



David Cameron, Boris Johnson and the ‘populist hypothesis’ in the British Conservative Party

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Abstract

Brexit was often associated with a recent upsurge of populism in Western democracies, with the idea of *re-engaging* with the people being construed as a populist strategy to *disengage* from Europe. This article seeks to explore the populist hypothesis by stepping outside the dominant literature on populism to take a closer look at Peter Mair’s ‘populist democracy’ as applied to two defining moments: David Cameron’s decision to hold a referendum on EU membership and Boris Johnson’s process of implementing Brexit. Mair’s notion encompasses two aspects—procedural and substantive populism—which seem to apply to both moments. While Cameron’s long leadership (2005–2016) reveals changes in governing practices and party management which have altered the nature of the relationship between the leader and the ‘people’, Boris Johnson’s (2019–) more contemporary leadership can be described as an illustration of a new populist rhetoric in its combination of hard Brexit, anti-immigration and anti-Parliament discourse. Although both leaderships expose ingredients of Mair’s two variants of populism, the ‘populist hypothesis’ does not hold in the light of the type of leaders that Cameron and Johnson have actually turned out to be.

Keywords Brexit · Conservative Party · Populism · David Cameron · Boris Johnson

Introduction

The association of Brexit with populism has become recurrent even among key specialists (See among others: Norris and Inglehart 2019). At first sight, the conceptual fuzziness around the notion makes it probably easier to venture into this hypothesis as it is open to several interpretations. For example, the ‘ideational’ and consensual, yet minimal definition of populism, provided by Mudde and Kaltwasser, defines it as a ‘thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two

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homogenous and antagonistic camps, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite,” and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* of the people’ (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, p. 6). In the UK, the referendum of 23 June 2016, organised by a Conservative government which officially campaigned to remain in the EU, resulted in 52% of voters deciding to leave the EU. According to the aforementioned definition, this referendum can indeed be interpreted as a moment of popular sovereignty and the expression of popular will against a Conservative elite who nonetheless provided the people with the opportunity to express their views by making the decision to hold a referendum. In this respect, and in line with the editorial of this special issue, the idea of *re-engaging* with the people can be easily construed as a populist strategy to *disengage from Europe*.

Being in power since 2010, the Conservative Prime Ministers, David Cameron (2010–2016), Theresa May (2016–2019) and Boris Johnson (2019–), have successively been in charge not only of organising a referendum on the UK’s continued membership of the EU but also of trying to implement the popular decision to leave. The word Brexit arguably encompasses these two defining moments but if the succession of Conservative governments in office since 2010 seems to be the most appropriate recipient of the populist thesis, it is still unclear whether ‘Brexit’ is the starting point or the consequence of a populist upsurge in the party.

As the historic party of respect for the Monarchy, Parliament and the establishment, the case of the British Conservative Party may not be the first illustration of populism that would come to mind. The oligarchic nature of British political parties in general has been historically combined with the image of a party keen to defend the interests of the elite, whether it had meant the aristocracy originally or business today (McKenzie 1955). Yet, the party has also had to struggle with key divisive issues like European integration and been seen as a case study for pioneering Euroscepticism in government, as one of the possible versions of British populism (Gifford 2014).

This article will therefore raise the ‘populist hypothesis’ in the recent evolution of the party and in relation to the EU referendum and its implementation. From the angle of party politics, UKIP and later the Brexit Party have often been studied as having the monopoly of capturing and fuelling the populist surge which the referendum triggered (see among others, Tournier-Sol 2015; Usherwood 2019). Based on this postulate, the Conservative Party, despite being a government party promoting official Euroscepticism, could hardly ever be envisaged in this light, although some scholars have been receptive to the coincidence between the neo-liberal turn of the 1970s, embodied in the UK by Margaret Thatcher, and a resurgence of populism (Abromeit 2017, p. 181). As one of the longest-lived mainstream parties with a tradition of pluralism and a track record of defending the interests of established institutions and the elite, the association of the Conservative Party with an ideology based on a Manichean division of the world between a ‘pure’ people and a ‘corrupt’ elite (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017) and fuelling anti-politics sentiments (Taggart 2018; Marsh 2019) is at first sight counter-intuitive. Few comparativist scholars would dare to classify the party in the populist category (Norris 2019). Yet its Eurosceptic radicalisation (Dorey 2017; Lynch and Whitaker 2017) culminating in the EU referendum of 23 June 2016 provides an opportunity to further explore



the populist undercurrents of British Euroscepticism (Gifford 2014). Analysing the populist dimension of the Conservative Party enables an in-depth analysis of the concept of (re)-engagement of British political parties with their domestic constituencies. A phenomenon that has happened simultaneously with disengagement from Europe. This article therefore engages with the legitimacy dimension, within domestic politics of (re) and (dis)engagement.

In brief, the analytical focus of the paper can be summarised as follows:

1. Brexit has often been associated with populism.
2. The Conservative Party has played a crucial role in reaching the Brexit decision and implementing the Brexit process.
3. However, associating the Conservative leadership with populism seems counter-intuitive since the Conservative Party has usually been linked to defending elite interests, while populism has been associated to representing a (however defined) popular will.
4. This article seeks to reassess the concept of populism in relation to Brexit by asking this primary question: has the Conservative leadership been populist under David Cameron at the time around the Brexit referendum and at the current time of Boris Johnson seeking to implement Brexit?

Peter Mair and the two faces of populism

The association of the Conservative Party with populism in the precise context of Brexit needs to be conceptually explored, as the notion of populism remains one of the most 'contested' (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017) and therefore challenging ones among scholars. In line with what Glynos and Mondon called 'populist hype' (2016), the theoretical debate around populism has been endless and this paper will not embark on an exhaustive discussion of the concept (among the recent literature reviews available, see for example Bang and Marsh 2018), nor will it address the connection between Brexit and populism which has already been envisaged through different theoretical perspectives, whether political (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018; Norris and Inglehart 2019), philosophical (Freeden 2017; Marsh 2019), anthropological (Gusterson 2017), sociological (Calhoun 2017) or even psychoanalytical (Browning 2019).

The objective of this paper is to explore one precise version which had been put forward by Peter Mair in analysing the rise of what he called partyless or 'populist democracy'. It dwells on two variants of populism which could be labelled procedural and substantive. On the one hand, Mair defined 'substantive populism' in line with the original specialists of populism, in particular Canovan (1981), Ionescu and Gellner (1969), as popular protest against the elite. Hence the idea that populism has often been analysed as an ideology associated with the Right (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008, p. 3). Yet Mair did not take this version into consideration but relied on this existing literature to infer three features of 'substantive populism', namely emerging protest, anti-establishment rhetoric and 'depoliticisation'



(Mair 2002, p. 88). On the other hand, Mair saw ‘procedural populism’ as part of a new phenomenon of depoliticisation characterising mainstream parties in Western democracies. Setting his thesis in the early 2000s, Mair used New Labour as a striking example of this trend (Mair 2002). He explained that the weakening of the parties’ mediating role has offered an enhanced scope for the revival of a certain type of populism which exists alongside the conventional sense, i.e. popular protest against the political establishment. Mair advances a more ‘respectable version’ which he defines as ‘a means of linking an undifferentiated and depoliticised electorate with a largely neutral and non-partisan system of governance’ (Mair 2002, 84) and argues that the transformation of parties in Western democracies has resulted in the gradual blurring of their ideological identity and the weakening of their representative role to the benefit of an increasing emphasis on their procedural role.

‘Procedural populism’ appears to be an unmediated style of leadership which seeks a direct relation with the people (Mair 2000). From this broad definition, Mair derived four features: (1) non-partisan rhetoric; (2) an increasing reliance on plebiscitary techniques of winning support, so that the leadership’s proposals were widely endorsed; (3) populism as a form of governing in which the party is sidelined or disappears; (4) an iron control exercised by the leadership of both the organisation on the ground and the parliamentary party. Mair’s argument went far beyond the sole case of New Labour. Like other scholars, he was concerned with partisan dealignment (Dalton and Wattenberg 2002) and elaborated on the weakening of the party structure, which paved the way for the rise of populists as being committed to ‘direct representation’ against forms of mediation (Urbiniati 2015; see also Müller 2016).

In the case of New Labour, this strategy was particularly visible in party management where the disappearance of the word ‘party’ was meant to illustrate the need to gradually remove any intermediary structure between the leader and the people, but also in governing practices through the narrative of ‘citizen empowerment’ in order to win the support of the electorate. Specific strategies were then introduced to reach both objectives, including plebiscitary techniques which were meant to erase any boundary between the people and the leader. Typically, the use of the referendum was thus promoted as the key institutional device of what Rosanvallon would call ‘procedural and institutional simplification’ (Rosanvallon 2011). It is no surprise that New Labour initiated a cycle of recurrent referenda as part of the constitutional package which was supposed to free citizens from the yoke of representative mechanisms. European integration and devolution having arguably resulted in weakening Westminster in terms of decision-making, the response proposed by Blair’s governments (1997–2007) was the need to empower individuals and bring them closer to their institutions. Implementing devolution and consulting people directly became some of the instruments of this constitutional agenda, with the recurrent use of referenda substantiating this constitutional evolution.

In line with his concept of a ‘cartel party’, Mair’s approach to populism is located within the theoretical frame of party politics and party change and therefore falls outside the scope of the mainstream literature on populism. As such, his conception can therefore be easily open to criticism from key specialists of populism. But arguably, this is also what precisely makes it challenging and worthy of interest.



This article will therefore exclusively rely on Mair's postulate to examine these two variants of populism and argue that they apply particularly well to the Conservative Party in relation to the two phases of Brexit. It will try to show (1) how the EU referendum provided David Cameron's Conservative leadership with one opportunity among others to focus on 'process and linkage' with a view to transforming the relation to the electorate by introducing new governing practices and innovative party reforms (2005–2016), (2) how the second phase of implementation paved the way for a resurgence of a form of 'substantive populism' which, as we will argue, Boris Johnson partly appropriated when becoming Prime Minister on 24 July 2019, by departing radically from Theresa May's style of leadership (2016–2019).

David Cameron and the temptation of procedural populism

The first phase of Brexit is associated with David Cameron's decision to hold a referendum on the UK's continued membership of the EU. This decision was not an expected move in a parliamentary democracy like the UK (Qvortrup 2006). It came after years of intra-party divisions and growing Euroscepticism which culminated with the promise made by the then Prime Minister in 2013 to consult the people if the party came to be re-elected in May 2015. Thus presented, the decision to hold a referendum on such a divisive issue was often analysed as one putting party interests ahead of national ones and therefore criticised (see among others, Matthijs 2013). If we broaden our scope and associate this initiative with the way decisions were generally made by the Conservative government—both in relation to public policy and party changes—during this period, the EU referendum can be analysed differently as a major illustration of 'procedural populism', a hypothesis already advanced elsewhere (Alexandre-Collier 2015). As shown earlier, Mair emphasised four aspects which will be examined below.

As regards the first feature of non-partisan rhetoric, the continuity between Blair's and Cameron's agendas should be underlined. David Cameron's Conservative leadership and subsequent election has often been analysed as a modernisation agenda (Bale 2009; Dommett 2015) which could also be interpreted as the continuation of the Blairite project. The two dimensions of this modernisation—ideological and organisational—had different outcomes. Although Cameron's desire to modernise British conservatism can be assessed as a failure (Hayton 2017), his record in attempting to modernise both the institutions and the party by introducing organisational and procedural innovations is arguably mixed. In this particular light, it is, however, easy to interpret his use of referendums as a device which was consistent with a whole package of constitutional and party organisational reforms. David Cameron celebrated the rise of what he called a 'post-bureaucratic era' which pleaded for a 'massive, radical redistribution of power' from the elites to the people. 'With every decision government makes, he wrote, it should ask a series of simple questions: does this give power to people, or take it away? Could we let individuals, neighbourhoods and communities take control? How far can we push power down?' (*The Guardian*, 25 May 2009). His strategy revealed a deliberate attempt to produce a non-partisan-rhetoric which he meant to translate into a proper form



of governance. The Big Society agenda was subsequently meant to encapsulate this rhetoric by seeking to restore the imbalance produced by years of Thatcherite emphasis on individuals and empower citizens.

Yet a more striking feature of procedural populism could be seen in David Cameron's recurrent use of 'plebiscitary techniques', as the second feature in Mair's definition of procedural populism. As already said, the decision to hold a referendum on the UK's continued membership of the EU has often been analysed as a somewhat defeatist response to irreconcilable divisions over the EU. In this long-lasting tension, the Eurosceptic phenomenon emerged in the early 1990s, as a mobilisation of Conservative rebel MPs which was not only bound to last but was also meant to be strengthened by years of opposition following the defeat of John Major's Conservative Party at the general election of May 1997. In this context, as some scholars argued, the 2016 referendum was a major mistake, mainly a gamble which was justified by personal ambition as much as by Cameron's speculation on three future scenarios: (1) that the pledge would be dropped as part of the coalition deal with the Liberal-Democrats, (2) that Cameron would secure favourable terms for the UK in the EU and (3) that people would eventually vote to remain (Matthews 2017, pp. 606–607). Although Matthews also acknowledges the importance of pre-existing 'constitutional fuels' like shifts in party competition with the emergence of UKIP and Cameron's 'constitutional statecraft', they were mainly defined as 'instrumental' and serving his personal ambition. It is also fair to admit that Cameron organised this referendum under duress while being overly confident about its outcome.

We believe that the broader picture provided by Peter Mair's theoretical framework would also be constructive. Conservative divisions certainly reached a peak during the ratification of the Maastricht ratification (1992–1993). Exclusively taking place within the Westminster Parliament, while other member-states like France and Denmark had decided to resort to referenda, this eighteen-month period of tense debates and intra-party quarrels can also be analysed as a period of deep frustration in public opinion. It came as no surprise that so many extra-parliamentary anti-Maastricht organisations emerged during this period, including the United Kingdom Independence Party (Usherwood 2002). This period of frustration, especially in the way decision-making operated, produced long-term resentment and crave for constitutional changes. New Labour then capitalised on it by campaigning on the need to empower citizens and draw them closer to their institutions. Devolution and referendums were part of a constitutional package which was meant as a response to this public frustration.

In resorting to successive referendums, David Cameron was arguably eager to continue the constitutional cycle of 'plebiscitary techniques' initiated by New Labour and provided a response which is consistent with the hypothesis of procedural populism at the heart of the Conservative Party's new organisation. Within only five years (from 2011 to 2016) three major referendums were organised in a row, while only three of this type had been held before: one on continued membership of the EEC in June 1975 and two on devolution to Scotland and Wales in



September 1997.¹ Cameron's governments (2010–2015; 2015–16) embarked on major consultations which were bound to bring about radical constitutional changes: the referendums on (1) Alternative Voting in May 2011, (2) Scottish independence on 18 September 2014 and (3) EU membership on 23 June 2016. All this resulted in a governing practice which was radically different from what could be observed when Margaret Thatcher, quoting Clement Attlee, criticised the referendum in 1975 for being a 'splendid weapon for dictators and demagogues'.

As Mair argued, party management and governing practices were used jointly by Blair's government to consolidate in advance, through public approval, the policies he intended to adopt. Thus plebiscitary techniques helped to produce a 'form of governing in which the party was side-lined' (Mair 2002). Similar strategies could be first observed with David Cameron who combined direct consultations but also innovative party procedures as plebiscitary tools (Morel 2001; Rahat 2009). Analysed as an instrument of 'procedural populism', the Brexit referendum should therefore not be isolated from the whole set of procedures that both characterised public policy and party strategy. Outside the sphere of government decision-making, party management was also an experimental field for Cameron's reforms, once again drawing inspiration from the Blairite project. In both cases, a similar strategy of internal democratisation was used to achieve unmediated interaction between the leader and the people. In 1998, the Conservative Party was looking in the direction of New Labour's *Partnership in Power* (1997) in which democratisation was promoted by enlarging consultation with the multiplication of policy forums and introducing the principle of OMOV (One Member One Vote) in the electoral college for the election of leaders and the National Executive Committee. Having lost the 1997 general election, the Conservative Party, led by William Hague, decided to undertake comparable organisational reforms unveiled in a document entitled *Fresh Future*. The reforms included the participation of party members in the leadership contest and the multiplication of focus groups and internal referenda to give them more sway. It also provided the party with a full constitution bringing its three components (parliamentary, professional and volunteer) together.

Among the apparently innovative organisational reforms favoured by David Cameron once he became party leader in December 2005, the introduction of open primaries for the selection of Conservative parliamentary candidates is therefore a case in point (Hazan and Rahat 2010) to illustrate the third feature identified by Mair as the 'side-lining of the party'. Open primaries, where the ballot is open to any voter regardless of their party preferences, were organised as early as 2003, before his election as party leader, but then considerably extended after 2005 to over a hundred constituencies. Though open primaries were subsequently reduced to only 26 constituencies in the run-up to the 2015 election, on the grounds that they failed in their initial objectives of democratisation, they paradoxically revealed the continuing centralisation of the procedure (Alexandre-Collier 2016).

¹ The referendums organised in Scotland and Wales in March 1979 can hardly be considered nationwide as the then Labour government imposed a restrictive 40 percent-rule whereby at least 40% of the total electorate was expected to vote "yes" in order for devolution to pass.



Another—ephemeral—example of procedural populism was the reliance on registered supporters (Alexandre-Collier and Avril 2020), and the institutionalisation of their status. In the run-up to the 2015 general election, Conservative supporters who are not required to pay any subscription were given a new role, with the creation of Team2015 by the Party Chairman Grant Shapps, so as to compensate for declining party membership. Consequently, despite the fact that party activists and members remain a powerful component of party organisation, the increasing importance given to supporters—a phenomenon which is even more visible in the Labour Party—shows that they are no longer considered as an indispensable force and can be replaced on the ground and easily circumvented by party leaders.

These innovations were also accompanied by new communication strategies which were part of the package of these procedural populist experimentations (Higgins 2013). The ‘Webcameron’ emerged as an instrument of direct proximity between the leader and the people, as Cameron virtually invited viewers into his private home and allowed them to witness his daily routine of washing up and child-caring. It was meant to respond to this need to reconnect with and be seen as close to the people (Ridge-Newman 2014, pp. 20–29). Yet it attracted a lot of criticism as it seemed to stage the Conservative leader as an ordinary husband and father while carefully concealing his socially privileged status.

Nevertheless, the very democratisation of the reforms proved to be cosmetic and only served to reveal continuing oligarchy as well as indicating a shift in the party’s balance of powers with the leader now at the top of a huge structure codified by the party constitution. Procedural populism can thus be noted in the form of a radical shift in the Conservative Party’s balance of powers after 1998, with a leader who is now more dependent on and respondent to the people. Back in 1998, the election of the leader was democratised, including a final postal ballot for all members of the party in what could be labelled a ‘closed primary’ for the election of the leader. More precisely, the leadership’s firm control—the fourth feature of procedural populism—is visible in each of the party organisational reforms introduced by Cameron, as these reforms showcased a form of governance which side-lined the party and were actually used to conceal the ‘iron control’ exercised by the leadership on the party organisation, demonstrated for example through the increased control of candidate selection and attempts to ensure that all MPs were on message.

Open primaries for candidate selection, for example, can be easily interpreted as a remake of what Mair had anticipated for New Labour back in the early 2000s, ‘an exceptional tight grip is now kept on the selection and nomination of candidates at elections’. In this case, the attitude of the party leadership towards local associations was one of encouraging open primaries but, behind the facade of democratisation, monitoring the whole process while giving the associations leeway to organise the event. More precisely, the role of Conservative Headquarters (CCHQ) was essentially fourfold in initiating, filtering, controlling and adjudicating the process of candidate selection. This has in fact resulted in more centralisation around the leader who effectively controls the whole process while being in a position to bypass party intermediaries, such as members, in order to gain more direct access to the electorate (Alexandre-Collier 2016). Similarly, the introduction of Team2015 was meant for the leader to manufacture an unmediated relationship with supporters while



keeping a 'firm grip' on the distribution of roles and the balance of power within the party.

As we have seen at the beginning of this section, Mair (2002) had argued that New Labour represented the most relevant example of procedural populism. David Cameron's ambition was not only similar but also served by favourable circumstances: an election victory after 13 years of New Labour which to some extent legitimised his intention to perpetuate the Blairite legacy; a coalition with the Liberal Democrats which helped 'neutralise' their governing practice and a 'Big Society' non-partisan project which claimed to appeal to all sections of society regardless of previous Conservative and Labour's objectives of representing specific class interests.

All in all, there are clear illustrations of procedural populism within the Conservative Party in the Cameron era. It is fair to argue that the process of reengaging the party with the people was initiated by Cameron through the narrative of redistributing the power to the people which went beyond the message of the Big Society. Yet the party's correspondence with Mair's model remains imperfect and full of caveats. Internally, David Cameron enhanced central control quite markedly, especially in the realm of campaigning and candidate selection. Moreover, the party membership and the bureaucracy were slightly side-lined, for example, with the use of open primaries. But the professional structure remained visible, even reinforced. Externally, plebiscitary techniques in general and the EU Referendum in particular are indeed seen as primary devices of procedural populism. From 2010 to 2016, the party offered an interesting combination of opportunities (referendums on Alternative Vote, Scottish independence, EU membership) with proactive leadership. Yet this was not necessarily part of a definite and conscious strategy.

Boris Johnson and the temptation of substantive populism

Cameron's modernisation agenda and socially liberal position did not fulfil the ideological expectations of party members and voters and only a minority of them truly endorsed it. In 2015 and 2017, a large majority of Conservative members placed themselves on the socially conservative right (respectively 70.9% and 69.7%) (Bale et al. 2020, p. 62; see also Heppell 2013). Cameron's agenda also failed to reshape the party's ideology (Hayton 2017). The failure of the ideological modernisation of the party already prepared the ground for a shift towards substantive populism which was then easily legitimised by Johnson, who narrowed it down to identity politics and explicitly associated it with disengagement from the EU. Arguably, the narrative of reengagement with the people, which started under Cameron, could not have been easily legitimised by Johnson without Cameron's phase of procedural populism.

Although substantive populism is mentioned by Peter Mair, he did not consider it thoroughly but focused instead on the existing literature to define substantive populism through three features: emerging protest, anti-establishment rhetoric and 'depoliticisation' (Mair 2002, p. 88).



The first feature can be easily identified. In post-referendum Britain, the rise of identity politics, in an exclusionary form (Müller 2016), has paved the way for substantive populism in the form of protest and opposition against policies formerly supported by mainstream parties. But already, before and under David Cameron's first government (2010–2015), some hints at anti-EU protest had been observed in the absorption of a Eurosceptic environment, crystallised by the rise of Nigel Farage's United Kingdom Independence Party. Yet during this period, Cameron's own Euroscepticism was unclear and certainly not an ideological priority in the face of his Big Society agenda. All in all, it remained a fluctuating electoral message and it eventually faded away in the run-up to the referendum campaign when David Cameron advocated 'remain'.

Following the 'leave' victory at the referendum, which was perceived as a major blow by David Cameron, he subsequently resigned from leadership. The Conservative Party then shifted towards an increasingly anti-EU and anti-immigration agenda which was already supported by many Conservative members (Bale et al. 2020, p. 66) and voters (Phillips et al. 2018; see also Partos 2019). The move not only materialised in the two election manifestos of June 2017 and December 2019 but Boris Johnson, who replaced Theresa May as leader in July 2019, came to be seen as the living embodiment of the people's preference for a hard (and quickly delivered) Brexit after two years of 'hung parliament' and the party's failure to get an absolute majority in June 2017 (only 317 seats out of 650). In 2019, 95% of Conservative voters and 49% of all voters thought Boris Johnson would be the best Prime Minister (Ashcroft 2019). Unlike his predecessor, his popularity among members and MPs had already culminated in his landslide election as Conservative leader on 23 July 2019. In December 2019, the Conservative Party eventually won a landslide victory of 365 seats against 202 for Labour.

Boris Johnson was one of the figureheads of the Leave Campaign during the referendum then a maverick and free-riding Foreign Secretary from 2016 to 2018 in Theresa May's government. As such, his name is often mentioned in the plethoric literature on the current surge of populism in Western democracies. This often coincides with another scholarly tendency to associate British Euroscepticism with populism (Gifford 2014). In the literature of comparative politics, Boris Johnson's name is often seen alongside the names of Donald Trump, Viktor Orban and Marine Le Pen. To simplify matters, prominent scholars have indulged in the temptation to throw very different leaders into the same ideological bag (Müller 2016; Norris and Inglehart 2019). Others have been keener to isolate the specificities of each by underlining their political background or ideological lineage. Schoor, for example, argues that Johnson's brand of populism could be best labelled as a mix of populism and elitism, as will be developed later (Schoor 2019). Boris Johnson's portrayal as a populist was also briefly considered in line with the nature of British Conservatism. Yet the counter-natural association of both ideologies makes it difficult to sustain the argument. Flinders relies on Moffitt's conception of populism as a style to isolate a specific brand of 'populism UK-style' in Johnson's willingness to flaunt the rules and engage in offensive behaviour and rhetoric (Moffitt 2016; Flinders 2019).

Elected leader in July 2019, Johnson was in charge of implementing the legislative process of the UK's departure of the EU which had reached a standstill in



Parliament three years after the referendum. Although his first response to the Brexit legislative stalemate turned out to be not very different from his predecessor's, Johnson kept telling a different story, with a leadership style and narrative which placed him at the opposite end from Theresa May. The implementation of Brexit was indeed often described as a gridlocked process with no solution eventually approved by MPs. Theresa May's withdrawal agreement bill was rejected three times, on 15 January, 12 and 29 March 2019. Indicative votes saw no prevailing options emerge and on 4 September 2019, Boris Johnson was similarly faced with a majority of MPs supporting a bill introduced by Labour MP Hilary Benn which sought an extension of the withdrawal date, while the Prime Minister looked determined to have the UK leave the EU on 31 January 2021. Although the tiny Conservative majority which characterised this period (July 2019–December 2019) was a major factor of this paralysis, it was also viewed as a process conducted by a popular Conservative who had been one of the leading figures of the Leave Vote. Yet, Theresa May's leadership is more complex than it seems. She arguably contributed to the repositioning of the party on populist grounds post-referendum, away from the socially liberal agenda of David Cameron, and in line with the Leave Vote (Brusenbach Meislova 2019; Stefanowitsch 2019). Although her first speech in June 2016 as party leader stands as an archetypal populist speech, she had also been characterised by her failure to consolidate her majority in 2017 (Allen 2018). Moreover, she could hardly be associated with a populist leader, essentially because of the discrepancy between her discourse/narrative of hard Brexit and her performance, especially her inability to communicate or relate to the people (Atkins and Gaffney 2020). Likewise, research showed that there was no consistency between MPs' attitudes towards Brexit and their support for Theresa May. This tends to prove that she was not viewed as the standard-bearer of a hard Brexit line in spite of her continuous efforts to sell this message (Roe-Crines and et al. 2020).

In relation of the second feature of substantive populism, i.e. an anti-establishment rhetoric, Boris Johnson also appropriated this strategy in two remarkable ways.

First, populist leaders display a tendency to distort reality and build a narrative where the truth is no longer a priority (Marsh 2018). Populism therefore coincides with the rise of a 'post-truth' politics—which appeals to emotion set against the search for truth—as a combined result of the expansion of social media and growing distrust towards politics (Suiter 2016). As a journalist who had been keen to disseminate Euro-myths in the tabloid press, Johnson has always indulged in what Bronk and Jacoby would call a 'tribal construction of facts'. The populist leader's 'toolkit' usually includes a propensity to subvert common sense concepts and ideas through 'narrative coups' (Bronk and Jacoby 2020; Finlayson 2014).

Second, by defining popular protest as 'a substantive if not always coherent programme which seeks to mobilise popular support against established elites and institutions', Mair acknowledged the strong anti-establishment component of the populist agenda (Mair 2002, p. 88). This component is still at the core of more contemporary definitions of populism as being based on a Manichean vision of society that separates the 'corrupt' elite and the 'pure' people with which populist leaders side and even merge, regardless of how this people is defined (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). Johnson showed consistency in his opposition to EU



membership since his decision to support the Leave Vote during the referendum campaign (a decision which was however announced a little late) and had then promoted himself as the champion of a genuine hard Brexit which, he argued, was in line with the popular verdict. As such, he branded himself as the representative of the people, targeting Parliament or the judges as the enemies whom he placed on the side of the elite (Clarke and Newman 2017). An image of a gridlocked parliament was then constantly brandished by members of the Government, where parliamentarians (including those from his own party) were no longer portrayed as representatives but as enemies of the people (Alexandre-Collier 2020b; Russell 2020). This escalation culminated in the prorogation of parliament for five weeks, ordered on 28 August 2019 by the Queen on the advice of the newly elected Conservative leader and Prime Minister Boris Johnson. Although this decision was criticised by opponents as an authoritarian move, which affected members of Johnson's own party, Attorney General Geoffrey Cox justified it as a legal procedure and described parliament as 'a disgrace', a 'dead parliament' which 'should no longer sit' (HC Deb, 25 September 2019, c660). This image of Parliament in stalemate as being the sole cause of the Brexit paralysis was not only relayed by many Conservative backbenchers but by Boris Johnson himself (Johnson 2019).

A further degree in the condemnation of the enemy was Johnson's determination to put his ideas into action, as the decision to prorogue parliament shows. Within the five months of Boris Johnson's Conservative leadership, from his election as leader on 23 July to the general election of 12 December 2019, the last pro-remain MPs in the party either kept a low profile, resigned, or were forced to stand down, after Johnson expelled 21 diehards. The expulsion of MPs who disagree with him is not only a sign of the leader's central control exercised over parliamentarians (and quite a common feature of populist leaders, as the example of Beppe Grillo in Italy shows, according to Müller 2016). The gradual disappearance of the last remainers among Conservative MPs and the renewal of the parliamentary party in the run-up to the general election of December 2019 can also be seen as evidence of the ideological narrowing of the party and its transformation from a 'broad church' hosting various political sensibilities into a parochial one-sided approach to Brexit with a clear focus on identity politics (Alexandre-Collier 2020a). The landslide victory in December 2019 provided Johnson with a large majority which operated as an avenue for his personal decisions and indicated a more authoritarian form of leadership. Over Brexit, constant tensions with the UK Supreme Court have also helped the party leadership identify judges with another type of enemy.

Although the substantive populism of Boris Johnson can be best illustrated by the priority given to a hard Brexit and tough anti-immigration agenda, the redefinition of social and economic policies in the run-up to the 2019 general election allowed him to move beyond identity politics. With the party conquering the 'red wall' of historic Labour constituencies in the Midlands and the North-East of England in December 2019, Johnson offered assurances that the most vulnerable would be protected and public services left untouched. This One-Nation message could be interpreted as compensating for the aggressive nationalist and protectionist line chosen by the new Prime Minister in the run-up to the UK's actual exit from the EU. Put together, both economic



and geopolitical pledges were meant to satisfy the expectations of the large majority of new voters who decided to put their trust in Johnson.

Yet, could it be seen as a form of depoliticisation as being the third and last feature of substantive populism? Peter Mair precisely argued that One-Nation conservatism, as a partisan strategy meant to 'counter the appeals of what were posited to be more sectionally-based opponents', contradicts the contention of a drift towards populism (Mair 2002, p. 90). This poses strict limitations to the thesis of Boris Johnson's substantive populism. What could have been interpreted as Johnson's initial strategy of depoliticisation has paradoxically turned out to repoliticise the Conservative Party around new party cleavages, with the new Tory MPs elected in the Northern seats now gathered in a faction known as the Northern Research Group.

In addition, Johnson's personal background may reveal another caveat. His Etonian-Oxbridge education, combined with his liberal approach to the management of a cosmopolitan city like London, which he was the mayor of from 2008 to 2016, would make it difficult to fully sustain the populist claim. Schoor argues that a mix of populism and elitism is what would best characterise Johnson's style of leadership (2019). Yet, being themselves products of an elitist social background, as many examples would show, does not prevent populist leaders from standing against the 'elite', a concept which is more an abstract notion and a performative tool in their exclusionary rhetoric than a reality which applies to themselves as persons (Müller 2016).

Furthermore, Johnson's practice of power as an illustration of procedural populism is highly debatable. On the one hand, it may indeed indicate strict control over the different intermediate institutions. The gradual elimination of the most critical MPs in the party, from their marginalisation to their actual expulsion, could appear as blatant evidence for the new leader's firm grip on the parliamentary party. It can also reveal a willingness to depoliticise these institutions. The appointment of Dominic Cummings, as a key and powerful adviser, has shown a less political approach to government. The Chancellor of the Exchequer Sajid Javid decided to resign rather than being forced to sack his collaborators, resenting the fact of being treated like a puppet in the hands of the Prime Minister and his unelected advisor, with Johnson considering 'department of state less as centres of power than as delivery mechanisms' (Bagehot 2020). On the other hand, the party is far from being side-lined but has been even restored to the status of an indispensable link between the leader and the people. Already under May, the party had returned to a very traditional style of leadership: open primaries for candidate selection were dropped after the Conservative Party review acknowledged that the issue was divisive among members (Feldman 2016, p. 26) and the party further decided to centralise the membership database, thus extending their control over local party associations. Team2015 had been a positive initiative to use the skills, knowledge and energy of both members and non-member supporters, but it was not reconstituted in 2017.



Conclusions

Did the Conservative Party turn populist between the EU referendum of 2016 and the UK's actual withdrawal from the EU in 2021? What we have tried to show is how both Conservative leaders, David Cameron and Boris Johnson, clearly and successively ventured into the quicksand of populism through two of its most obvious paths. It is true that while Johnson appropriated substantive populism by thriving on popular distrust, Cameron's ambition, whether genuine or not, was to re-legitimise democratic processes in a context of widespread political apathy. Through the devices of procedural populism, primarily the referendum, Cameron sought to get a more direct access to citizens and progressively remove the boundaries of mediation. In doing so, he consecrated the principle of popular sovereignty on which his successors Theresa May and Boris Johnson would then capitalise in order to justify their choice of hard Brexit and identity politics. To some extent, Cameron's governing practice was about flouting the constitutional principle of parliamentary sovereignty but paradoxically he continued to appear as the true and remote representative of the elite. When campaigning for remain in contrast to personalities like Nigel Farage, Boris Johnson and Michael Gove who placed themselves on the side of the people (Clarke and Newman 2017), Cameron alienated the people who eventually won the referendum. His procedural populism remained eminently experimental but his moderate Euroscepticism and his aversion for UKIP kept him away from substantive populism which Brexiteers like Johnson subsequently promoted by claiming to represent the true voice of the people. As a result, the narrative of the reengagement with the people, which started under Cameron, could not have been legitimised by Johnson without a modernisation phase which managed to open up both the political system and the party organisation to citizen participation.

Both key moments of Brexit revealed some populist ingredients in the way the Conservative Party branded itself but they also indicated not only the caveats of such hypothesis but also the limitations of the concept of populism and its possible uses. According to Peter Mair, the two senses of populism go together as they converge towards a process of widespread depoliticisation which Brexit has accelerated by polarising the political debate beyond party cleavages (Sobolewska and Ford 2020). Yet, both mainstream parties attempted to realign around these new cleavages and this paradoxically contributed to repoliticising Johnson's Conservative Party. Moreover, the handling of the Covid 19 crisis by Boris Johnson since March 2020 has tended to de-emphasise his Brexit policy, blur his general leadership message and altogether reshuffle the cards of the political game.

Nevertheless, even though the two phases of Brexit under different Conservative leaders may prove otherwise, Mair's versions of populism are not contradictory but should be understood as complementary, with procedural populism potentially operating as a powerful corrective to substantive populism. Mair's extensive definition can therefore serve to broaden the scope of traditional and somewhat narrow conceptions of populism and encourage party leaders to create more open narratives of reengagement to compensate for the negative perception of exiting the EU.



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