

Journal of Contemporary European Research

Volume 17, Issue 2 (2021)

Commentary

From 'Brexhaustion' to 'Covidiot': The United Kingdom and the Populist Future

Russell Foster and Matthew Feldman

Citation

Foster, R. and Feldman, M. (2021). 'From 'Brexhaustion' to 'Covidiot': The United Kingdom and the Populist Future' in, *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 17 (2): 116-127.
<https://doi.org/10.30950/jcer.v17i2.1231>

First published at: www.jcer.net

Abstract

One consequence of Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic is the acceleration of Britain's shift towards populism, and the rejection of expert-informed policymaking in favour of vox populi claims. The continuation of this toxicity beyond Brexit means that nationalist narratives have become Britain's new 'politics of everything' (Valluvan 2019). The past five years have seen growing British contempt for technocracy, with 'us and them' populist narratives gaining widespread traction as the United Kingdom's (UK) volatile political environment moves away from the political procedures and economic values by which the UK has operated since 1945. Since early 2020, this narrative has been significantly accelerated by Covid-19 countermeasures, with anti-EU parties and narratives on the left and right becoming anti-lockdown or anti-vaccine advocates. This commentary approaches the surge in British populism as emblematic of the UK's shift from centrism towards polarised factions defined not by party, but by cross-spectrum contempt for technical governance. We argue that while populism is a worldwide phenomenon, it is not homogenous and the UK is particularly vulnerable to anti-status quo discourses and narratives. We argue that British populism should be seen not as a temporary phenomenon in response to specific events and conditions, but as a fluid, amorphous and heterogeneous 'new normal' which, in an environment of social mistrust, contempt for expertise and disillusionment with traditional politics, is now becoming the defining characteristic of British politics.

Keywords

Brexit; UK Politics; Anti-establishment Politics; Populism; Covid-19

'People in this country have had enough of experts'. Michael Gove (Financial Times 2016)

Between July 2019 and December 2020, four events marked a transitory period in which discussions of populism and technocracy dominated British political discourse in the aftermath of the 2016 European Union (EU) membership referendum (itself a debate framed, as the Michael Gove quote above illustrates, by discussions of technical expertise versus popular will). First was the Conservative Party's selection of Boris Johnson as party leader to replace Theresa May. Second, the December 2019 general election which saw the Conservatives gain their largest majority since 1987 while Labour were reduced to their lowest vote share since 1935. Third, the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) signed between the EU and the United Kingdom (UK) on 24 December 2020, and Britain's formal departure from the EU on 31 January 2020. Fourth, the current global coronavirus pandemic and consequent state countermeasures, during which the Conservative Party morphed from an ethos of small state and limited spending into a wartime-measures party of unprecedented state intervention, spending and regulation of everyday life. The result of these four developments is an increased and highly emotional public discourse on the merits and limits of technocratic versus populist governance.

In this commentary we argue that these four developments have led to a greater visibility of the British radical right. Consequently, there is a need to critically re-interpret the contested concept of populism as neither a reaction to 'rational' grievances (for example economic change or globalisation) or 'irrational' anxieties (for example narratives of cultural decline or identity anxieties) which can be quelled through policy decisions; nor as isolated, temporary reactions to specific, localised political conditions. Nor is populism an entirely transnational phenomenon. We argue that recent developments to the British radical right, in the aftermath of Brexit and Covid-19, demonstrate the fluidity and flexibility of a radical right populism that is not a reaction to specific events or grievances. Rather, the radical right is able to capitalise on very poor levels of trust in the British political system, uniting people across the political spectrum (KCL 2021) through an amorphous and fluid set of anti-establishment, anti-status imaginations and narratives whose advocates are able to apply to unrelated events (for example systemic challenges such as Brexit, and spontaneous challenges such as Covid-19) and which are able to appeal to very different demographics than the far-right can. We argue therefore that radical right populists' narratives, strategies and ideologies require much greater prominence in studies of British and wider international politics, as their influence is not in decline but is now arguably inextricable from political discourse. To understand and respond to the growing populist radical right, research must privilege affect theory and the role of emotion and perception as it is the *perception* of social and political inequality and elite oppression – whether "status threat", or "Great Replacement", or "Big Pharma" conspiracy theories – rather than the *reality*, which drives anti-technocratic, populist rhetoric in the contemporary UK.

Our commentary is structured as follows. First, we explore the impact that the Brexit process has had on popular trust in pre-2016 British politics and political structures, with intensifying polarisation between the British population, and additionally between British political institutions (such as Parliament and parties) and a population whose trust in the political establishment has been severely impacted (Sugue 2020). Second, we use reactions to Covid-19 countermeasures to argue that public hostility towards technical expertise is not a one-off emotional reaction, but part of Brexit's legacy in weakening trust between public and professionals. Third, we argue that the radical right is now so influential that, despite being anti-establishment, it has become symbiotic with the centre-right (Bale 2018) and indeed so established in British politics that it will continue to have enduring impact into the future. We conclude by urging greater critical investigation of such groups, ideologies, and narratives, in order to better understand their potential influence upon the post-Brexit, post-Covid UK.

POPULISTS ALL THE WAY DOWN: BREXIT'S ENDURING LEGACY

We failed to reckon with the fact that Boris Johnson was an exception. It's true that centrism is dead. There's no future in Cameron Conservatism or Blairite Labourism. But when you break the mould and open up the populist box, there's no guarantee it's going to be the left – or left populists – who benefit. (Labour aide cited in Poggrund and Maguire 2020: 228)

Brexit has left many legacies, not least a widespread public contempt for professional politicians, parties and the Westminster system. Four years of parliamentary deadlock over the results of the June 2016 referendum and the subsequent negotiations with the EU, a series of public votes in repeated local, national and European elections, not to mention several parliamentary votes on Theresa May's negotiated Withdrawal Bill, exacerbated the phenomena of '*Brexeternity*', '*Brexhaustion*' and the spectre of a '*Neverendum*'. Brexit debates were not confined to Westminster but seeped into every aspect of British life, transforming a distant constitutional and political debate into a domestic, *quotidian* debate on identity, affect and anxiety. The 2016-2020 debates on Brexit also engendered widespread distrust of politicians who were seen either as out-of-touch, metropolitan elites 'frustrating the will of the people' by blocking the Withdrawal Agreement, or in hectoring the masses by asserting that the vote was wrong and/or demanding new referenda (from a Leaver perspective); or blustering egoists pandering to nationalist rhetoric and imperial nostalgia (O'Toole 2018), pursuing a collectively destructive agenda through mathematical majoritarianism (from a Remainer perspective). The legacy of this is twofold. First, an appeal to popular will on both sides. Leavers elevated the majority results of the 2016 referendum to a semi-sacred status, followed in 2019 by Remainers citing the projected results of a second referendum following "Crossover Day", when sufficient numbers of (presumably pro-Brexit) pensioners had died that the electoral balance would tip in favour of Remain (Kellner 2018). Second, a persisting mistrust of mainstream politicians and a subsequent technocrat-populist battle fought by both sides, between what Salvatore Babones (2018) calls 'the tyranny of experts', and what Catherine Fieschi (2019) terms 'the tyranny of authenticity', as both Leavers and Remainers deployed emotional, affective appeals side by side with statistics and projections supporting their case. While it is not possible to trace the rise of populism to a single root cause it is arguable that one result of Jeremy Corbyn's tenure as Labour leader, the aftermath of Brexit, and Boris Johnson's period as Conservative leader (and as we argue, significantly exacerbated by the 2020-21 Coronavirus Pandemic) is a reframing of British politics not around party affiliations, national identities, or Leave/Remain, but rather around an imagined binary of technical expertise versus non-expert political narratives – populism.

As Frank Stengel (2019) argues, 'populism' is an over-used word with limited consensus on its meaning. British, and indeed global, politics have demonstrated that all too frequently, 'populism' is used as a 'snarl word' by factions across the political spectrum, often as a way of delegitimising opponents. However, for a working definition we adopt Mudde and Kaltwasser's (2015: 18) characterisation of populism as 'a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite"' (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2015: 6. The latter are a convenient foil for populists, in this case presented as three ostensibly allied/overlapping groups conspiring against 'the people': an Anglophobic and technocratic EU (the external threat); an out-of-touch, xenocentric, metropolitan class (the internal threat); and an excessively cautious cadre of economic, constitutional, diplomatic and medical experts narrated as frustrating the will of 'the people' in favour of statistics. The net result of these developments may mean that challenges faced in the UK are familiar drivers for the emergence of populist narratives which borrow from, but transcend, the radical right.

TAKE THE NEXT RIGHT

In response to economic and political developments since the onset of the Global Financial Crisis, and ideational or civilisational rhetoric and anxieties, politics is witnessing a rapid shift towards the right (Mudde 2019). Since 2016, the UK's political atmosphere has polarised into hostile extremes, significantly enhanced by Brexit and exacerbated by Covid-19 countermeasures. The continuation of this toxicity beyond Brexit is highly likely, given the unclear economic and constitutional consequences of leaving. This includes the dominance of various nationalist narratives within the UK and its four nations, what Sivamohan Valluvan (2019) calls Britain's new 'politics of everything' and the framing of all political debates in national and nationalist terms. It also includes the acceleration of mutual mistrust and anxieties in the subsequent economic fallout of Brexit and the coronavirus pandemic. The Prime Minister's approval ratings have oscillated between unprecedented levels of national support in the early stages of the national lockdown, a phenomenon enjoyed by incumbent leaders across the world, to widespread condemnation and civil disobedience in response to delays and failures in containing the outbreak, to unclear and confusing advice and regulations, to accusations of cronyism and hypocrisy. Indeed, the UK government's response to the pandemic and lockdown exemplifies the continued oscillation between technocratic and populist governing styles witnessed during Brexit, with both emotions and emotionless statistics, being deployed by pro- and anti-lockdown advocates. By April 2020, the government's advice that it was 'guided by science' (Grey and MacAskill 2020) in imposing an unprecedented sequence of lockdowns was met with high approval ratings, with the Prime Minister in particular enjoying widespread support for placing objective reality over political expedience. In sharp contrast to widespread public hostility towards expertise in the first half of 2016, the first half of 2020 saw widespread public support for a technopopulist style of governance (see Outhwaite 2021; Domaradski and Radić-Milosavljević 2021; Baldoli and Radaelli 2021 in this special issue), with an elected leader making addresses to the nation and giving daily briefings (with interactive *vox populi* engagements with members of the public), while enacting policies informed and guided by unelected experts. However, by summer 2020 this technocratic popularity had lost much of its public appeal. A 'Cummings Effect' (Fancourt, Steptoe and Wright 2020) of unelected experts violating rules with no consequences presaged a new populist/technocratic divide, namely between supporters of lockdowns and lockdown sceptics/anti-vaccine activists/conspiracy theorists.

In the era of a moribund Labour Party, rising nationalism in Scotland and the Johnson government's increasingly cavalier approach to domestic norms and international law more specifically, the UK's already-volatile political environment is moving away from the political and economic system by which the country has operated since 1945. Key to this are groups and leaders spanning the political spectrum, from the controversial Liberal Democrat policy of 2019 to unilaterally cancel Brexit, to Nigel Farage moving from UKIP to his anti-EU Brexit Party (itself spawning the anti-lockdown Reform Party), to a refocused 'big state/big spend' Conservative Party from 2020 onwards appealing, to borrow Labour's 2017 electoral slogan, to the many not the few, to an alleged 'will of the nation' or *vox populi* in whose name so many politicians are desirous of speaking, over the advice of technical experts. Political and social movements which promote various forms of nationalism, and which advocate either anti-globalist, anti-EU protectionism or anti-neoliberal, pro-socialist nationalisation of the economy, appear polar opposites but are united in a rejection of expert-informed policymaking (Eichengreen 2018: 131-144) and technocracy (particularly from experts born outside the UK and/or EU policymakers). These trends are not merely emerging, but rapidly gaining influence (Norris and Ingleheart 2019: 443-472) and 'mainstreaming' (Stocker 2017; Miller-Idriss 2017) in British politics. Since the resignations of David Cameron and Theresa May, parliamentary politics has seen a shift from traditionally centrist positions to left- or right-wing populism (Pirro, Taggart and van Kessel 2018), with the two united in disdain for expertise. However, the motivations for this cannot be reduced to ideological chicanery or political point scoring, nor can the old binary of Left/Right be used to understand motivations for populist support.

Post-Brexit Britain demonstrates the inefficacy of binary Left/Right understandings to account for populism. For example, in the fortnight after the vote to leave the EU was confirmed, hate crimes rose by 40 per cent (Albornoz, Bradley and Sonderegger 2021). This 'trigger event' contrasts sharply with previous models, such as responses to jihadi Islamist attacks or, most recently, counter-protests at Black Lives Matter demonstrations. Instead, the post-Brexit spike in hate crimes might just as easily be associated with 'celebratory racism' in contrast to more familiar models stressing alleged 'defence' of race, nation or an ill-defined 'culture' (Feldman and Littler 2014). As this implies more broadly, the popularity of the new, populist radical right cannot be explained exclusively through the economic policies of the Old Right nor the racial policies of the Far Right (Eichengreen 2018: 1-14; Eatwell and Goodwin 2018). Instead, a new approach must ask *why* diverse demographics in the UK support populist *Radical* Right solutions while eschewing technocracy (or, perhaps, advocating thrown versions of technocracy in which conspiracy theories and pseudoscientific hocus-pocus are invoked to justify political action).

Anti-technocratic sentiment is far from exclusive to the UK, and scepticism towards technocratic rule is arguably more visible beyond states rendered 'peripheral' by public hostility towards austerity and financial instability (such as Greece and Italy). However, we argue, the UK is uniquely vulnerable to populism due to the legacy of the Brexit process, itself the legacy of a UK-EU relationship which has historically oscillated between ambivalent and reluctant. Similarly we reject the popular assumption that the rise of radical populism is a homogenous phenomenon, and we further reject interpretations that political phenomena such as Brexit and the emergence of politicians such as Trump, Johnson, Le Pen and Salvini are part of a single phenomenon. We acknowledge that very strong links exist (particularly between the UK and US) and that in the digital age, radical right narratives in different spaces influence each other (see Wodak, KhosraviNik and Mral 2013) but we argue that these are not *a priori* connections – superficially similar conditions do not spawn identical responses. These are not causally related and do not emerge from the same sources. The emergence of 'populism' is instead attributable to varying conditions which are not replicated across countries (Fieschi 2019). While rejecting Anglocentrist approaches, we argue that the UK is indeed unique in this regard as post-Brexit British populism replicates many of the themes of the traditional radical right while transcending rightist appeal (for example, the appeal of Left-populists in the form of Corbynism and widespread anti-technocratic sentiments during the pandemic). Rather than the re-emergence of an old far right populist narrative, the UK is witnessing the emergence of a set of qualitatively new groups and narratives which distinguishes British populism from the far right and conservative old right, and which unites with far-left populism in mutual contempt for political centrism, expert-informed policymaking, and the Westminster model.

BRITAIN'S POPULIST PROBLEM

Populism in the UK is rapidly gaining traction, and while we do not discount economic motivations, it is arguable that a significant causal factor is contempt for the status quo, the legacy of Brexit and a shift to identity as the prime focus of political narratives (Moffitt 2017: 112-122, Lord 2013: 1056-1073). Yet identity politics is not the only preserve of the left. We anticipate that the growth of populist right identity politics will continue to gain traction. This is likely to follow whatever model of Brexit Boris Johnson pursues, the likely fallout of Covid-19 countermeasures, the continuing struggle of opposition parties and continuing nationalist arguments over the existence of the four-member UK. All of these challenges, yet again, will most significantly impact Britain's post-industrial areas and economically precarious populations (Standing 2016: 69-70). These areas are already vulnerable to economic instability (Hope Not Hate 2019) and may be sympathetic to nativist politics (Lubbers and Coenders 2017: 98-118). This is in turn likely to encourage anti-immigrant, Eurosceptic, anti-establishment positions from populists (Goodhart 2017:

231-234; Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley 2017: 175-229), as well as continued rejection of evidence-based policymaking. Accordingly, we anticipate an upward trend of mainstream parties seeking to reclaim voters by adopting populist rhetoric. This necessitates a new understanding of the relationship between radical-right populism and attitudes towards technocracy.

Using the phenomenological distinction elaborated by Alfred Schutz, we argue that fluid party politics are a second-order construct informed by first-order constructs, namely dissatisfaction, contempt and anxiety, which span the political spectrum. These elements are identifiable as motivations for the waxing and waning popularity of charismatic leaders such as Jeremy Corbyn, Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson, but also help to explain the rejection of evidence-based policymaking discernible in different movements. A key observation here is what Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin (2018: 16) term 'relative deprivation':

a sense that the wider group, whether white Americans or native Britons, is being left behind relative to others in society, while culturally liberal politicians, media and celebrities devote far more attention and status to immigrants, ethnic minorities and other newcomers. (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018: 16)

While this perception may bear little resemblance to reality, that is of less importance in this view than the phenomenological meaning invested, and the speed and ease with which social media and the internet can allow for messages to be shared among like-minded individuals with a shared language (Žižek 2018, Fukuyama 2018). Online echo chambers, like those cheering President Trump's unwillingness to concede electoral defeat on grounds of fraud (Groshek and Koc-Michalska 2017), help to render this imagination a reality. Pre-existing views, in some cases amounting to a 'foundational myth' (Bottici and Challand 2013: 17-19) for those subscribing to the view, thus informs subsequent political behaviour (Goodhart 2017, Hochschild 2016). Given that 'the idea that national-populist movements can be reduced to simplistic stereotypes is ridiculous' (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018: 3), it is evident that 'misdiagnosing the roots of their support will in the long run make it harder for their opponents to get back into the game' (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018: 3). To better comprehend the role and significance of the new populist right in Britain's future, 'it pays to work out what makes these movements tick' (Wodak 2015).

The challenges posed by British populism are thus Janus-faced. The phenomenon is both particular to Britain insofar as a confluence of unique crises have seized the country: unfamiliar hung parliaments and populist leaders, imperilled by devolution (especially the Scottish conundrum) on one side and Brexit on the other. Yet there are also several transnational trends, of which the most immediate is the pandemic. Here the British government's response has been found wanting, amidst accusations of cronyism and failing to heed scientific advice. Despite more than 100,000 dead at the time of writing this has not impeded the spread of conspiracy theories in Britain, especially online. As stressed above this is far from solely a problem on the right of the political spectrum (mired in internecine civil wars after Corbyn, the British left is equally prone to conspiracist accusations), but on either side, the spread of misinformation ultimately has the effect of placing more conspiracy theories into the mainstream. In this way, populism is fuelled by the very nature of social media and social mistrust.

It is easy to forget that the rise of social media is largely a product of the second decade of the 21st century. While its potentially polarising effects may still be only starting to be grasped, there can be little doubt that avoiding media gatekeepers, such as editors or television producers, has allowed populist politics to flourish on social media, already a subject of academic analysis in peer-reviewed pieces dating to 2017 (see Groshek and Koc-Michalska 2017; Engesser et. al. 2017). While doubtless elevating populism, too much

emphasis on social media as a monocausal explanation risks missing the woods for the trees.

Mudde has identified the recent emergence of 'a fourth wave of postwar far-right politics as the mainstreaming and normalisation of far right actors and ideas' (Accardo 2020). Others have also noted the arrival of this recent phenomena, drawing upon terms such as 'illiberal democracy', 'authoritarian democracy' or the 'near right' (Scopelliti 2020). While invariably country-specific, this mainstreaming of right-wing extremism has been increasingly identified by scholars in recent years, as exemplified in the UK by the notorious 'Breaking Point' poster of 2016 and *The Daily Mail's* 'Enemies of the people' broadside against British judges later that year (Feldman 2020: 243-44). This is likely to leave matters no less confused going forward, whether in terms of how a 'near right' populism may develop, or in respect of how individuals might be seduced or radicalised toward such views. In other words, the key challenge posed by the 'fourth wave of populism' centres on where the line between 'extreme' and 'mainstream' is drawn, and how radicalisation can have both moments of acceleration as well as stasis, or even regression. Despite the waxing and waning of populists' popularity (for example Boris Johnson's approval ratings have peaked and plummeted in consecutive waves), one phenomenon does seem identifiable: in Britain, populism is here to stay.

POPULISM: THE 'NEW NORMAL' FOR BRITAIN?

It is a glib but recognisable claim that since 2014 British politics has moved from cautious, "small-c" conservative traditions to a far more affective, emotional, and arguably irrational/arational atmosphere increasingly defined by populists on the right and left (and even centrist populists) attacking the status quo in the name of 'the people'. Since 2014 this has taken multiple forms besides Johnson's rhetoric and style (the SNP claiming to speak for the Scottish people, Corbynites citing the many not the few, anti-vaxxers and lockdown sceptics peddling conspiracies, even doomed projects such as Change UK, the Liberal Democrats' policy of unilaterally cancelling Brexit, and the vocal remains of 'Remain' from 2016). Yet all share the common, classical trope which defines populism: claiming to be the only legitimate *vox populi*. This is a manifestation of what Crouch (2000: 4) terms 'post-democracy', something that is arguably more applicable today than when it was originally coined. Widespread dissatisfaction with parliamentary democracy is clearly visible in British society and politicians. Pre-pandemic, the British Social Attitudes Survey (2019) revealed that Brexit resulted in the lowest levels of public trust in the government since 1980, with two thirds of respondents not trusting the government. This continued into the pandemic era, with an initial surge in public trust in the government rapidly declining in 2020 (UCL 2020). While the success of the vaccine rollout has seen trust levels rise again, the legacy of five years of Brexit debates and lockdown anxieties leave a febrile atmosphere. This is a direct, and perhaps in the long term the most significant, legacy of Brexit: a breakdown of social trust which allows populist narratives to rise.

Arguably the December 2019 general election signalled the long-term victory of populism. Boris Johnson unarguably approximates many tropes of a traditional populist leader. His raft of policy proposals promised to end austerity and invest in the UK outside London, through to proposals ranging from a bridge connecting Northern Ireland to Scotland (ITV 2019), and a suggestion of moving state institutions such as the House of Lords to York (Bush 2020). These proposed measures would bring limited quantifiable economic benefits. However, it is their symbolic significance in assuaging the resentments of a severely polarised population which signal them as hallmarks of a populist campaign and leader. Simultaneously, Jeremy Corbyn equally represented a traditional populist leader in his claims to exclusively represent 'the people' against an imagined shadowy cabal of scheming 'elites'. In this regard the 2019 election was not a watershed representing the triumph of populism over the status quo, but a choice between populism or populism

(Foster 2019). This can be read as a 'lesser-of-two-evils' scenario which presented the choice facing Britain since 2016. Rather than a triumph for populism and right-wing Brexit politics, it was a collective exhaustion, a choice between two Eurosceptic and publicly toxic leaders, and the collapse of whatever remained of centrism (a theme repeated in the May 2021 local elections).

The 2019 General Election was therefore arguably not simply the victory of populism, but an indication that populism is now the only option. The British people still have a choice to support expert-led policymaking and centrist politics, but reject these in favour of populist nationalists, populist conservatives, or populist socialists. The net result is the UK returning to a similar position as in 2016 and with no end in sight: a population polarised between supporters and detractors of unelected experts, and a febrile atmosphere for long-term anti-democratic forces to take root.

One key question is therefore posed: how much does populism matter in the post-Brexit, post-pandemic UK? After five years of Brexit wrangling, public contempt for politicians and expertise is high, including in the aftermath of Covid-19 countermeasures and renewed debates on devolution and the possible breakup of the UK itself, toward a Prime Minister elected to break a longstanding parliamentary deadlock. The political debates caused by unprecedented state countermeasures against coronavirus are a planetary phenomenon and far from unique to the UK, and has dominated UK and EU politics for most of 2020. Yet in the specifically British context it has engendered a continuation of the Brexit debate. As in 2016-2020, politics has been reduced to a single issue, with the dominance of Brexit replaced by the dominance of Covid-19 countermeasures. Two consequences of Brexit and the pandemic are now becoming evident. First is the increasing abandonment of technocratic governance and the solidification of populist appeals (Burleigh 2021: 87-98). Second, and more ominous, is an accelerating growth of rhetoric and movements which, if not radical right, at least qualify as moving from fringe or 'near-right' (Feldman in Bevelander and Wodak 2019), formerly relegated to the margins of politics, to taking prime position. This *habitus* of mistrust, mutual suspicion and contempt for the status quo is not, we argue, an aberration. Instead it is now the nature of British politics and, unresolved (and perhaps unresolvable) by any leader other than a populist, it has created fertile ground for another populist surge in response to the next challenge facing a divided, mistrustful and systemically weakened UK.

CONCLUSION

In this commentary we explored accelerating populist attitudes in the UK and problematised scholarship which is incapable of moving beyond traditional explanations founded in theories of prejudice (cultural) and/or economic disgruntlement (material). In an atmosphere of mistrust, populists' flexible narratives on the establishment and technical expertise are extremely malleable, and adaptable to changing and, as with Covid-19, unforeseeable circumstances. This flexible demographic appeal, adaptability to external conditions, transnational appeal and ability to successfully instrumentalise negative emotions by narrating an uncaring or malevolent 'elite' as the source of social problems, means that populism, particularly the radical right, will not continue to present a major challenge far into the post-Brexit, post-Covid future, but has come to be the dominant, and perhaps even the only surviving, aspect of British politics.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are most grateful to the Reviewers of this paper for their helpful and insightful comments and suggestions, and to Christopher Huggins for his indefatigable assistance with reviewing and setting.

AUTHOR DETAILS

Russell Foster, Department of European and International Studies, King's College London, Room 4.21 Virginia Woolf Building, 22 Kingsway, London, WC2B 6LE [russell.1.foster@kcl.ac.uk]

Matthew Feldman, Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right, 16 Murray Street, York, YO24 4JA [matthew@radicalrightanalysis.com]

REFERENCES

- Accardo, Gian-Paolo (2020). "We are now in a fourth wave of postwar far-right politics": Cas Mudde on the Far-Right', *Voxeurop*. Online: <https://voxeurop.eu/en/cas-mudde-we-are-now-in-a-fourth-wave-of-postwar-far-right-politics>
- Babones, Salvatore (2018). *The New Authoritarianism: Trump, Populism, and the Tyranny of Experts*. London: Polity.
- Bale, Tim (2018). 'Who leads and who follows? The symbiotic relationship between UKIP and the Conservatives – and populism and Euroscepticism'. *Politics*, 38(3): 263-277. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395718754718>
- Bevelander, Pieter and Ruth Wodak (eds) (2019). *Europe at the Crossroads: Confronting Populist, Nationalist, and Global Challenges*. Lund: Nordic Press.
- Baldoli, Roberto and Claudio M. Radaelli (2021). 'Foundations of Regulatory Choice: Precaution, Innovation ... and Nonviolence?' *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, 17(2): 186-204. <https://doi.org/10.30950/jcer.v17i2.1177>
- Bottici, Ciara and Benoît Challand (2013). *Imagining Europe: Myth, Memory, and Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- British Social Attitudes Survey (2019). *Key Findings: Britain's Shifting Identities and Attitudes*. Online: <https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/latest-report/british-social-attitudes-36/key-findings.aspx>
- Burleigh, Michael (2021). *Populism: Before and After the Pandemic*. London: Hurst.
- Bush, Stephen (2020). 'Why relocating the House of Lords to York would be a smart move by Boris Johnson', *New Statesman*. Online: <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/devolution/2020/01/why-relocating-house-lords-york-would-be-smart-move-boris-johnson>
- Clarke, Harold D., Matthew Goodwin and Paul Whiteley (2017). *Brexit: Why Britain Voted to Leave the European Union*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Crouch, Colin (2000). *Coping with Post-Democracy*. London: Fabian Society.
- Domaradzki, Spasimir and Ivana Radić-Milosavljević (2021). Between Populism and Technocracy: How National Executives in Bulgaria and Serbia Manipulate EU Rule of Law Conditionality. *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, 17(2): 281-303. <https://doi.org/10.30950/jcer.v17i2.1181>
- Eatwell, Roger and Matthew Goodwin (2018). *National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy*. London: Pelican.
- Eichengreen, Barry (2018). *The Populist Temptation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Engesser, Sven, Nayla Fawzi and Anders Olof Larsson (2017). 'Populist online communication: introduction to the special issue'. *Information, Communication & Society*, 20(9): 1279-1292. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1328525>

- Fancourt, Daisy, Andrew Steptoe and Liam Wright (2020). 'The Cummings Effect: politics, trust and behaviours during the Covid-19 pandemic'. *The Lancet*, 396: 464-465. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)31690-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)31690-1)
- Feldman, Matthew (2020). 'On Radical Right Mainstreaming in Europe and the US'. In Archie Henderson (ed), *Politics, Intellectuals and Faith*. ibidem-Verlag: Stuttgart: 235-256.
- Feldman, Matthew and Mark Littler (2014). *Tell MAMA 2013/14: Anti-Muslim Overview, Analysis, and "Cumulative Extremism"*. Online: <https://www.tellmamauk.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/finalreport.pdf>
- Fieschi, Catherine (2019). *Populocracy: The Tyranny of Authenticity and the Rise of Populism*. Newcastle: Agenda.
- Financial Times (2016). *Britain has had enough of experts, says Gove*. Online: <https://www.ft.com/content/3be49734-29cb-11e6-83e4-abc22d5d108c>
- Foster, Russell (2019). *Something old, something new, something borrowed, something EU*. Online: <http://www.electionanalysis.uk/uk-election-analysis-2019/section-4-parties-and-the-campaign/something-old-something-new-something-borrowed-something-eu/>
- Fukuyama, Francis (2018). *Identity: Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition*. London and New York: Profile.
- Goodhart, David (2017). *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics*. London: Penguin.
- Grey, Stephen and Andrew MacAskill (2020) 'Johnson listened to his scientists about coronavirus', *Reuters*. Online: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-britain-path-speci-idUSKBN21P1VF>
- Groshek, Jacob and Karolina Koc-Michalska (2017). 'Helping populism win? Social media use, filter bubbles, and support for populist presidential candidates in the 2016 US election campaign'. *Information, Communication & Society*, 20(9): 1389-1407. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1329334>
- Hochschild, Arlie Russell (2016). *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*. New York: The New Press.
- Hope not Hate (2019). *State of Hate 2019: People v. the Elite?* Online: <https://www.hopenothate.org.uk/2019/02/17/state-hate-2019/>
- ITV (2019). *Irish Sea Bridge: Boris Johnson puts price on bridge linking Scotland to Northern Ireland*. Online: <https://www.itv.com/news/2019-09-12/boris-johnson-puts-price-on-irish-sea-bridge-proposal>
- KCL (2021). *Lockdown scepticism not linked to pro-Brexit values*. Online: <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/lockdown-scepticism-not-linked-to-pro-brexit-values>
- Kellner, Peter (2018). 'In January 2019 Britain will officially switch from a pro-Brexit to an anti-Brexit country'. *Independent*. Online: <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/final-say-remain-leave-second-referendum-brexit-no-deal-crossover-day-a8541576.html>
- Lord, Christopher (2013). 'The democratic legitimacy of codecision'. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 20(7): 1056-1073. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2013.795400>
- Lubbers, Marcel and Marcel Coenders (2017). 'Nationalistic attitudes and voting for the right in Europe'. *European Union Politics*, 18(1): 98-118. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116516678932>
- Miller-Idriss, Cynthia (2017). *The Extreme Gone Mainstream*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Moffitt, Benjamin (2017). 'Liberal Illiberalism? The Reshaping of the Contemporary Populist Radical Right in Northern Europe'. *Politics and Governance*, 5(4): 112-122. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17645/pag.v5i4.996>
- Mudde, Cas and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2015) 'Vox populi or vox masculini? Populism and gender in Northern Europe and South America'. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 49(1-2): 16-36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2015.1014197>
- Mudde, Cas (2019). *The Far Right Today*. London: Polity.
- Norris, Pippa and Ronald Inglehart (2019). *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- O'Toole, Fintan (2018). 'The paranoid fantasy behind Brexit', *Guardian*. Online: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/nov/16/brexit-paranoid-fantasy-fintan-otoole>
- Outhwaite, William (2021). 'Technocratic Planning and Political Strategies: Territorial Policy in the EU'. *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, 17(2): 87-101. <https://doi.org/10.30950/jcer.v17i2.1183>
- Pirro, Andrea LP, Paul Taggart and Stijn van Kessel (2018). 'The populist politics of Euroscepticism in times of crisis: Comparative conclusions'. *Politics*, 38(3): 378-390. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395718784704>
- Poggrund, Gabriel and Patrick Maguire (2020). *Left Out: The Inside Story of Labour under Corbyn*. London: Bodley Head.
- Scopelliti, Alessio (2020). *Authoritarian Populism, Emancipatory Populism: The Italian Constitutional Referendum*. Online: www.radicalrightanalysis.com/2020/09/26/authoritarian-populism-emancipatory-populism-the-next-italian-constitutional-referendum/.
- Standing, Guy (2016). *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Stengel, Frank A. (2019). 'Forget Populism!'. *Global Discourse*, 9(2): 445-451. <https://doi.org/10.1332/204378919X15628418445603>
- Stocker, Paul (2017). *English Uprising: Brexit and the mainstreaming of the far right*. London: Melville House.
- Sugue, Merlin (2020). 'Survey: Trust in British government has dropped to lowest levels in decades', *Politico*. Online: <https://www.politico.eu/article/survey-trust-in-british-government-dropped-to-record-low/>
- UCL (2020). *Significant rise in "no confidence" in government's handling of Covid-19*. Online: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2020/oct/significant-rise-no-confidence-governments-handling-covid-19>
- Valluvan, Sivamohan (2019). *The Clamour of Nationalism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Wodak, Ruth (2015). 'Right-wing populism is surging on both sides of the Atlantic – here's why', *The Conversation*. Online: <https://theconversation.com/right-wing-populism-is-surg-ing-on-both-sides-of-the-atlantic-heres-why-47876>
- Wodak, Ruth and Salomi Boukala (2017). 'European identities and the revival of nationalism in the EU'. *Journal of Language and Politics*, 14(1): 87-109. <https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.14.1.05wod>
- Žižek, Slavoj (2018) 'Are liberals and populists just searching for a new master?', *The Economist*. Online: <https://www.economist.com/open-future/2018/10/08/are-liberals-and-populists-just-searching-for-a-new-master>