

What Is Brexit? What Does ‘No-Deal’ Mean?



Dan Kitwood/Getty Images

Britain's two main political parties are haggling over the nation's withdrawal from the European Union, known as Brexit. The badly divided government is in crisis, unable to agree on an approach to the country's biggest peacetime decision in decades. The deadline to come up with a plan is fast approaching.

The struggle has already cost one prime minister, Theresa May, her job; she announced on May 24 that she would resign after failing to come up with a plan that satisfied her party, her coalition partners and officials in Brussels, the seat of the European Union.

Now it is taking a toll on her successor, Boris Johnson. The Conservative Party chose Mr. Johnson, a brash proponent of withdrawal, to succeed Mrs. May and take control of the Brexit process.

It has not gone well.

Many lawmakers were outraged over Mr. Johnson's insistence that if need be, he would pull Britain from the European Union even without a formal agreement — a move many warn could mean major economic damage. And his attempts to in effect shut Parliament out of the process did not win him many friends.

When lawmakers rose up, seizing control of the legislative process, and Mr. Johnson lost his majority in Parliament, he responded by tossing out rebels from his Conservative Party and demanding a new general election.

The deadline for withdrawal is currently Oct. 31. Mr. Johnson insists he can cut a deal with the European Union before then. But time is rapidly running out.

What ultimately emerges could determine the shape of Britain and its place in the world for decades. Following is a basic guide to Brexit, what it is, how it developed into the mess it is today and how it could ultimately be resolved.

What is Brexit?

A portmanteau of the words "Britain" and "exit," Brexit is shorthand for Britain's split from the European Union, changing its relationship to the bloc on trade, security, and migration.

Britain has been debating the pros and cons of membership in a European community of nations almost from the moment the idea was broached. It held its first referendum on membership in what was then called the European Economic Community in 1975, less than three years after it joined when 67 percent of voters supported staying in the bloc.

In 2013, Prime Minister David Cameron promised a national referendum on European Union membership with the idea of settling the question once and for all. The options it offered were broad and vague — Remain or Leave — and Mr. Cameron was convinced that Remain would win handily.

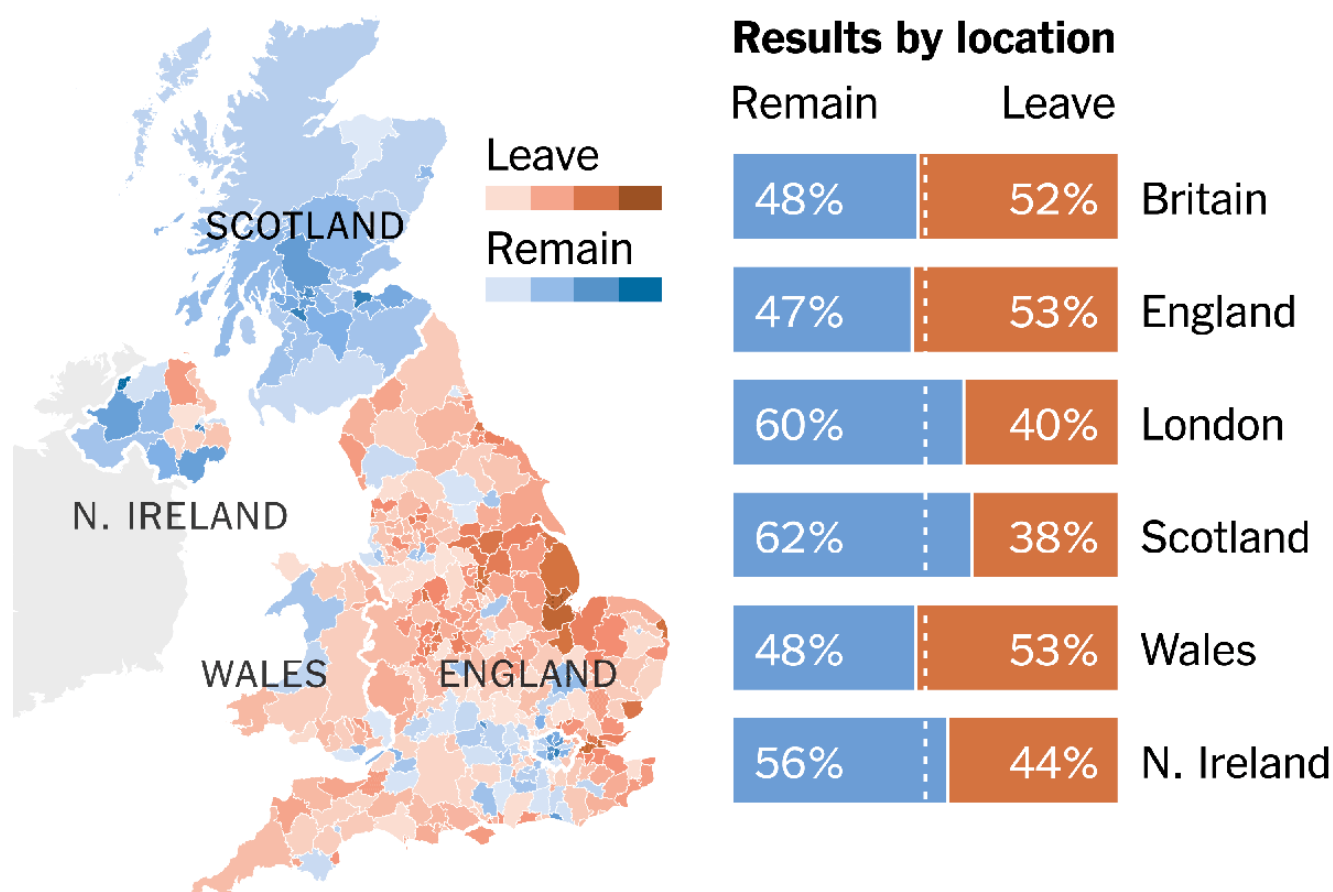
Britons voted on June 23, 2016, as a refugee crisis made migration a subject of political rage across Europe and amid accusations that the Leave campaign had relied on lies and broken election laws. An ill-defined Brexit won 52 percent of the vote.

Not only did that not settle the debate, but it also saved for another day the tangled question of what should come next. After nearly three years of debate and negotiation, that remains unanswered.

How did the vote break down?

Most voters in England and Wales supported Brexit, particularly in rural areas and smaller cities. That overcame majority support to remain in the European Union in London, Scotland and Northern Ireland. See a detailed map of the vote.

Young people overwhelmingly voted against leaving, while older voters supported it.



Why is it such a big deal?

Europe is Britain's most important export market and its biggest source of foreign investment, and membership in the bloc has helped London cement its position as

a global financial center. An announcement, or at least a threat, from a major business to leave Britain because of Brexit is a regular occurrence. The list of companies that are thinking about relocating includes Airbus, which employs 14,000 people and supports more than 100,000 other jobs.

The government has projected that in 15 years, the country's economy will be 4 percent to 9 percent smaller under Brexit than it would inside the bloc, depending on how it leaves.

Mrs. May had promised that Brexit would end free movement, the right of people from elsewhere in Europe to live and work in Britain, and vice versa. That was a triumph for some working-class people who see immigration as a threat to their jobs, but dispiriting for young Britons hoping to study or work abroad.

Mr. Johnson wants to strike an agreement of his own with Brussels by Oct. 31 — specifically one without the controversial Irish border provisions in Mrs. May's deal — but that may not be possible.

What's holding it up?

Undoing 46 years of economic integration in one stroke was never going to be easy, and the Brexit process has been bedeviled by the same divisions that led to the referendum in the first place. Both Britain's main parties, the governing Conservatives and the Labour opposition, are divided over what to do, leaving Parliament so factionalized that there may be no coherent plan that would get a majority.

Mrs. May spent 18 months negotiating a divorce deal with the European Union, shedding one cabinet minister after another in the process. Her plan would have kept customs and trade arrangements at least temporarily, but ultimately envisioned cutting most of those ties. It did not detail what would replace them in Britain's future relationship with the European Union.

When she presented her plan to Parliament in January, it was rejected by a historic margin of 230 votes. When she tried again in March, she fared less badly, but the pact was still soundly defeated, 391 to 242.

Some ardent Brexiteers, who would accept a no-deal withdrawal, came around to

supporting Mrs. May's deal — not because they liked it, but because they believed it might be their only chance to avoid a soft Brexit or remaining in the bloc. But a third attempt to pass her bill, also in March, failed 344 to 286.

That prompted Mrs. May to do something she had hoped to avoid: negotiate with Labour, which advocates a soft Brexit. Those talks failed to accomplish anything that would allow her to proceed, and she was eventually forced to abandon plans for a fourth vote. The revised plan was scorned by both Conservative and Labour lawmakers, and the decision not to publish the plan, let alone hold a vote, was a clear sign that Mrs. May's days were numbered.

We keep hearing about the Irish border. What's that about?

The single greatest hangup is the question of Britain's only land border with the European Union — the invisible line between Ireland, another member state of the bloc, and Northern Ireland, which is part of the United Kingdom.

Mrs. May and her Irish counterpart, Leo Varadkar, want to prevent checkpoints from going up at the border; such barriers are generally seen as incompatible with the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, which brought respite from decades of violence in Northern Ireland.

But the method she agreed for guaranteeing that — called “the backstop” — has alienated much of Parliament.

The backstop would keep the United Kingdom in a trading relationship with Europe until a final deal to avoid a hard border could be agreed on, something that hard-line Brexiteers fear would never happen.

And it would bind Northern Ireland to even more European rules, to the dismay of those who reject any regulatory differences between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. Most notably, that includes the Democratic Unionist Party of Northern Ireland, whose 10 lawmakers give Mrs. May her parliamentary majority.

Mr. Johnson has promised to negotiate a new deal without the backstop

arrangement, which he says would leave Britain in an “absolutely unacceptable” situation.

Read more: What Is the Irish Backstop, and Why Is It Holding Up Brexit?

How did we end up with an Oct. 31 deadline?

Just about the only clear decision Parliament has made on Brexit since the 2016 referendum was to give formal notice in 2017 to quit, under Article 50 of the European Union’s Lisbon Treaty, a legal process setting it on a two-year path to departure. That set March 29, 2019, as the formal divorce date.

When it became clear that Parliament would not accept Mrs. May’s deal by then, the European Union pushed the precipice back to April 12, to allow her to try again. The timing was dictated by the coming European Parliament elections, the thinking being that if Britain were to take part in that vote, it would need to begin preparing at least six weeks in advance.

Once again, the “cliff-edge” of a no-deal Brexit loomed, but the new deadline did not yield any more agreement in London, forcing Mrs. May to plead, again, for more time. European leaders insisted on a longer delay this time and set Oct. 31 as the date.

But in announcing her decision to step aside, Mrs. May acknowledged that lawmakers had yet to find a way to pass that deal or to agree on what they want instead.

The fantasy that Brexit would be easy has crumbled, and lawmakers who made lofty promises to their constituents are having to face hard reality.

Somehow, having the nightmare come to a head — again — on Halloween seems fitting.

What happens next?

On Aug. 28, Mr. Johnson announced that he would cut short the time lawmakers have to debate his Brexit plans before the Oct. 31st withdrawal deadline.

The move drew swift and fierce backlash from the opposition — and some lawmakers within Mr. Johnson's own Conservative Party — and caused the British pound to plunge.

In the first week of September, Parliament blocked his plans to leave the union with or without an agreement. It then stymied his bid, at least for now, to call an election for Oct. 15, out of fear he could secure a new majority in favor of breaking with Europe, deal or no deal. But the government has said it would hold another parliamentary vote on Sept. 9th on an early election.

What are the alternatives?

Mr. Johnson has said he would be prepared to lead a no-deal withdrawal, but that he will work toward a better deal. A less strident leader might have tacked to the center by committing to a customs union with Europe — a close trading relationship that would prevent the imposition of tariffs and quotas. That would solve the Irish border dilemma and possibly win votes from Labour lawmakers.

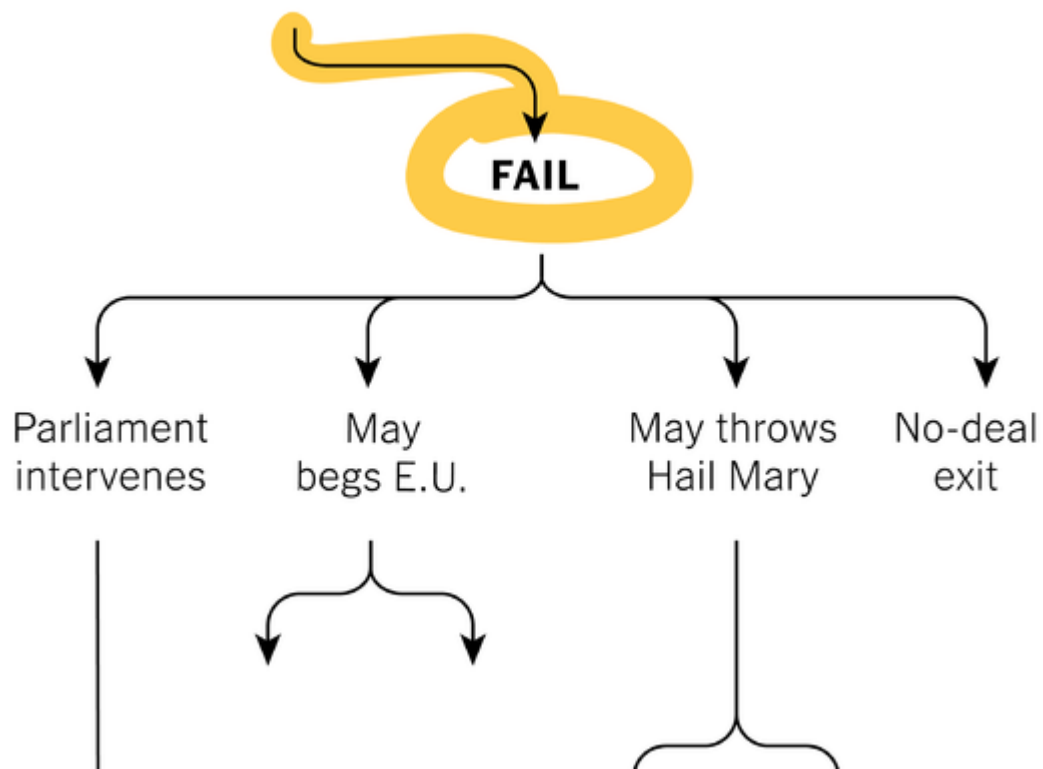
Mr. Corbyn has worked hard not to commit Labour to a distinct course on Brexit. But under pressure from many of his members, he has moved toward supporting a second referendum on the eventual withdrawal agreement.

But a referendum could take many forms, and even among its backers, there is no agreement on that, either. Nor is it certain that a rerun of the vote would deliver a different result.

Still, other pro-Europe voters want Parliament to kill Brexit on its own, or at least delay it for years, by revoking Article 50.

With the suspension of Parliament and a shorter time to come up with a plan, exiting without a deal remains a real possibility, one that that hard-line pro-Brexit forces in the Conservative Party, including Mr. Johnson, insist would be preferable to a long delay.

Visit our more detailed guide to what could happen next.



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