



Brexit Extended

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New Deadline Is End of October 2019

The departure of the United Kingdom (UK) from the European Union (EU), known as “Brexit,” was originally scheduled for March 29, 2019. The UK House of Commons has repeatedly rejected the withdrawal agreement that the UK government negotiated with the EU, however, while also opposing the “no-deal” option of leaving the EU without a withdrawal agreement.

On March 22, EU leaders agreed to extend the UK’s departure date to May 22, 2019, provided the UK could approve the agreement by April 12, 2019. As that deadline drew near, EU leaders at an emergency [European Council summit](#) on April 10, 2019, agreed to offer the UK a new “flexible” extension until October 31, 2019, with an earlier departure possible upon approval of the agreement. In both instances, UK Prime Minister Theresa May had requested a three-month extension to June 30.

Paramount to the EU’s decision was preserving the integrity of the European Parliament elections scheduled for May 23-26, 2019. The extension means that the UK must prepare to [participate in the elections](#). If it does not participate, the UK’s EU membership would cease on May 31, 2019, with or without a withdrawal agreement.

In seeking and granting the extensions, both sides have also reiterated their intention to avoid [the “no-deal” scenario](#), due to concerns that it could cause considerable disruption, with negative effects on economic, trade, security, Northern Ireland, aviation, and other issues.

The Withdrawal Agreement and Its Critics

The [strategy](#) adopted by the government of Prime Minister May in 2017 was to pursue a relatively “hard Brexit,” meaning a departure from the EU single market and customs union, and a restoration of British sovereignty over lawmaking, including with regard to trade policy and immigration. The strategy calls for the UK to negotiate a free trade agreement with the EU to secure as much access to the EU market as possible.

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In November 2018, EU and UK negotiators finalized the 585-page [draft withdrawal agreement](#) and a 26-page [political declaration on the future relationship](#). The agreement includes a transition period through 2020 in which to implement steps for an orderly separation. It also contains a “backstop” provision under which the UK would essentially remain in the EU customs union until the two sides agree on their future trade relationship. The backstop addresses the lack of an apparent solution to the [Irish border question](#), with all parties intent on avoiding a “hard border” with customs checks and physical infrastructure between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Supporters of Brexit in the prime minister’s Conservative Party object that the backstop would leave the UK bound indefinitely to EU rules and unable to conduct a national trade policy. Northern Ireland’s Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), whose backing is critical to the Conservative-led government, objects that the backstop would also preserve deeper regulatory alignment between [Northern Ireland and the EU](#), arguing that treating Northern Ireland differently from the rest of the UK threatens the UK’s constitutional integrity. Advocates of “soft Brexit” object to the agreement because it does not commit to retaining permanent ties to the EU single market or membership in the EU customs union, which they argue would mitigate economic uncertainty. Others in the opposition parties have voted against the deal hoping that its defeat would lead to an early general election or a second referendum on EU membership.

Repeated Rejection

Between [January](#) and March 2019, the House of Commons rejected the withdrawal agreement three times, albeit with a [decreasing](#) (but still considerable) margin of defeat as the [votes](#) progressed.

The House of Commons has also held a series of nonbinding “[indicative](#)” [votes](#), but there has been [no majority](#) for any proposed option, including staying in the EU single market and/or customs union, leaving without a deal, cancelling the withdrawal process, or holding a public vote on the deal.

Having survived an internal party vote of confidence in December 2018 and a parliamentary vote of confidence in January 2019, Prime Minister May has offered to resign before the next phase of negotiations with the EU (on the future relationship) if Parliament approves the withdrawal agreement.

Cross-Party Talks

In early April, Prime Minister May opened talks with the opposition Labour Party. A possible compromise is that Labour could help pass the agreement in return for a “soft Brexit” that includes a permanent customs union with the EU. The EU has refused to reopen the agreement to further negotiation, but might be willing to rewrite the political declaration on the future relationship toward the preservation of closer ties, such as a commitment to maintain a customs union. In order to move forward, Conservative and Labour leaders could also pledge to enact the result of binding indicative votes in Parliament on options for the future UK-EU relationship. Both parties face considerable political [risk](#) with the talks, however, and the prospects for reaching a successful compromise appear [limited](#).

Possible Developments and Outcomes

A number of broad scenarios remain in play for the weeks and months ahead. Possibilities include

- additional attempts in Parliament to deliver Brexit under the terms of the withdrawal agreement, possibly with a revised political declaration on the future relationship;
- an eventual “no-deal Brexit” if the extension runs out and Parliament has still not approved the withdrawal agreement;

- a Conservative Party leadership contest that produces a new prime minister, should Theresa May resign or if the government loses a parliamentary vote of no confidence;
- an early general election, which could provide a clearer mandate for the winner to pursue Brexit plans; and
- a second referendum on EU membership.

Issues for Congress

Many Members of Congress have a broad interest in Brexit. Developments related to Brexit are likely to have implications for the global economy, U.S.-UK and U.S.-EU economic relations, and transatlantic cooperation on foreign policy and security issues. In 2018, the Administration [notified](#) Congress of its intent to launch [U.S.-UK trade negotiations](#) after the UK leaves the EU, and Congress may consider how developments affect the prospects for an agreement. Members of Congress may also have an interest in how Brexit might affect the peace process in [Northern Ireland](#). Speaking in London on April 15 ahead of a visit to Ireland, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said there would be “[no chance whatsoever](#)” for a U.S.-UK trade agreement if Brexit were to weaken the Northern Ireland/Republic of Ireland peace process.

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