

# Disaster scenario for Cameron on Europe



David Cameron faces the risk of winning the EU referendum and losing his job as prime minister if he fails to convince a majority of Tories to back his recommendation to stay in the European Union. While the prime minister favours Britain remaining in the EU on terms he negotiates with Brussels, most Tory voters want to leave the EU.

Among those who voted the Conservative leader back to Downing Street at the May election, 55 percent were prepared to vote to leave the EU, according to the [British Election Study](#).

Since then, support for the [Conservative Party](#) has held up but opposition to the EU has increased in the electorate. Among Conservative voters has hardened. A pre-party conference [YouGov](#) poll found that 62 percent of Conservatives said they vote to leave the EU while 38 percent would vote to stay in. Conservative voters currently provide the largest bloc of British voters who want to withdraw from the EU.

If the issue was whether Conservatives wanted David Cameron or Jeremy Corbyn as prime minister, the party leader would have no trouble in rallying virtually unanimous support from his fellow Tories. However, the EU referendum is about a single issue. Conservatives can vote to leave the EU secure in the knowledge that the party will remain in government for five years or longer.

The prime minister has made his support for staying in the EU conditional on achieving the return of significant powers to the British Parliament. Instead of his demands being red lines they are pink dots. The dots can only be joined up if the EU agrees to meet his conditions. The best he can

expect to get is a mixed bag of demands accepted, promises to take British views into account in further deliberations, and failure on one or more counts.

In theory, Cameron could report Brussels had refused his demands and announce he had decided to endorse withdrawal. Doing so be seen as an admission of failure on the international stage and cast doubt domestically on his leadership, whether or not his U turn was endorsed in a referendum.

However much or little is conceded by the EU, the prime minister is likely to claim victory for his reform efforts and the small number of pro-EU MPs will accept this view. Committed Eurosceptics will reject on principle any deal that is negotiated. A majority of Tory MPs are not yet committed to staying in or leaving the EU, according to an analysis by the Open Europe think tank.

While the Conservative party organisation will remain neutral in the EU campaign, anti-EU MPs will urge their constituents to vote for leaving the EU. The anti campaign will be led by former Conservative Chancellor Nigel Lawson.

Cabinet ministers cannot stay on the sidelines, but they can split, and ministers are divided in their view of the EU. Cameron has the choice of following Harold Wilson's example in the 1975 referendum of allowing ministers to campaign on opposite sides without leaving the Cabinet. Alternatively, he can tell ministers that they will have to resign if they want to campaign for leaving the EU. Some undoubtedly will do so with one eye on the contest for being the next prime minister, as Cameron has already announced he will resign at an unspecified date before the next general election.

If the EU referendum were held today, opinion polls indicate that a slim majority of Britons would probably vote to stay in the European Union, while a majority of Conservatives would vote to leave. That majority would be composed by adding up the pro-Europe ballots cast by most Labour, Liberal Democrat, SNP and Greens and people who do not favour any party. Conservatives would provide a much bigger bloc of votes to leave because they are much more numerous than UKIP voters, who are virtually unanimous in their opposition to Brussels.

Public opinion toward the EU is fluid. Almost half the electorate say they are not certain how they will respond when the referendum ballot is held in about a year's time. Conservatives are more likely to be undecided than supporters of other parties, because of the confusion caused by the conflicting recommendations coming from leading Conservatives during the

referendum campaign. Confused voters are less likely to vote. Lower turnout among Conservatives will reduce the impact of their vote on the overall result.

If the referendum produces a majority for the UK remaining in the European Union, the result will be a Pyrrhic victory for the prime minister if endorsement of his position is in spite of rather than because of the views of a majority of Conservative voters.

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