

Factsheet – EU membership referendum

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Background

Two of the most significant election pledges made by David Cameron before he surprisingly won a majority in the House of Commons during the 2015 general election, were to renegotiate the terms of the UK's EU membership and to organise an in/out referendum in 2017 at the latest.

Wording of the question

Following a recommendation by the Electoral Commission, the question that will be posed to voters in the referendum was changed from 'Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union?' to 'Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?' to avoid favouring the pro-EU side.

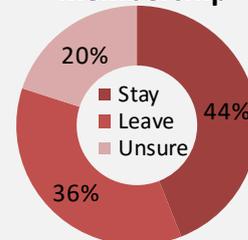
Timing

An earlier referendum, held in 2016, would prevent clashes with the German and French 2017 elections and could allow the Conservatives to take full advantage of their strong electoral mandate. Furthermore, pushing the date forward would limit uncertainty for business, which generally favours continued EU membership. A later referendum, however, would grant the government more time to achieve fundamental reform of its EU membership. Some of the PM's demands pointed out below may require amendments to EU treaties, which is likely to be opposed by European leaders. A later referendum may, therefore, be required for successful negotiations and a Yes vote.

Other issues

Apart from the timing of the referendum, decisions will have to be made concerning campaign spending limits and the right of Tory ministers and MPs to support the No campaign. Given that the Conservatives are divided on the EU membership question, some ministers may have to resign in order to campaign for a No vote. Moreover, the issue of who would be eligible to vote in the referendum will also have to be addressed during the coming months. For example, if the 1.5 EU citizens residing in the UK would be allowed to vote, they could have a decisive influence on the outcome.

Opinion poll on EU membership



Source: YouGov / Sunday Times, 21-22 May

Main renegotiation demands

Although Cameron is yet to present which powers he wants to claim back from Brussels, he has given a rough indication of his demands:

- ❖ Curb migrant benefits: tax credits, child benefits and social housing could be claimed by EU immigrants only after having worked and lived in the UK for at least four years
- ❖ Enable non-Eurozone members to suspend qualified majority voting in case their rights are impinged on
- ❖ Change the EU's historic mission: it should no longer aim for "ever closer union among the peoples of Europe"
- ❖ Reform our relationship with the European Court of Human Rights and replace the Human Rights Acts with a British bill of rights
- ❖ Increase power of national parliaments to block new EU legislation by introducing a "red card"

Cameron's EU reform agenda: upcoming events

Potential challenges

- ❖ **ECJ ruling on UK "right to reside" test which limits EU citizens access to certain social security benefits**
If taking place before the referendum, a defeat would mean a step backwards for Cameron's objective to change EU citizens access to benefits
- ❖ **Polish general elections: October 2015**
If European freedom of movement becomes an election issue, this could pose problems for Cameron's reform agenda
- ❖ **Spanish general elections: November/December 2015**
Recent local and regional elections suggest that a centre-left government could be formed, impeding UK reform drive
- ❖ **Scottish general elections: May/June 2016**
Would distract from the EU membership debate if the referendum has not been held yet
- ❖ **Fiscal compact potentially incorporated into EU treaties: March 2017**
Given broad opposition, the proposal may be refused and Cameron could claim to deliver on his promises. If accepted, it would give a boost to the No campaign
- ❖ **French presidential election: March/April 2017**
If the referendum has not yet taken place, this crucial election could break open any deal Cameron may have struck with EU leaders. A victory for the centre-right UMP would be an opportunity to gain support that Cameron may not have received at this point
- ❖ **German federal elections: September 2017**
Also a crucial, potentially game-changing election in which the key questions are whether Chancellor Angela Merkel will run for a fourth term and what her stance on the EU will be during her campaign

Potential opportunities

- ❖ **Catalan regional elections: 27 September 2015**
Proxy for a second Scottish independence referendum. Failure to realise Catalan independence could discourage SNP to push for another referendum, easing fears of a UK break-up. An independent Catalonia could strengthen calls for an independence referendum, evoke worries of a UK break-up and boost the Yes campaign
- ❖ **Summits of EU leaders: 15-16 October 2015 & 17-18 December 2015**
Could draw more attention to UK reform demands
- ❖ **Netherlands holds EU Presidency: January-June 2016**
A reform ally in a powerful position
- ❖ **Mid-term review of long-term EU budget: November-December 2016**
Opportunity to prioritise reform of the EU budget and fight the proposed spending increase
- ❖ **Swiss EU referendum: December 2016**
If the referendum has not yet taken place, this is an important proxy for what deals could be struck should the UK get out. Substantive Swiss concessions could discourage people to vote no, while major changes to freedom of movement could lead Cameron to get similar concessions
- ❖ **Dutch general elections: March 2017**
Re-election of Mark Rutte or another reform ally is likely considering all main parties favour EU reform
- ❖ **UK holds EU Presidency: July-December 2017**
Opportunity to push for last-minute reforms if referendum has not yet been held