BREXIT: MNI Experts Poll Puts One-In-Three Chance On Leaving

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-Academics Tend To See Higher Chance of UK Leaving EU Than City Economists
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There is a slightly greater than one-in-three chance of Britons voting to leave the European Union, a snap MNI poll of City economists and top political scientists finds, but taken alone, political scientists see a higher risk than that.

UK Prime Minister David Cameron has promised to renegotiate the terms of Britain's relationship with the EU before holding a membership referendum by the end of 2017. City economists and the academics combined put a median 35% chance on Britons voting to leave. Separately, the median of City economists' is 33% and the academics' up at 43%.

The political scientists highlight the complexity of the political challenges facing Cameron in securing concessions from the EU and the risk of events, notably the migration crisis, tilting the scales against him.

John Curtice, Professor of Politics at Strathclyde University, who led the work on the BBC's exit polls at the May general election, put the risk of leaving at 50%.

Curtice says that the immigration issue is undoubtedly crucial and the free movement of EU nationals enshrined in EU treaties will come under sustained attack from the pro British exit side.

"If the 'Leave' side can convince people that leaving is the only way to control immigration, then their chances will increase," he said.

Simon Hix, Professor of Political Science at the London School of Economics, said the MNI poll median of 35% underplays the real risks of an exit vote.

"I think that's way too low, I really do...I would put leave at about 48% and remain at 52%, +/- 10%. It is too-close-to-call and the outcome is highly uncertain," he said.

Recent polls of the electorate have produced erratic results, adding to the uncertainty.

A YouGov poll carried out between September 10 and 17 found 40% backed 'Leave' the EU and 38% supported 'Remain In', with 16% in the don't know category. But this poll was promptly followed by one from ComRes showing 55% for 'Remain In' and 36% for 'Leave'. An ICM poll out Friday gave the 'Remain In' camp a six percentage point lead.

Hix notes that immigration is a burning issue in Britain and may dominate the referendum campaign, with the recent polls showing immigration has moved to the top of voters' concerns.
The timing of the Brexit vote could be key, in light of the Syrian refugee crisis, as the flow of people out of conflict zones peaks in late summer when the Mediterranean Sea is storm-free. An Autumn 2016 referendum, after weeks of headlines about refugee chaos, could encourage an exit vote.

"In August and September there's always a migration crisis. It's only going to get worse," Hix notes.

"The more the migration crisis goes on, the more it plays into the hands of the leave campaign. Because ... the one key argument they have is if you leave the EU, you lose control of your borders," Hix added.

Leaders of other European nations, facing their own domestic political pressures, may be in no position to offer concessions to the UK. There is, for example, speculation that faced with the domestic challenge of the euroseptic Front National, French President Francois Hollande will opt to have a showdown with the UK rather than pandering to PM Cameron.

"If we do not wish to strengthen Europe, then we should leave it," Hollande told Members of the European Parliament Wednesday in what could be a taste of things to come.

Hix also challenged the view that the "status-quo" bias, which suggests Britons are hostile to major constitutional changes from referenda, will play a key role in this vote. Unlike in the Scotland referendum, there's not much clarity about what staying in would mean for Britain, he says.

"It's less risky to leave the EU rather than leave the UK. There's no argument about currency, debt or banking. It's a return to status quo ex-ante. People pine for the 1950s when we controlled our borders," he said.

The UK only became a full member of the European Economic Community, the EU's forerunner, in 1973 and in the years since then politicians from both the left and right and swathes of the popular press have been unremittingly negative about it.

Some experts suggest it is more likely than not the UK will vote to leave. LSE Professor John Van Reenen, director of the Centre for Economic Performance, put the chance of an "Out" vote at 54%, with very wide uncertainty around that figure.

"I think the Scottish referendum is a salutary reminder of how populist sentiment can be very strong. And unlike that vote there is no chance of a last minute set of concessions," he said.

In the 2014 Scottish independence referendum the 'No' to independence won with 55.3% of the vote but it was a hard fought campaign. The Scottish National Party swept the board north of the border in the May 2015 General Election, keeping the independence question in the spotlight.

Michael Saunders, UK economist at Citigroup, raised the possibility in a research note of a similar "neverendum" on UK membership of the EU, with continuing worries on immigration and hostility to EU integration triggering unending speculation about another referendum if the 'Remain In' camp win the first one.

The MNI poll covered 18 City economists and senior academics. MNI plans to update this poll of experts regularly, increasing the number of respondents.

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