# From eating cake to crashing out

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# From Eating Cake to Crashing Out: Constructing the Myth of a No Deal Brexit

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## Abstract

This article traces the emergence and development of claims that the 2016 referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union delivered a mandate for a so-called 'no deal' Brexit. Utilising Lacanian ideas about group mobilisation combined with a detailed content analysis and evidence drawn from polling data, it shows that this no deal narrative should be viewed as a discursive project that was constructed by a section of Leave campaigners relatively late into the Brexit process amidst growing disillusionment with the direction that negotiations with the EU were taking. By emphasising the role of Brexit as an 'empty signifier' the article shows that Brexit was initially successful in mobilising and uniting a disparate, but often unconnected, range of discontent to its cause. However, over time the complexities of the Brexit process triggered a discursive 'war of position' as competing visions of Brexit attempted to vie for dominance amongst the Leave camp. It is within this context that the myth of no deal emerged as an attempt by an elite group of actors to re-mobilise support for their cause.

## Introduction: interpreting Brexit

The UK's decision to leave the European Union by a margin of 52-48% in the referendum of June 2016 has triggered one of the most turbulent periods in its modern political history. The subsequent process of attempting to disentangle the UK from EU institutions has proven to be both complex and dramatic, leading to the triple rejection by Parliament of the government's Withdrawal Agreement, three extensions to Article 50 and the resignation of the Prime Minister, Theresa May. Not surprisingly, these events have attracted a substantial amount of academic attention. Much of this has focused on the causes and consequences of Brexit, centring on a wide range of economic factors, including the effects of globalisation, neo-liberalism and austerity on so-called 'left-behind' groups (e.g. Hopkin, 2017; Pettifor, 2017; Powell, 2017; Watson, 2018), coupled with the impact of cultural forces, such as immigration and the spread of socially liberal values (e.g. Inglehart and Norris, 2016; Goodwin and Heath, 2016; Hobolt, 2016; Virdee and McGeever, 2018). Others have sought to link Brexit to a range of pathologies within the British political system itself, such as ongoing representational and legitimacy crises (Bailey, 2017; Jessop, 2017; Vines and Marsh, 2018), or have connected the referendum result to the more general rise of a post-truth politics (Hopkin and Rosamond, 2017).

Beyond these accounts, a large segment of the literature has centred on the dynamics of political mobilisation, typically focusing on the impact of nationalism and populism in fuelling a wave of social discontent. From these perspectives, Brexit is variously interpreted as having been the product of 'a populist mindset' (Freeden, 2017; also Bang and Marsh, 2018; Browning 2019), the result of anti-immigration and anti-establishment forces (Goodwin and Milazzo, 2017; Dennison and Geddes, 2018; Clarke *et al*, 2017), a symptom 'of a new nationalist populism in western Europe' (Gusterton, 2017) and as a backlash against modernisation (Kerr *et al* 2018). To some authors, this unexpected rise of populism in the UK represents a qualitative break

with the past (Richards *et al*, 2019), departing from an elitist political tradition to 'unleash a new populist dynamic into British politics' (Gamble, 2018). Authors addressing the consequences of Brexit have focused on the potential damage to national prosperity and the future likelihood of greater socio-cultural polarisation (Dagnis et al, 2016; Guldi, 2017; Morgan, 2017; Oliver, 2017), while a smaller number of commentators have emphasised the opportunities that Brexit has provided for future leftist activism and social movements (e.g. Roth, 2018; Ishkanian, 2019).

While these studies highlight a range of important factors, key aspects of the Brexit phenomenon remain under-explored. One area where research is particularly under-developed concerns the discursive framing of Brexit. This is a critical omission, not least because elite framing has shaped the way in which political events have developed. One key example has been the emergence of a myth surrounding the demand for a 'no deal' Brexit. Contrary to the early claim of Leave campaigners, that the UK could 'have its cake and eat it' by exiting the EU with a deal allowing it to retain most of the benefits of membership, by early 2019 many Brexiteers were insisting that a no deal Brexit, with UK-EU trade operating on World Trade Organisation (WTO) terms, was the only way to fulfil the popular mandate delivered by the referendum. During a debate on the UK's future relationship with the EU in April the Conservative MP, Edward Vaizey, professed to being 'confused about how, three years after the referendum, we have got to a place in which no deal turns out to be allegedly what people voted for' (*Hansard*, 1 April 2019), while the *Telegraph* were being forced by the press regulator, Ipso, to correct a Boris Johnson (2019) column erroneously claiming that polls showed a no deal Brexit to have been 'by some margin the outcome most preferred by the British public' at the time of the vote. The following month the newly formed Brexit Party, led by Nigel Farage with a pledge to 'put no deal back on the table', topped the European Parliamentary elections with 32% of the vote, winning 28 MEPs (*Irish Times*, 27 May 2019).

In this article we trace the emergence and development of this idea that the referendum result had delivered a mandate for the UK to leave the EU without a deal. We show that this 'no deal' narrative should be viewed as a discursive project designed to retrospectively alter the meaning of the 2016 referendum, and was constructed relatively late in the Brexit process amid growing disunity and disillusionment within the Leave camp about the direction that negotiations with the EU were taking. In tracing the origins and evolution of the no deal myth this article combines Lacanian ideas about group mobilisation with a detailed, qualitative content analysis of elite attempts to frame the meaning of Brexit, alongside polling evidence of shifting public support for a no deal departure. By emphasising the role of Brexit as an 'empty signifier' the article shows that Brexit was initially successful in mobilising and uniting a disparate, but often unconnected, range of discontent to its cause. However, over time the complexities of the Brexit process triggered a discursive 'war of position' as competing visions of Brexit attempted to vie for dominance. It is within this context, amid growing disunity amongst Leave supporters which threatened to destabilise the effectiveness of Brexit as empty signifier, that the myth of no deal emerged as an attempt to consolidate support for Brexit.

## Brexit as empty signifier

Following the work of Laclau (2005), a number of authors have begun to apply Lacanian ideas about identity construction and group mobilisation to understand the recent wave of populism (e.g. Stavrakakis, 2004; 2017; Kerr *et al* 2018; Browning, 2019). Central to this work is a focus on the role of 'empty signifiers' – key components of discourse, such as words, symbols or slogans – that are used by competing political projects to structure the identity of their supporters, give meaning to their aims and secure hegemony for the project. The key function of the empty signifier is to bring a semblance of unity (an 'equivalential bond') to the heterogeneous and often unconnected set of popular grievances that coalesce around the

project. The key to the success of the empty signifier is its contingent character and relative lack of substantive meaning, allowing a disparate group of supporters, who may not share common interests, to inscribe it with their own meanings and desires.

Our claim here is that 'Brexit' played such a role, effectively mobilising and uniting a disparate, often unconnected, range of discontent to its cause. This observation is also made by Browning (2019: 11: see also Powell, 2018: 234), who argues that:

> 'Brexit' became positioned as an 'empty signifier' – a signifier lacking specific meaning but which comes to stand in for and unify other (potentially contradictory) claims and demands to which it is seen as equivalent (Laclau 2005, 154). Thus, 'Brexit' became a concept, aspiration and demand into which various (divergent) desires for redress and fulfilment could be channelled.

However, because the unity of support for Brexit was only held together by its relatively meaningless character, its utility as an effective mobilising device was always going to be precarious. As such, the effectiveness of Brexit as an empty signifier was destined to be destabilised once a more substantive set of meanings attached themselves to it. As the following analysis will show, this posed a serious problem for Theresa May because Brexit could never remain devoid of content for any length of time. Once negotiations with the EU began to produce a concrete set of proposals for withdrawal, the empty signifier was destined to become the focal point for rival projects seeking to inscribe it with their own sets of meanings. This dilemma is noted by Stegemann and Ossewaarde (2018: 26), who observe that the empty signifier: 'typically functions as a discursive myth. Being subject to contestation of its "truth", the central theme facilitates a so-called "war of position"'.

The following sections will show that it was within such a war of position that the no deal narrative emerged as a discursive project constructed by key Leave protagonists relatively late into the Brexit process amid growing disillusionment with the direction that negotiations with the EU were taking. Focussing our analysis on elite attempts to frame Brexit, alongside shifting

levels of public support for the process, we argue that the emergence of the no deal myth occurred, broadly, over three key phases. In phase one, during the immediate post-referendum period, the integrity of Brexit as an empty signifier capable of preserving the unity of the Leave camp remained largely intact. The government's refusal to furnish its Brexit strategy with any substantive detail, and Theresa May's ambiguous slogan 'Brexit means Brexit', ensured that the meaning of 'Brexit' remained sufficiently vague to satisfy the majority of Leave supporters. This unity came under growing pressure during the second phase, beginning with Theresa May's Lancaster House speech of January 2017. Despite the ambiguities of a new discourse that 'no deal was better than a bad deal', the process of transforming Brexit into a set of specific proposals began to destabilise its efficacy as an empty signifier. This opened the way for a competitive war of position in which rival elite actors vied to supply their own meanings to the Brexit process. The third phase began with the unveiling of Theresa May's Chequers Plan in July 2018 and fully revealed the precarious character of Brexit as an empty signifier. As the terms of the UK's exit became ever more specific, the efficacy of Brexit as a unifying device was shaken at the elite level as frustrations at the details of the forthcoming Withdrawal Agreement spilled over into deep schisms. Hereafter, a number of Brexiteers began to argue that, because May's deal was precisely the kind of 'bad deal' she had warned against, a no deal exit could be justified as the default position. From this point, the myth of no deal began to take hold as an attempt to shore up support for a Brexit process which was looking ever more precarious. While the no deal myth was never hegemonic – and, indeed subsequent events would show how unstable the myth itself was (as the new PM, Boris Johnson, found himself driven by public and parliamentary disquiet over the potential consequences of a no deal departure to secure a deal with the European Union)[1] – it nevertheless proved to be a relatively successful means of strategically undermining May's deal and retaining unity amongst the Brexit camp.

The following sections use a discourse theoretical lens to show how this war of position over the meaning of Brexit led to the emergence of the no deal myth. The empirical material for the analysis is based on a qualitative examination of speeches, media interviews, public statements and news reports using data gathered from LexisNexus, the UKPOL political speech archive (www.ukpol.co.uk) and Hansard – the latter involving a comprehensive analysis of more than one hundred Parliamentary debates and questions relating to Brexit since the 2016 referendum. Opinion poll figures are drawn from a dataset of more than 260 polls compiled from a range of organisations including: What UK Thinks (https://whatukthinks.org/eu), Lord Ashcroft Polls, BMG, ComRes, Deltapoll, GQR, ICM, Ipsos Mori, Kantar, Opinium, ORB, Sky Data, Survation and YouGov.

## Phase One: 'Brexit Means Brexit'

Contrary to recent claims by prominent Leave campaigners, the idea of departing from the EU without a deal was not a prominent feature of the mobilising discourse at the time of the referendum. Indeed, the central assertion of the official Vote Leave campaign was that: 'Taking back control is a careful change, not a sudden step – we will negotiate the terms of a new deal before we start any legal process to leave'.[2] The main themes of political debate during the referendum focused on the factors driving peoples' vote choice (with immigration, national sovereignty, security and economic concerns consistently topping most surveys) and the actual substance of 'Leave' remained unclear. An Opinium poll just prior to the referendum found that 24% of people intending to vote Leave were planning to do so in the belief that this would enable the UK to secure better terms for remaining inside the EU, and a poll by Survation in October found that 18% of Leave voters had cast their ballots in this way 'to convince other European countries we are serious and for them to offer us a better deal'. A YouGov poll in July found that only 7% of respondents (and just 12% of Leave voters) thought that Britain

should leave the EU immediately, without a deal. Polls in the wake of the referendum also found that significant proportions of Leave voters were keen to maintain access to, or membership of, the European single market – opposition to which was later to become one of the key elements of the no deal myth. According to a survey by Orb in July, 20% of Leave voters agreed that it was 'more important to have access to the European single market than it is to limit immigration from the EU'. In December a ComRes poll found that 36% of respondents (and 52% of Leavers) did not think that leaving the EU meant giving up membership of the single market.[3]

The relative absence of a no deal narrative at the time of the referendum can be further highlighted by analysing the frequency with which key phrases relating to this issue featured in the UK's political discourse. Data taken from the Hansard website show that the use of such phrases in the Houses of Parliament (in this case: 'no deal', 'no deal Brexit', 'without a deal' and 'WTO terms') was almost imperceptible at the time of the referendum campaign. It was not until the end of 2016 that these terms began to appear with any degree of regularity, and it was not until the end of 2018 that they became an established part of parliamentary discourse (see figure 1). A similar pattern can be found in the volume of UK internet searches made for these phrases (providing a rough but illustrative measure of public interest) using data taken from the Google Trends toolkit (see figure 2).

**Figure 1: Use of key phrases in the Houses of Parliament (source: Hansard online)**



**Figure 2: Searches for key phrases (source: Google Trends)**
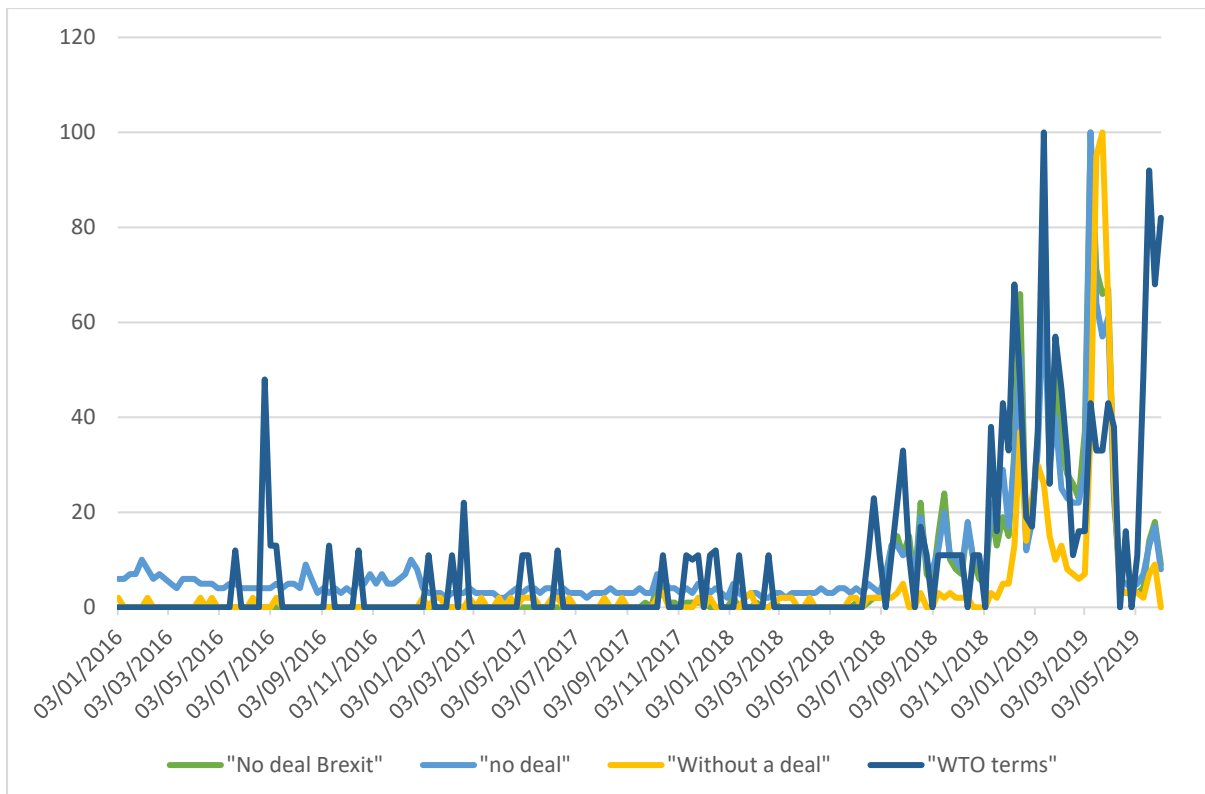
This was the backdrop against which the government set out its initial Brexit plan and attempted to frame the meaning of 'Brexit'. Theresa May's early strategy was presaged by her bid for the Conservative party leadership (following David Cameron's resignation in the immediate aftermath of the referendum) when she laid out her stall to stand as a unity candidate:

> First, our country needs strong, proven leadership to steer us through this time of economic and political uncertainty and to negotiate the best deal for Britain as we leave the EU and forge a new role for ourselves in the world. Because Brexit means Brexit, and we're going to make a success of it (*Independent*, 11 July 2016).

From this point the phrase 'Brexit means Brexit' quickly became the cornerstone of the government's effort to retain unity amongst the Leave camp by keeping the character of Brexit sufficiently vacant. This nebulous position was further outlined by the newly appointed Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, David Davis, who claimed in October that the referendum result had been a call for 'regaining control of our borders, regaining control of our laws and regaining control of our money, and at the same time getting the best possible access to the European market that we can negotiate – end of story' (*Hansard*, 10 October 2016). Specific details on how the government were planning to achieve any, or all, of these things remained elusive.

This ambiguity was reflected in the government's initial negotiating strategy. According to Davis, the basic premise was to build 'a national consensus around our position' without spelling out what this was going to be. Insisting that 'we cannot … give away our negotiating strategy early', Davis explained that ministers would 'not be giving a running commentary, because that is not the way to get the right deal for Britain'. The need for secrecy was therefore critical, because:

> I know of no negotiation in history, either in commerce or in politics or international affairs, where telling everybody what we are going to do in precise detail before we do

so leads to a successful outcome … What we will not do is lay out a detailed strategy and a detailed set of tactics before we engage with our opposite numbers in the negotiation (ibid.).

This approach was not without its critics. Opposition figures attacked the government for trying to side-line Parliament and avoid democratic scrutiny. Several of the government's own backbenchers were also keen to press for more details. As the Conservative MP, Maria Miller, complained: 'There is no clarity about what Brexit means at this stage … the position is full of contradictions'. One of these contradictions involved the looming shadow of 'no deal'. As Miller told the House of Commons:

> The basic rule of negotiation, which the Government should acknowledge at this point, is that we are only as strong as our ability to walk away. The World Trade Organisation terms are, in practice, our starting point. I hope that is not where we end up, but we should be honest and say that if we do not acknowledge that, our starting point in these negotiations is fundamentally flawed (ibid.).

Notwithstanding such calls to put a no deal scenario at the heart of the government's negotiating strategy, talk of leaving without a deal was at this point principally framed as a threat coming from the EU side. In October the Conservative MP, Crispin Blunt, asked David Davis about the implications of the European Union blocking a successful deal in order to punish the UK for daring to leave. To this, Davis retorted that a no deal outcome was bound to fail since such a move would provide 'an even bigger incentive to countries that want to leave than no punishment plan at all' (*Hansard*, 10 October 2016). This stance was similar to the view of the prominent Brexiteer (and outgoing leader of UKIP), Nigel Farage, who told the European Parliament in June that if the EU forced the UK into a no deal situation it would effectively 'cut off your noses to spite your faces' (speech, 28 June, 2016).

The uncertainty surrounding the terms on which the UK would leave the EU, and the radical ambiguity around the meaning of Brexit, facilitated the initial success of Brexit as an empty

signifier. This enabled the government to maintain relatively stable levels of support for its view that the key demands of the Leave camp could be met in the context of reaching a favourable withdrawal deal, whatever that might look like. Nevertheless, as the end of the year approached, signs of discontent were starting to emerge. In November, the High Court ruled that Article 50 (under which the UK was to give formal notification of its intention to leave the EU) could not be triggered without a vote in Parliament, a decision that was presented by Brexiteers as a brazen attempt to thwart the ostensible 'will of the people'. This view was notoriously captured by the *Daily Mail*, which described the High Court judges as 'Enemies of the People' (*Daily Mail*, 4 November 2016) and in comments by Nigel Farage, who accused the Court of being part of 'a deliberate wilful attempt to frustrate this referendum'. Any such betrayal, he warned, would lead to 'political anger the likes of which none of us in our lifetimes have ever witnessed in this country' (Ashmore, 2016).

In this shifting political context public support for a no deal Brexit – or, at least (given that the idea of leaving without a deal was not yet being seriously discussed) for the kinds of outcome that would later come to be associated with a no deal Brexit (such as leaving the single market) – began to rise. Assessing public opinion on this is not straightforward as polls do not always pose the issue of no deal in simple terms, but often couch it within a set of alternate hypothetical situations, such as the holding of a second referendum or parliamentary failure to approve a deal. However, expressions of support for no deal grew from a relatively low point in the immediate aftermath of the referendum to a peak in the early months of 2017 (see table 1).[4] According to a YouGov poll in November, 34% of respondents (and 62% of Leave voters) took the view that a no deal exit would be good for Britain. An Opinium poll in December found that 35% were in favour of a 'hard Brexit'. A YouGov poll in January found that 57% of respondents (and 82% of Leavers) felt that leaving the single market (albeit with the 'greatest possible' access) was now the right course of action to take.[5]

**Table 1: Public support for a no deal Brexit (monthly averages)**

| **Month** | Monthly average |
|-----------|-----------------|
| July 2016 | 23% |
| August 2016 | 21% |
| September 2016 | 18% |
| October 2016 | 31.6% |
| November 2016 | 34.5% |
| December 2016 | 35% |
| January 2017 | 45.2% |
| February 2017 | 47.8% |

## Phase Two: From Lancaster House to Chequers

In January 2017 Theresa May set out a more detailed vision for Brexit in a speech at Lancaster House. This claimed that the referendum vote had been a choice 'to build a truly Global Britain' and committed the government to a 12-point plan for the forthcoming negotiations, central to which was the pursuit of 'a bold and ambitious free trade agreement'. At the same time, however, the PM also made it clear that the UK would not remain part of the European single market, since this would subject the UK to EU regulations (which 'would to all intents and purposes mean not leaving the EU at all') and would not accept a deal at any price. As such, the prevailing slogan at this juncture became: 'no deal is better than a bad deal'.[6] Nevertheless, instead of energising the Brexit process this new discursive framing led to a heightening of tensions, intensifying a nascent 'war of position' as actors on both sides of the Brexit divide attempted to project their own competing meanings onto the referendum result. This posed a threat to the status of Brexit as an empty signifier, making it increasingly clear that the referendum vote could point to a variety of different outcomes.

While prominent Eurosceptics welcomed May's commitment to leave the single market – Boris Johnson, the-then Foreign Secretary, claimed that it offered a 'very, very exciting vision for this country' (*Telegraph*, 17 January 2017) – MPs on the Remain side expressed frustration that the will of the British people was being misrepresented. Attacking the government for its 'deliberate distortion of the mandate they received from the British people', the ex-Liberal Democrat leader, Nick Clegg called for a second referendum, alleging that:

> the Brexit campaigners deliberately withheld from the British people what they meant by Brexit … Therefore, when we finally know what Brexit really means in substance, rather than in utopian promise, of course the British people should have their say … *the Brexit campaign deliberately did not spell out to the British people what Brexit means* (*Hansard*, 31 January 2017) (emphasis added).

From this point, the terms 'hard' and 'soft' Brexit began to feature more prominently in national political discourse. The latter signalled a form of Brexit in which the UK remained part of key EU institutions such as the single market, while the former started to crystallise around a publicly expressed desire for a 'clean break' from all EU institutions. Supporters of this position now frequently claimed that such a decisive rupture was the only 'true' form of Brexit on offer. As the Conservative MP, Cheryl Gillan, observed: 'If soft Brexit means staying in the single market with no controls on our borders and, crucially, the UK being subject to the European Court of Justice, it is not really Brexit at all' (ibid). This view was supported by David Davis, who described the terms 'hard' and 'soft' Brexit as 'terms of propaganda' since there could only ever be one form of Brexit (*Hansard*, 24 January 2017). The Conservative MP, Chris Green, in a neat summation of this positional conflict, contended that:

> elements of the political establishment seem to be doing whatever they can, in a kind of war of attrition, to undermine the decision of the British people. It is a deliberate redefining of what Brexit means, and we have seen the invention of the notions of hard and soft Brexit, which never existed before the referendum. There is no such thing (*Hansard*, 26 June 2017).

These tensions around the meaning of Brexit increased with the Parliamentary vote to trigger Article 50 at the end of March. Contrary to Vote Leave's initial claim that a deal would be obtained before initiating the legal process for exiting the EU, this committed the government to leaving within a two-year timeframe regardless of whether or not a deal had been reached. This decision was driven by a combination of political pressures to be seen enacting the 'will of the people' and a belief that the threat of no deal was now required to put pressure on the European Union. As David Davis told the House of Commons, Article 50 needed to be triggered because 'the public want us to get on with it' and 'to uphold the strength of the negotiations' (*Hansard*, 24 January 2017). The ex-Conservative leader, Iain Duncan Smith, claimed that the triggering of Article 50 had been driven by 'a very simple reason, which is that the timescale determines that those who are negotiating must reach, or agree not to reach, an agreement … That is the whole point about compression — to get an agreement' (*Hansard*, 14 November 2017).

In this way, the idea of a no deal Brexit was transformed from being a weapon wielded by the EU – as a way for it to 'punish' the UK for having voted to Leave – to a core part of the government's negotiating strategy. According to David Davis, the government's aim was to get 'barrier-free, most facilitated trade with the EU' (*Hansard*, 24 January 2017), and while it would be 'in no one's interests' for Brexit 'to be disorderly, with any sort of "cliff edge"', taking a no deal exit off the table would only weaken the government's position (*Hansard*, 17 January 2017). Thus:

> As for no deal, the issue is straightforward: we are intending, setting out and straining every sinew to get a deal. That will be the best outcome, but for two reasons we need to prepare for all the other alternatives. The first is that it is a negotiation with many people and it could go wrong, so we have to be ready for that. The second is that in a negotiation you always have to have the right to walk away: if you do not, you get a terrible deal (*Hansard*, 17 October 2017).

Echoing this point, the Conservative MP, Dominic Raab noted that 'it would be entirely counterproductive … to start these negotiations signalling that a lousy deal might lead the UK to reverse its decision' (*Hansard*, 13 March 2017), and the staunch Eurosceptic, Andrew Bridgen, noted that 'if we do not accept that no deal is an option, we are guaranteed not to get an exceptional deal' (*Hansard*, 6 July 2017). This position was reaffirmed by the Prime Minister herself. As she maintained: 'we have to be very clear that we are prepared to say that no deal is an option if we are not able to get that good deal for the UK' (*Hansard*, 23 October 2017).

The political landscape from this point was dominated both by the terms of Article 50 as well as the result of the June general election. Called by May in the hope of securing an overwhelming majority to force through her vision of Brexit, the actual result – a Conservative government propped up by a confidence and supply arrangement with the Democratic Unionist Party – led to a more complex set of parliamentary conditions. From here, it became possible to identify two overlapping, yet distinctive ways of framing the issue of no deal amongst those in favour of Brexit. The official position was that no deal was an undesirable outcome but an essential negotiating ploy. The second view, promoted by hard Brexiteers who suddenly found themselves with extra political leverage, was that a clean break was not just a positive way forward but the only valid reading of the referendum result. Rejecting complaints about the lack of specificity surrounding Brexit, the Conservative MP, Craig Mackinlay, insisted that 'the people of this country do know best. They knew what they were voting for, and that means leaving the customs union and the single market' (*Hansard*, 13 June 2018). His colleague, Chris Green, claimed that:

> In the run-up to the referendum, it was abundantly clear from leave and remain campaigners, including the then Prime Minister and the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, that if we chose to leave the European Union, we would leave the single market and the customs union (*Hansard*, 11 June 2018).

The same line was taken by the Labour MP, Kate Hoey, who declared that:

> if Brexit is worth doing, it is worth doing well … That means leaving the European Union properly by getting out of the single market and not being in the customs union. If we stay in either of those, we are not really leaving the EU (*Hansard*, 12 June 2018).

At the same time, many Brexiteers were also seeking to align the idea that the only true Brexit was a clean break from the EU with the narrative that the UK was somehow being 'punished' by the European Union. Craig Mackinlay, for example, despite insisting that 'it is looking more and more likely that WTO rules will apply, and that is nothing to be fearful of', sought to pin the blame for the lack of progress in the negotiations on 'the intransigence of our EU partners' (*Hansard*, 24 October 2017). In a similar vein, Kate Hoey criticised the government for 'not being tough enough with the European Union' (*Hansard*, 5 December 2017), claiming that the EU 'does not want to give us a good deal; it wants to punish us' (*Hansard*, 12 June 2018). And Bill Cash warned that the EU needed 'to be very careful that they do not put us in the position of having to accept the idea of no deal. If that happens … the advantages to us of trading on WTO terms are simply not unsatisfactory at all – quite the opposite' (*Hansard*, 6 July 2017). The prominent Leave supporter, John Redwood, declared that 'the EU has a simple choice to make … it can either trade with us with no new tariffs or barriers, because we have made a very generous offer, or it can trade with us under World Trade Organisation rules, which we know works fine for us because that is what we do with the rest of the world' (*Hansard*, 5 September 2017). This position was also taken by Steve Baker, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union. Describing a no deal scenario as 'unfortunate' (*Hansard*, 30 January 2018) and 'an unwanted contingency' (*Hansard*, 14 June 2018), Baker insisted that 'what we cannot do is accept some kind of punishment deal', and maintained that: 'An environment in which the UK trades with the world while having control

of our own tariffs, taxes and domestic regulation is one of which we should not be afraid' (*Hansard*, 7 September 2017).

The dominant theme through to the summer of 2018 was therefore one of growing disunity amongst the Leave camp over the meaning of Brexit and the desirability, or otherwise, of leaving without a deal. Throughout this period Brexit supporters held a variety of views on the prospect of leaving the EU on a cliff edge basis. These ranged from a pragmatic acceptance that such an outcome might have to be countenanced in the last instance to full-blown enthusiasm for a so-called 'clean break'. As a result, this period saw a number of framing efforts, including claims that a no deal outcome would be the result of the EU punishing the UK, that it would be more favourable to a bad deal, that it would present the UK with no particular difficulties (and plenty of opportunities) and that it would potentially be far more damaging to the European Union.

This intensifying war of position between competing segments of the Leave camp, and the fragmentation of 'Brexit' into competing potentialities, was reflected in growing volatility in levels of public support for leaving the EU without a deal. Two key trends are notable here. The first was a gradual dissipation of enthusiasm for a no deal outcome following the surge of support from the end of 2016, with levels of support falling back to the initial post-referendum levels by October 2017. According to a poll conducted by Opinium in June, 41% of respondents considered leaving the EU without a deal to be a good idea. A poll by Lord Ashcroft four months later put the figure at just 13%. The second trend was a subsequent reversal of this decline and a renewed rise in expressions of support for no deal from the end of the year, with levels returning to their earlier peak by the spring of 2018. A poll taken in March by Opinium, for instance, found that 46% of voters now approved of the UK leaving the EU without a deal if Parliament could not approve one by the end of the month (see figure 3).[7]

**Figure 3: The instability of public support for no deal (monthly averages)**
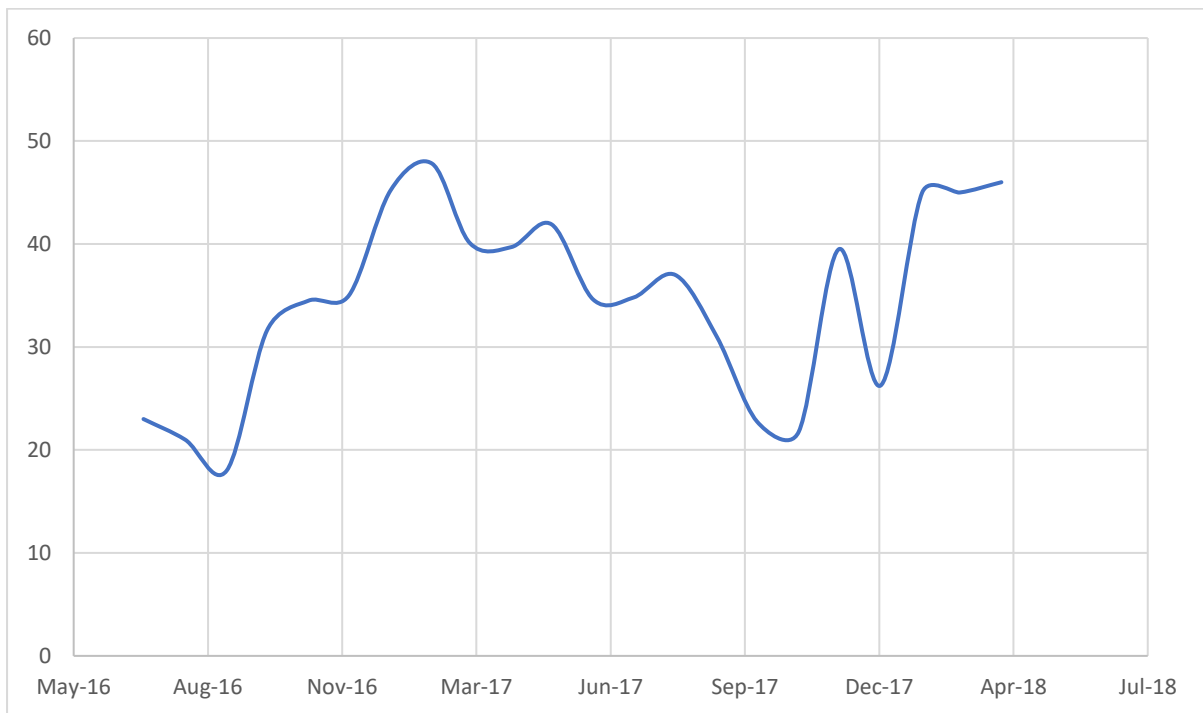


## Phase Three: From Chequers to postponement

With the war of position in the Leave camp rumbling on, a key turning point for the construction of the myth of no deal came in July 2018. After an extended Cabinet meeting at the PM's official country estate, Chequers, Theresa May presented a White Paper adding greater specificity to her vision for the UK's future relationship with the EU. The Chequers Plan was the most detailed attempt yet to define Brexit and had the effect of sharpening positions to a degree not seen in previous skirmishes. Principally, the plan sought to reconcile a number of problems emerging from the EU negotiations, one of the most notable of which was the controversial issue of the Northern Irish border. Here, Theresa May proposed to adopt a 'facilitated customs agreement' in order to avoid a hard border with Ireland or between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. Sensing that this arrangement would effectively keep the UK locked into EU regulations, the plan sparked a flurry of negative reactions from Brexit supporters. The Brexit secretary, David Davis, resigned in protest, as did Boris Johnson, who

notoriously described the proposal as a 'suicide vest'. Johnson claimed that the Chequers Plan would be 'substantially worse than the status quo' (*Guardian*, 11 September 2018) and warned that it would mean 'abandoning the notion of the UK as a proud independent economic actor' (*Telegraph*, 3 September 2018). Spelling out his own vision for Brexit, Johnson appealed directly to a no deal scenario, writing that: 'Before the referendum, we all agreed on what leaving the EU logically must entail: leaving the customs union and the single market, leaving the penumbra of the European Court of Justice; taking back control of our borders, cash, laws' (*Telegraph*, 16 September 2018).

At the same time the government's Brexit vision was facing strong public disapproval. According to a Survation poll in July 38% (rising to 52% of Leavers) described the Chequers Plan as a 'sell out', with just 29% considering it to be a faithful reflection of the referendum vote. A Sky Data poll in September found that 74% felt the government were handling the Brexit negotiations badly, a significant increase from 48% in November 2016. All the same, overt support for a no deal Brexit remained comparatively soft, with a monthly average hovering around the high 20s / low 30s in percentage terms from August through to the spring of 2019 (see figure 4 below). A Hanbury poll conducted in August now found that just 25% of people thought leaving the EU without a deal would be good for the country. A BMG poll in September found that fewer than a fifth (19%) had a preference for leaving on WTO terms.[8]

Despite this backlash the government continued to try and hold the line, insisting that a deal with the EU would be reached while deploying the threat of no deal as a way of making this happen. Reiterating this position, the new Brexit Secretary, Dominic Raab, explained that: 'the no deal outcome is sub-optimal because there are risks and short-term disruptions … it is by far and away a superior outcome to get a good deal with the EU' (*Hansard*, 9 October 2018). The negotiation process came to an official (if temporary) end in November with the publication of the draft Withdrawal Agreement. This set up a transition period until the end of

2020, during which time the UK would remain a member of the single market, the European Economic Area and the Customs Union. The Northern Irish border question was to be addressed with the establishment of a 'backstop' arrangement which would come into play in the event that an alternative deal could not be reached before the end of the transition period. A key feature of the backstop was that it would keep the UK in a customs union with the EU, and that this arrangement could not be altered unilaterally by either party.

If the Chequers Plan had been a major source of discontent for Leavers, the Withdrawal Agreement proved to be the final catalyst for enshrining the myth of no deal. In the midst of intense political conflict involving an attempted party coup against May, the government's repeated failure (three times) to push the deal through Parliament and the eventual postponement (twice) of the UK's exit date, critics claimed that the terms of the backstop arrangement would mean the UK had enacted 'Brexit In Name Only', and practically fell over themselves in their haste to denounce it. Nigel Farage lambasted the terms of the Withdrawal Agreement as 'humiliating' and claimed the government had 'collapsed on every level', the official Leave.EU campaign said that the Prime Minister had 'betrayed' Leave voters (Casallicio, 2018), the rambunctious Conservative MP, Mark Francois, described the deal as 'rancid' (*Hansard*, 20 March 2019) and the equally boisterous Andrew Bridgen claimed that it was full of 'humiliating betrayals and capitulations' leading to 'continued vassalage forever under the backstop' (*Hansard*, 26 November 2018). The veteran Eurosceptic, Bill Cash, added his voice to the clamour, describing the Withdrawal Agreement as 'a testament to broken promises, failed negotiations and abject capitulation to the EU' (*Hansard*, 15 November 2018), while the leading Brexiteer, Jacob Rees-Mogg, famously claimed that the government's plan:

> will produce a vassal state – Gulliver tied down by the Lilliputians; this great nation state tied down by petty bureaucrats, running all over us, tying us down with ropes – because we will have to do whatever the European Union says during the implementation period (*Hansard*, 10 September 2018).

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The obvious logic of this position was that, because the Withdrawal Agreement was so evidently a 'bad deal', the government's earlier view – that no deal was better than a bad one – meant that the default should now be a no deal scenario. As Andrew Bridgen explained: 'When this House voted overwhelmingly to invoke article 50, we knew that the default position was that we would leave the European Union on 29 March with no deal' (*Hansard*, 13 March 2019). Or as John Redwood put it, the government's line that 'no deal is better than a bad deal' meant 'that if it appeared that the deal on offer after the negotiations was a bad deal – as it clearly is at the moment – the preferred option should be no deal' (*Hansard*, 11 March 2019). The need to leave the EU without a deal was further reaffirmed by Kate Hoey, who maintained that: 'People voted to leave; they did not vote for a deal as such. They voted to leave, and we need to leave on 29 March' (*Hansard*, 12 February 2019). The arch Brexiteer, Peter Bone, claimed that failure to leave the EU on 29 March would be 'a betrayal' (*Hansard*, 26 February 2019) and insisted that: 'The truth is that a no-deal Brexit – which is, of course, a deal that means leaving on the basis of WTO rules … delivers what the British people voted for in June 2016' (*Hansard*, 28 February 2019). Some of the most effusive criticism of the Withdrawal Agreement came from Boris Johnson. Claiming that it made 'a complete nonsense of Brexit' (*Hansard*, 22 November 2018), the ex-Foreign Secretary at the time lambasted the deal as being nothing less than a 'national humiliation' and alleged that it would turn the UK into 'a de facto colony' of the EU. Despite calling on the government to return to Brussels and get a better deal – whatever that might possibly be – Johnson also claimed that the UK should now be preparing to leave without a deal 'with zeal and enthusiasm' (*Hansard*, 14 January 2019), and proceeded to solidify the emerging myth that the referendum result had been in favour of a clean break from the EU by arguing that: 'No one voted for this type of Brexit. This is not Brexit, but a feeble simulacrum of national independence … beneath the camouflage, we find

the same old EU institutions – the customs union and the single market – all of it adjudicated, by the way, by the European Court of Justice' (*Hansard*, 4 December 2018).

It was at this point, during the third phase, that the myth of no deal finally gained ascendancy to become the predominant, if not (as later events under the Premiership of Boris Johnson would show) wholly hegemonic discursive frame within the Leave camp. This consolidation of the no deal myth at the elite level was reflected in the enormous rise in the use of 'no deal' terminology and public awareness in the issue (as shown in figures 1 and 2 earlier) and in a renewed rise in public support for the idea of leaving without a deal. Although this failed to regain the heights reached during the winter of 2016/17 and the spring of 2018 (perhaps due to the increased discussion of no deal, and hence an increased focus on its risks and dangers) monthly average levels of support grew from a low point of 29% in December to 38% in May and hovered around the mid-30s for the rest of the summer (see figure 4).

**Figure 4: Public support for no deal (phases 1-3): monthly averages**
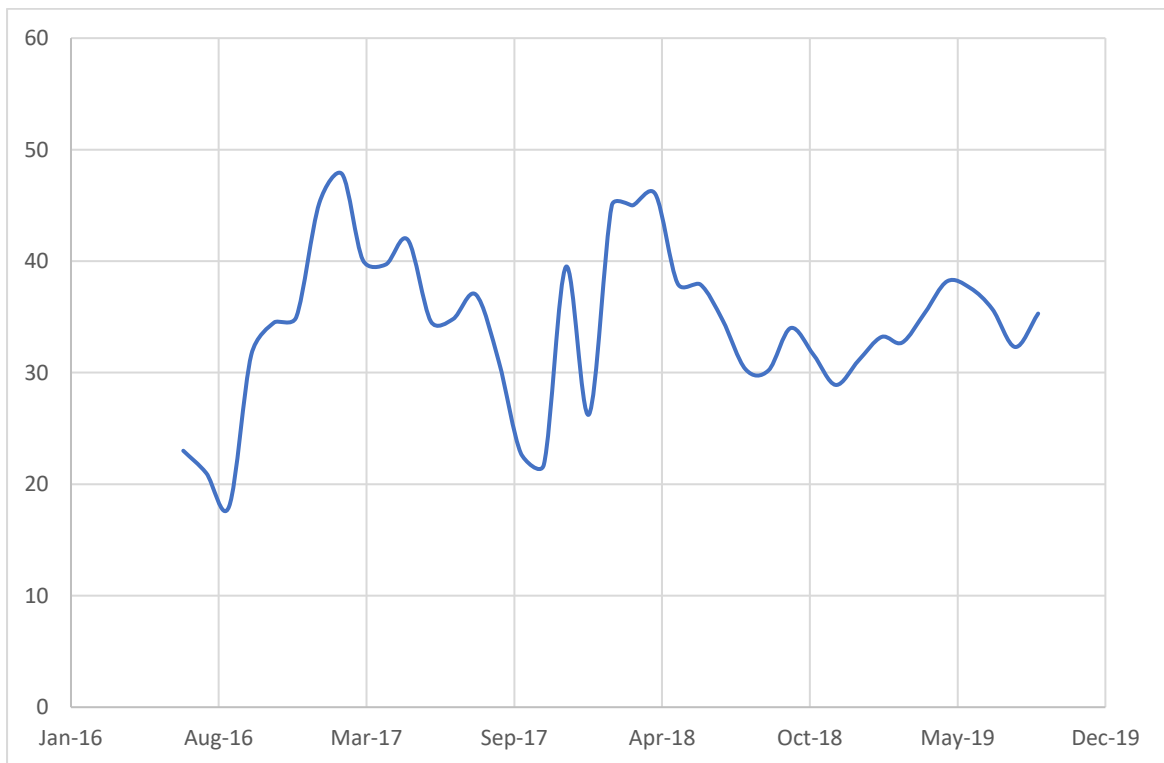
## Conclusion

During the early months of 2019 the discourse that the UK must leave the EU without a deal, framed around the myth that a vote for the Withdrawal Agreement would betray the will of the people as expressed in the referendum of 2016, became the dominant way of framing Brexit amongst prominent Leave supporters. This myth of a no deal Brexit clashed with earlier narratives from the Leave camp about the ease with which the UK would be able to forge a deal with the European Union. In the wake of the referendum campaign Boris Johnson famously quipped that, when it came to the UK's future relationship with the EU, the UK could 'have our cake and eat it' (*Sun*, 30 September 2016). By the end of 2018 this sense of optimism from some of the most enthusiastic Brexiteers had been almost entirely expunged amid accusations that the UK had capitulated to an EU hell-bent on keeping the UK in a state of perpetual vassalage. The result was that, to many, the only viable option was for the UK to leave without a deal. To some, this would be a regrettable outcome, but by no means a catastrophe. To many, it was the only way to prevent a betrayal of the popular will.

The analysis presented here has attempted to trace the journey that this discourse has taken, from so called 'cakeism' to the view that crashing out would be the most favourable option for the UK. In doing so, the aim has been to contribute to the growing scholarship on the discursive dynamics of political mobilisation during and after the referendum. This analysis highlights the importance of viewing Brexit as more than a legal and constitutional process, and as a site of discursive contestation and mobilisation – a focal point for different political projects to compete for dominance by projecting a variety of different meanings and desires onto the process. At this level, the success of Brexit in mobilising widespread popular support was always rooted in its ability to bring a semblance of unity to a disparate, but often unconnected range of social grievances. As an empty signifier, its potential vulnerability lay in the fact that, over time, the unity of its support base was always likely to be destabilised as more substantive

sets of meanings attached themselves to it. As the negotiations with the EU faltered, and as Theresa May's ill-fated Withdrawal Agreement exposed serious schisms amongst the Leave camp, the myth of a no deal Brexit emerged as an attempt to reconfigure the meaning of Brexit around a revamped interpretation of the will of the people as expressed in 2016 in order to consolidate levels of support for Brexit. While the success of this at the popular level was mixed – public support for leaving the EU without a deal grew from a low point of 18% in September 2016 to an average of 34% during the first nine months of 2019, but remained unstable throughout the three phases examined here – the myth proved to be an effective means of undermining the version of Brexit developed by Theresa May and of holding the Leave camp together during a critical time.

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[1] At the time of writing it remains to be seen whether the government's commitment to this deal (which has yet to receive its third reading in the House of Commons) is genuine or whether the agreement is merely a political ruse to achieve a no deal outcome at the end of a twelve-month transition period, by which time the Conservatives will no doubt hope to be in a stronger political position.

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[4] To deal with these ambiguities, the scoring method used for this study took (in cases where polls featured
multiple questions on the theme) the question and the answer that was closest to a no deal scenario. Where the
question of support for no deal was not explicitly put (especially during the first few months after the
referendum) the measure of support was taken from the question that came closest to the conditions for a no deal
exit (e.g. prioritising control of immigration over access to the single market). The full list of opinion polls used
in this dataset is available at:
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