T KNOW ABOUT THEM

At a high level, people thought rejoining would be broadly positive across all indicators, in particular on the economy (56 positive vs 17 negative), travel (63 vs 11), and defence and security (49 vs 15). When we placed a proposal to rejoin alongside some concrete benefits of EU membership, the single market, outbound freedom of movement, and greater data-sharing on asylum seekers all moved voters towards a rejoin position.

FIGURE 4

The best performing 'rejoin' elements are single market membership and freedom of movement for UK voters, for 'closer relationship' it's the customs union and defence and security cooperation

% of voters opting to accept a deal for either 'rejoin' or 'closer relationship' when this benefit is seen



Note: Some elements were only seen within 'rejoin' version of experiment as they were judged to be unrealistic for a 'closer relationship' scenario.

Source: IPPR and Persuasion UK polling

For any potential rejoin campaigner, it is also crucial that, although the most obvious benefits of EU membership were received positively, they were not necessarily common knowledge. When we asked people what surprised them in a scenario where the UK was negotiating a new deal with the EU, the right to live and work across the EU was rated the most surprising benefit. Even after 10 years of debate, the British public's knowledge about what membership of the bloc means is astonishingly low.

Interestingly, emphasising technocratic policy benefits like access to EU infrastructure funds and cheaper borrowing actually weakened support for rejoin. This should act as a clear warning to policymakers, who often speak about the benefits of EU membership in broad macroeconomic terms. The EU has long been viewed by the public as a bureaucratic machine, and our results suggest that emphasising benefits that align with this image is the wrong approach.

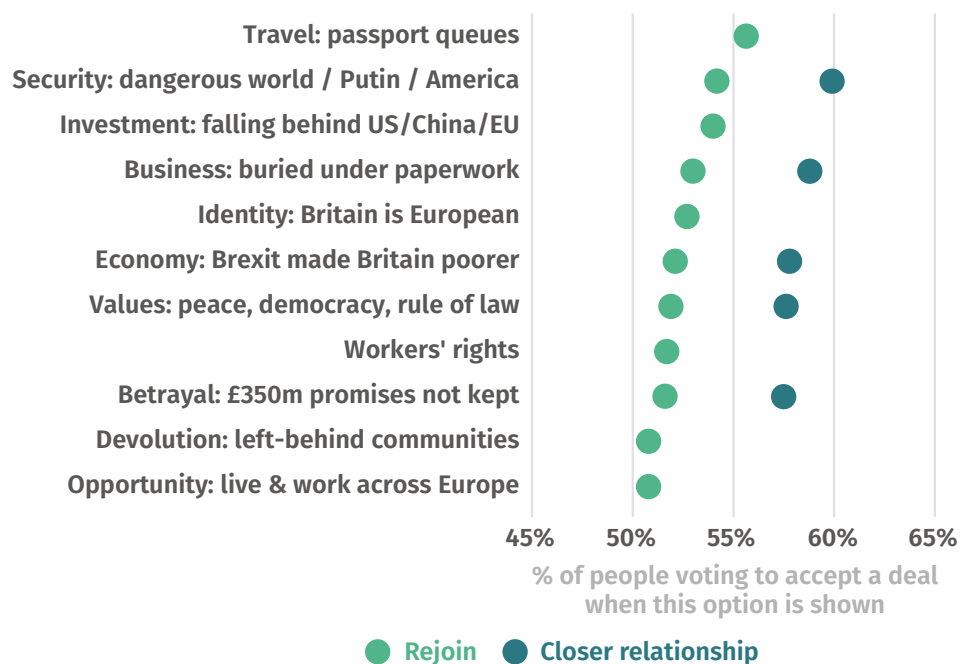
THE PUBLIC HAVE NEW PRIORITIES – AND IT’S UP TO POLICYMAKERS TO DEMONSTRATE THAT A NEW SETTLEMENT WITH THE EU CAN DELIVER ON THEM

As part of our ‘conjoint’ experiment, in which participants saw a randomised ‘rejoin’ and ‘closer relationship’ platform, we tested a series of pro-European messages alongside the benefits and obligations of membership. It was striking that the more contemporary messages resonated most strongly with the public. Cutting down passport queues; being closer to reliable allies in more insecure times; and the need for greater investment all moved the dial.

FIGURE 5

Travel, security and defence, and the economy (investment) are the messages with upward pull on rejoin compared to the average

% of voters opting to accept a deal for either ‘rejoin’ or ‘closer relationship’ when this pro-Europe message is seen



Note: Some elements were only seen within ‘rejoin’ version of experiment as they were judged to be unrealistic for a ‘closer relationship’ scenario.

Source: IPPR and Persuasion UK polling

The takeaway is that support for moving closer to the EU is not just rooted in people’s experience of membership prior to 2016. Voters also see moving closer to the EU as part of the solution to new geopolitical and economic anxieties – in addition to seeing it as the way to reverse Brexit-induced inconveniences that impact people’s lives.

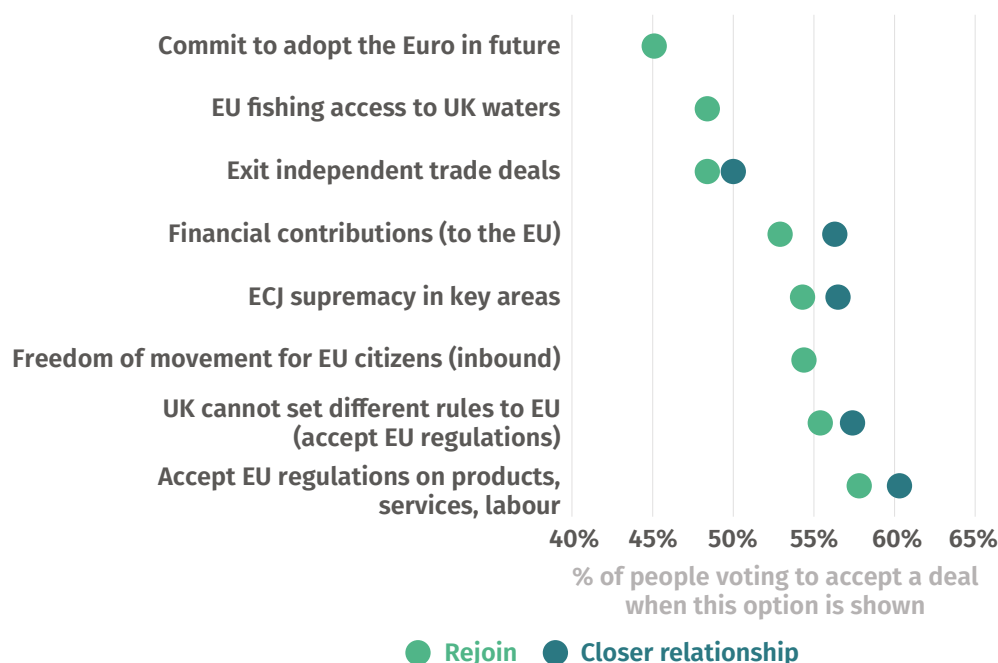
OLD CONCERNS HAVE LOOSENED THEIR GRIP ON THE PUBLIC IMAGINATION, BUT THE MEDIA ENVIRONMENT GIVES THEM BACK SOME OF THEIR STING

Our results showed a marked reduction in the capacity of freedom of movement to hurt support for membership. There are likely many things feeding into this shift – a sense that leaving the EU has not resulted in a reduction in net migration, or a recognition of the crucial role that migratory labour has played in keeping our public services afloat in post-pandemic labour shortages (Rolfe 2023).

FIGURE 6

The Euro, fishing, and existing independent trade deals emerge as large drags on support for ‘rejoin’

% of voters opting to accept a deal for either ‘rejoin’ or ‘closer relationship’ when this obligation is seen



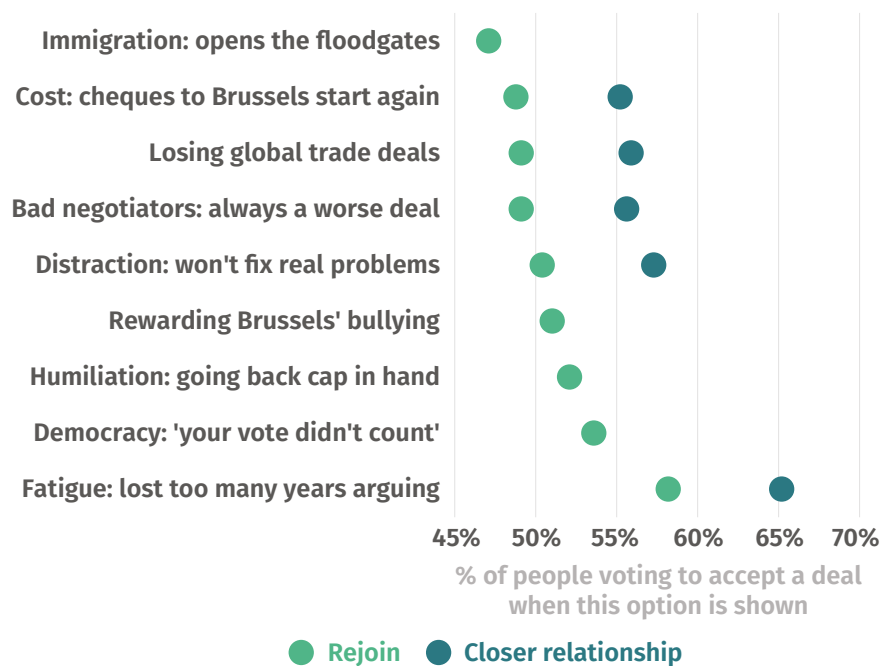
Note: Some elements were only seen within ‘rejoin’ version of experiment as they were judged to be unrealistic for a ‘closer relationship’ scenario.

Source: IPPR and Persuasion UK polling

Despite this shift, 52 per cent of people we polled still saw immigration and asylum as one of the top three issues facing the country. This is likely explained by a greater public focus on irregular migration on small boats. The 2016 Vote Leave campaign relied heavily on weaponising fears about freedom of movement from Eastern European countries such as Poland (Davies 2019). A 2026 YouGov poll found that attitudes towards Polish migrants have improved substantially, with 53 per cent of Britons now happy with current numbers or wanting more to come (Smith 2026). IPPR research has shown that the far right is now weaponising a different group of immigrants – non-white people and asylum seekers to their political advantage.

FIGURE 7

An 'opening the floodgates' message pushed down on support for rejoin, while budget contributions and the lost sunken cost of trade deals were again a drag
% of voters opting to accept a deal for either 'rejoin' or 'closer relationship' when this anti-Europe message is seen



Note: Some elements were only seen within 'rejoin' version of experiment as they were judged to be unrealistic for a 'closer relationship' scenario.

Source: IPPR and Persuasion UK polling

The reduction in the salience of freedom of movement, which is widely regarded to have won the 2016 referendum, is positive but any government hoping to campaign on Europe should still be careful. When presented in factual terms, 'freedom of movement' has lost its sting, but when framed in purposefully antagonistic terms of 'opening the floodgates' to immigration – a stalwart of the 2016 Vote Leave campaign – support for rejoin takes a hit.

Similarly, while financial contributions to the EU didn't weaken support on paper, when phrased as 'cheques to Brussels start again', support took a clear hit. As non-negotiable obligations of membership, figuring out how to tell a positive story on immigration and budgetary contributions is crucial for any Rejoin campaign. Communicating that the UK can be a net contributor and still benefit economically from EU membership is key.

A REALLY LONG NEGOTIATION SINKS SUPPORT, BUT THE PUBLIC AREN'T CLOSED OFF TO DEBATE

When we presented different lengths of negotiation to test the public's patience, support took a 5 percentage point hit under a five-year negotiation scenario. However, the second longest option of 18 months did not shift baseline support, and a 12-month negotiation was favourable to immediate implementation. While the public's patience was not endless, a reasonably long negotiation period did not sink the deal.

Interestingly, the attack line that the EU debate should remain closed because we have spent too many years arguing about it had the opposite effect to what we expected, strengthening support for rejoin. This could be read as the public being unwillingly to cut off its nose to spite its face, or a continuing desire to have a say. Although frustration and exhaustion with the Brexit debate had been surfaced in focus groups, this did not come across in the polling.

THERE IS A PREMIUM FOR 'CLOSER RELATIONSHIP', BUT THIS TAKES A HIT UNDER FAMILIAR OBLIGATIONS

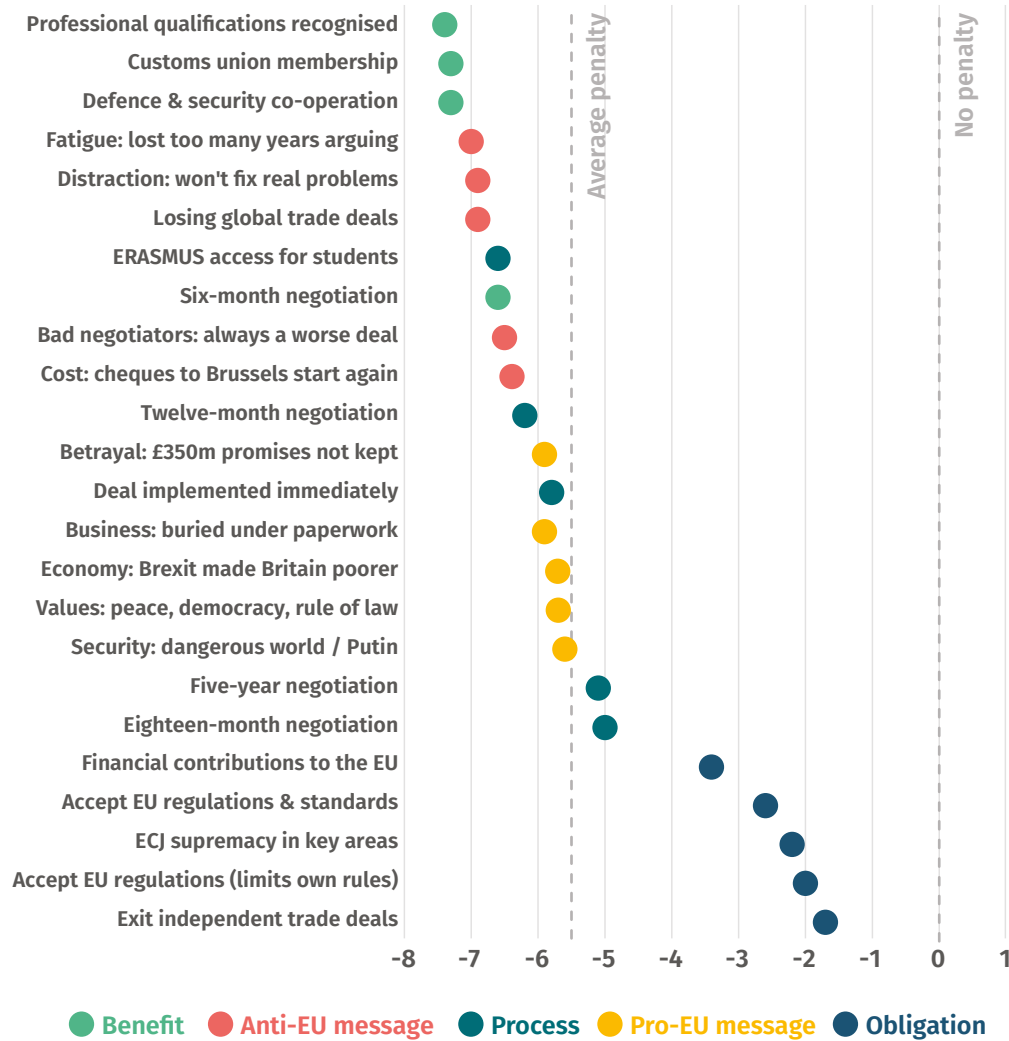
Across the conjoint experiment, support was consistently stronger for our 'closer relationship' option. The same policy benefits received almost a 10 percentage point boost from being part of the 'closer relationship' package.

This gap between the performance of the rejoin and closer relationship options closed somewhat when it came to the harder and better known obligations such as financial contributions, EU regulations and standards, and ECJ supremacy in key areas. This suggests that part of the closer relationship option's appeal lies in its ambiguity whereas costs are already priced in when it comes to rejoin.

FIGURE 8

Hard obligations carry the smallest ‘penalty’ to popularity when comparing the same elements attached to either ‘rejoin’ or ‘closer relationship

% difference between those accepting deals in the ‘rejoin’ category, minus the same figure in the ‘closer relationship category’



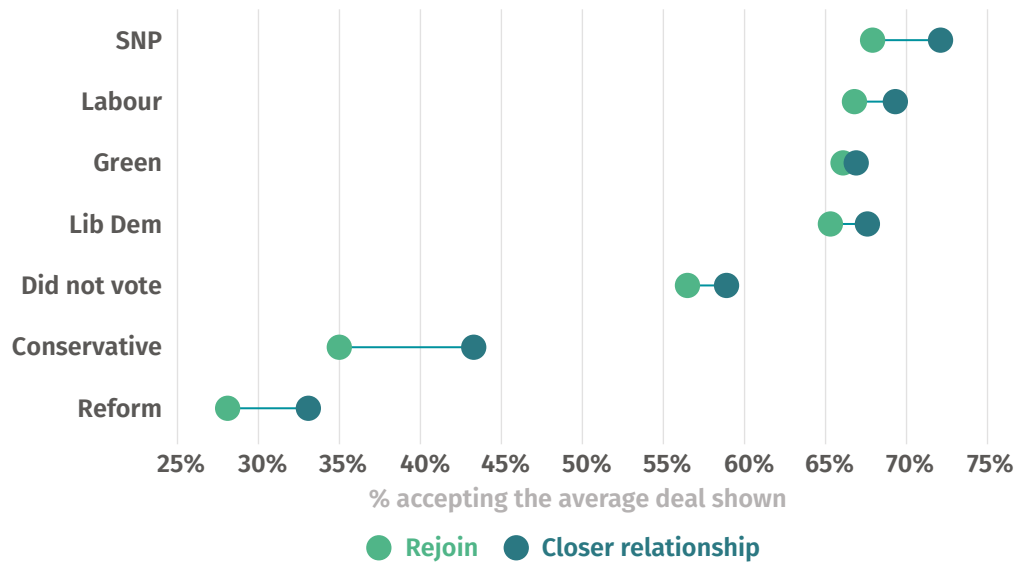
Source: IPPR and Persuasion UK polling

It is also worth mentioning that the strong preference for a ‘closer relationship’ almost all comes from Conservative and Reform voters. For a coalition that includes many 2024 Labour voters, and the party’s left flank, the margin of support between rejoin and another configuration of closer relationship is very small.

FIGURE 9

The progressive bloc is virtually indifferent between destinations, while Conservative and Reform voters have a larger ‘closer relationship’ premium

% voting to accept the average deal tested in each experiment among those expressing a view – the line between the dots is the ‘closer relationship premium’



Source: IPPR and Persuasion UK polling

ASPECTS OF A POTENTIAL NEW MEMBERSHIP NEGOTIATION HIT HEADLINE SUPPORT

As several preeminent European voices have made clear, if the UK were to target accession, the old deal would not be on the table (Rankin and Stacey 2026). We wanted our results to reflect this reality and therefore tested a version of rejoining the bloc that included more stringent conditions – greater financial contributions, a commitment to joining the Eurozone, and the post-Brexit reality of giving up independent trade deals.

With the exception of the UK public’s continuing concern regarding fishing access, only a commitment to joining the Euro, and the necessity of giving up trade deals administered a significant blow to baseline support. A commitment to the Euro also held attention in a more realistic media environment.

The Euro question is relatively easy to understand – it is a concern mirrored across many other countries on the outskirts of the union – most notably Sweden – where only 28.7 per cent of the public support joining the Euro zone, despite the country’s public commitment to do so (Reuters 2026). When asked, poll participants preferred the pound and didn’t trust the Euro – which could be read as a hangover from the Eurozone crisis.

Public reluctance to give up post-Brexit trade deals points to a clear vulnerability for any campaign to rejoin the EU. The public are either unaware that independent

trade policy is incompatible with membership, or reluctant to give up gains secured in the long and politically costly post-Brexit era. Any campaign to join would need a clear argument for why the benefits are worthwhile. The politics of articulating this trade-off have potentially become easier, as the new government has less political capital tied up in the trade deals.

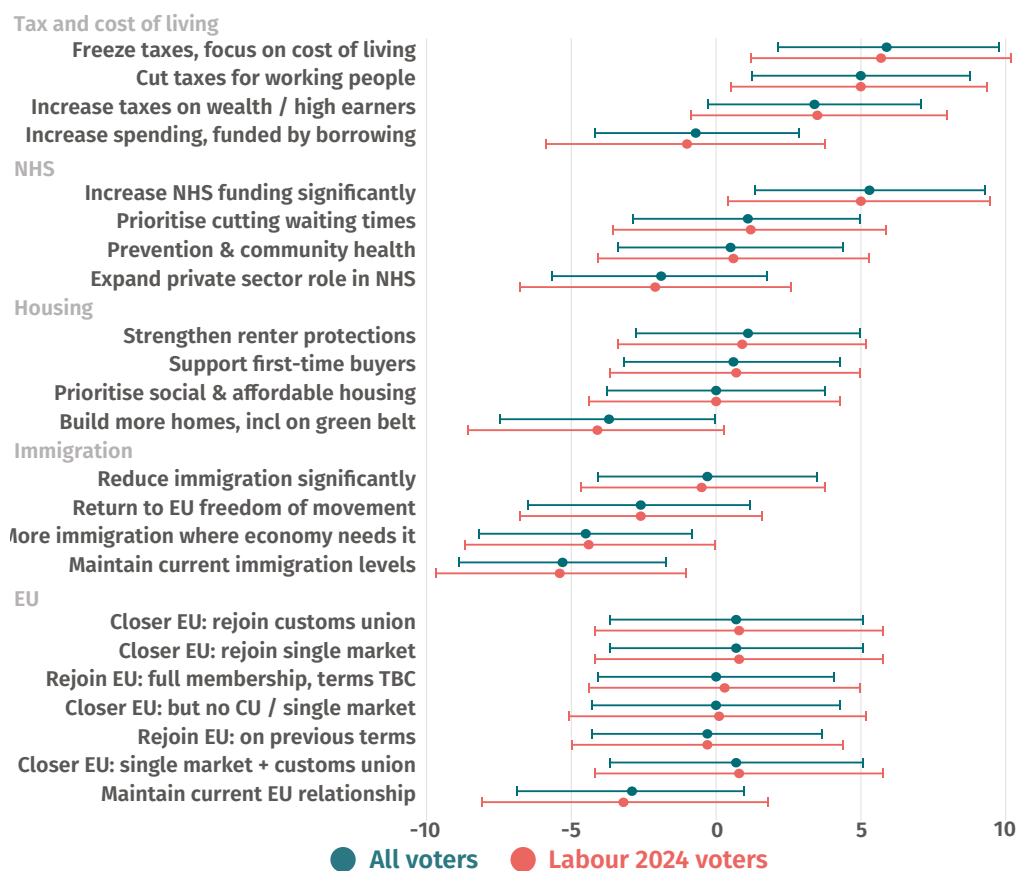
THE EU IS LOW SALIENCE, BUT IT IS POSSIBLE TO BUILD A VISION THAT BOTH SPEAKS TO PEOPLE'S CONCERNS AND IS TRUE

Unsurprisingly, the EU question is very low salience. The public do not see it as a key concern, and a new position on the EU does not move the dial on voter intentions. Where a change of position on Europe alone is unlikely to swing an election, the political case must connect Europe to the government's wider mission.

FIGURE 10

The EU issue does not move the dial on voting intention

Change in % saying they would vote Labour when the element appears in the platform, vs that element's 'not shown' control



Source: IPPR and Persuasion UK polling

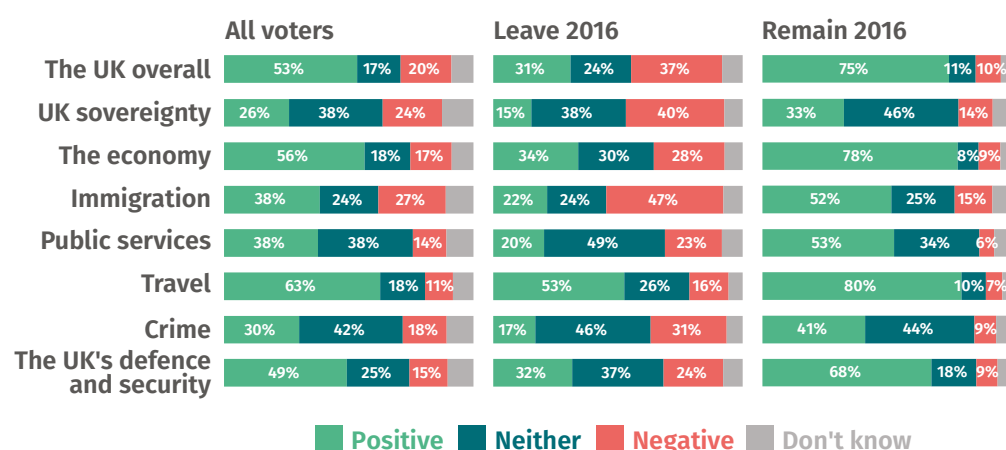
Andy Burnham has already demonstrated his problem diagnosis for the nation, identifying centralisation, deindustrialisation, and a lack of public investment as the core concerns. Our polling shows that the EU is not seen as ‘the problem’, or straightforwardly as ‘the solution’ by the public. It is therefore an open question for government whether EU membership is an important enough policy lever to accept its political risks.

For example, our results show that housing – a policy area central to the government’s vision of change, to improving living standards and improving the productive capacity of the economy – does as little to move the dial on voter intentions as the EU. It is up to the government to decide whether it believes a different relationship with Europe can deliver on its key priorities. If it does believe so, figure 11 shows that there is already a base understanding that membership could deliver those benefits.

FIGURE 11

Generally, people think issues made worse by Brexit will be improved by rejoin, although it is more equivocal in the case of immigration

Responses to the question: “And what difference, if at all, do you think rejoining the EU would have on these things in reality?”



Source: IPPR and Persuasion UK polling

There is also a chance that low salience might give government a little breathing room to conduct negotiations out of the spotlight. But if the previous referendum is anything to go by, this cannot be banked on.

LOOKING AHEAD

These results show that the positive case for Europe needs new articulation, but this doesn’t mean to do so is without risk. This is not to mention the moving part that is the EU itself – where the debate on whether to expand or cement the current bloc rages on. What is certain, however, is that any future government considering a substantive change of position must better understand what the British public will accept. Our results demonstrate that for any government that sees Europe as critical to its mission, a genuine majority exists, but it is not a majority that can be taken for granted.

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This paper was first published in October 2026. © IPPR 2026

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