

A change of heart

Peter Kellner on how British voters now see Brexit differently – and why regret is not the same as reversal.

The British public's verdict is increasingly clear. Brexit was a mistake. Ten years after the referendum, voters now say by two to one that the country was wrong to leave the European Union.

YouGov has tracked the question since 2016. Its latest survey, a decade later, records the lowest level of support for Brexit so far. Just 29 per cent of Britain's electors say that Britain was right to vote to leave the EU – the first time the figure has dipped below 30 per cent. Fifty-eight per cent say it was wrong to do so – the joint highest figure so far.

But the headline figures conceal important differences by age, social class and political allegiance, as [YouGov research shows](#). Almost one in three Leave voters have either changed their mind or now harbour doubts about the wisdom of Brexit. The generational gap is stark: voters under 25, who had no say in the 2016 referendum, oppose Brexit by ten to one, while those aged 65 and older are narrowly in favour.

The shift is not confined to younger or more affluent voters. Manual workers in England's former industrial heartlands voted heavily for Leave a decade ago. Today, those classified as having 'routine' occupations divide by 46 to 36 per cent against Brexit, even though they remain less hostile than voters in 'higher' or 'intermediate' occupations. Nor have pro-European Conservative voters disappeared. More than one in three voters who voted Conservative in 2024 say Britain was wrong to leave the EU, even if their voices are seldom heard on the opposition benches in the House of Commons.

The reasons for the change of heart are not difficult to find. A [tracking study](#) by NatCen

shows how disillusionment set in among many Leave voters. In 2017, while the UK's post-Brexit relationship was still being worked out, 57 per cent of Leave voters expected the economy to improve and immigration to fall. By 2024, four years after the UK left the EU and the subsequent transition period had ended, most Leave voters felt that those hopes had been dashed.

“Disillusionment does not necessarily mean that voters want Brexit reversed.”

Disillusionment does not, however, necessarily mean that voters want Brexit reversed. At first sight, that appears precisely what most voters do want. When YouGov asked in April whether people would “support or oppose Britain rejoining the European Union”, 55 per cent supported the idea and 33 per cent opposed it. The figures for Leave voters were almost identical to those on whether Brexit had been right or wrong: support 22 per cent, oppose 67 per cent.

Yet for many voters, support for rejoining may really mean a desire to turn the clock back to the position that Britain occupied before 2016: inside the EU, but outside the euro and the Schengen passport-free area.

YouGov tested this directly in July 2025. When voters were asked simply whether Britain should rejoin, 54 per cent supported the idea and 32 per cent opposed it. But when they were

told that re-entry could require the UK to join major policy areas from which it had previously secured opt-outs, support fell to 36 per cent and opposition rose to 45 per cent. Among Leave voters, only 10 per cent supported rejoining on those terms, while 76 per cent opposed it. Even among Remain voters, support was no longer overwhelming: 59 per cent backed re-entry and 29 per cent opposed it.

The precise terms of any future accession negotiation cannot be known in advance. In theory, Britain might be expected to join both the eurozone and the Schengen area. In practice, eight of the current 27 member-states are outside the eurozone and two remain outside Schengen. It is possible, if not likely, that Britain could negotiate arrangements allowing

it to keep the pound and remain outside Schengen. But it could not assume that its previous opt-out would simply be restored.

The larger point is political. Rejoining the EU would not be a single decision. It would be a lengthy, complex and at times difficult process. Polling figures suggest that sustaining public support for the process cannot be guaranteed. It would need determined and effective political leadership to have any chance of success. A decade after the referendum, the British public increasingly appears to regard Brexit as a mistake. But recognising a mistake is easier than agreeing how to correct it.

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