

Comments on the Yougov 3-way Brexit poll

Denis Mollison : 20 July 2018

1. There is no majority for either form of Brexit:

Remain > Soft by 51-33 with 16% abstaining (because no relevant 2nd preference) - the margin is 60-40 if you omit abstentions.

Remain > Hard by 53-44 with 3% abstaining - margin is 55-45 omitting abstentions.

[See pie charts overleaf]

These are quite clear majorities, despite the apparent headline comparison of a dead heat for Remain vs. Brexit (50 vs. 17+33). This confirms the view that had the referendum compared Remain with any specific practical form of Brexit it would almost certainly have gone the other way.

2. Despite the first preferences being 17-33 there is a narrow majority for Soft vs. Hard: 39-36 with 25% abstaining - 52.5-47.5 omitting abstentions.

3. However, the poll suggests that Soft - meaning the 'negotiated deal' - is widely viewed as an unsatisfactory compromise (as Tony Blair was saying on Newsnight last night). Given that Remain and Hard are fairly evenly balanced one might expect that it should be possible to find a Soft position in between that commanded a large majority against either: this is presumably the goal the Prime Minister has been pursuing, and she doesn't seem to be succeeding.

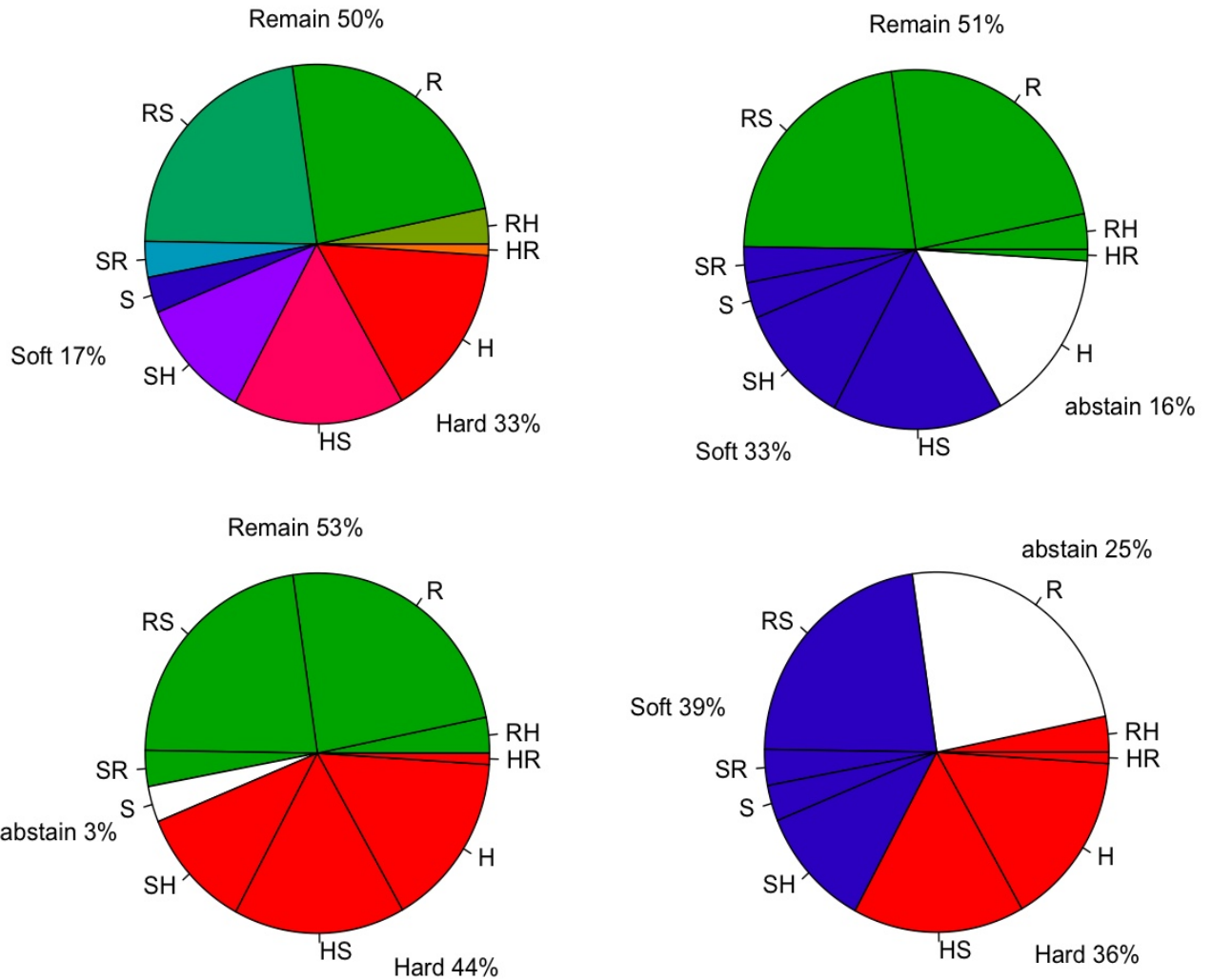
4. The difficulty of a 3-option referendum on Brexit:

The way this dissatisfaction with Soft shows up in the poll is in the very large numbers of Remain and Hard supporters who have no second preference. Altogether, 43% have no second preference, while 4% have the anti-compromise preferences of either RH or HR. [For comparison, the equivalent figures for Yougov's Scottish referendum poll in 2012 were only 10% and 1% respectively.]

Thus only 53% have the kind of preferences one would expect if people viewed the choices as options lying along an ordered spectrum R-S-H, and therefore all chose one of RS,SR,SH,HS. This means that a 2-question referendum, that would have worked reasonably well for the Scottish case (where 89% had such 'ordered spectrum' views) is not appropriate.

A satisfactory 3-option referendum would have to look at all three 2-way comparisons, either using preference voting as in this opinion poll, or possibly better by explicitly asking 3 questions, R v S, R v H and S v H - I say possibly better because this explicit questioning might encourage fewer abstentions.

Given the dislike of the main political parties of any sophisticated voting system, the practical implication is that a choice needs first to be made (by Government, or through a General Election) of a single specific Brexit proposal or deal, and a straightforward 2-way referendum held between that option and Remain.



The first figure (top left) shows the proportions supporting each of the 9 possible preferences. For example, RS indicates those with first preference Remain, second preference Soft Brexit; R indicates those with first preference Remain, no second preference.

The other three figures show what these preferences imply for each 2-option contest. For example, if R is excluded (bottom right figure), RS voters switch to their second preference of S, RH voters switch to H, while R voters abstain; this leads to a 39-36 % preference for Soft vs. Hard, with the 25% R voters abstaining.

A similar pie chart for the Scottish independence poll, Yougov February 2012, is shown below for comparison. Note how much smaller are the proportions of abstentions ($N+M+I = 10\%$ as against $R+S+H = 43\%$ for the Brexit poll) and anti-compromise preferences ($NI+IN = 1\%$ as against $RH+HR = 4\%$).

