

# Populism and the manufactured crisis of British neoliberalism: the case of Brexit



Using the case of Britain's 2016 vote to leave the European Union, **James Wood** and **Valentina Ausserladscheider** challenge prevailing accounts explaining populism as political response to neoliberalism's negative impact on voters. Using a descriptive analysis, they explain how the antagonistic 'people' vs. 'elite' relationship at the core of populism has been mobilised by opposing British political actors as a discursive frame to generate voter support for their own policies.

Populism has come to dominate Britain's political economy, which culminated in the 2016 vote to leave the political and economic project of the EU. Although there are various conceptions of what populism is, many definitions focus on a core antagonistic relationship between 'the people' and a corrupt or incompetent 'elite'.

Dominant explanations of the rise of populism in Britain argue that populist politicians appealed to a long-standing 'general will of the people' by advocating anti-EU policies to mitigate the negative consequences of globalisation, such as increased immigration and inequality from international trade. Populism has also been considered a response to voter demands for greater state intervention in the British economy to challenge the market-based policies of neoliberalism, which have increased economic insecurity since the 1980s. However, we argue these accounts fail to adequately conceptualise what constitutes as populism in the case of Brexit.

## So that's settled, then

Britons saying the EU is one of the most important issues facing the country, %



Source: Ipsos MORI

Economist.com

The chart above [from \*The Economist\*](#) demonstrates that for a decade prior to the 2016 referendum, less than 10% of the British public believed the EU was a pressing political issue; this increased dramatically to over 50% shortly after the referendum announcement. Therefore, leaving the EU cannot be considered a long-standing voter demand that populist politicians adopted to appeal to voters. Rather, the referendum itself may be considered the referential moment where leaving the EU became a significant issue for British voters. Additionally, whilst populist political actors on the left, such as Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party, advocated increased state intervention in the economy to challenge neoliberalism, there were mainstream populist political actors in the Conservative Party supporting policies perfectly congruent with neoliberalism.

Our research provides an alternative explanation as to what constitutes as populism in the case of Brexit. We argue that what these populist political actors have in common is that they both present a challenge to Britain's debt-driven neoliberal growth model, which is reliant on continuous house price increases and consumption.

Major shifts in macroeconomic policy paradigms occur rarely, and require the policies associated with the dominant paradigm to be framed negatively by political actors to the voting public. We argue that the elite/people relationship at the core of populism was used as a discursive frame by political actors looking to generate voter support for their own policies. Here, a current policy can be problematised by political actors by framing it as being detrimental to 'the people' whilst benefiting an 'elite'; alternatively, the converse framing can be used to highlight the benefits of their policies to voters as 'the people' at the expense of 'the elite'.

We explore this argument by examining two competing economic policy paradigms looking to challenge Britain's debt-driven neoliberal growth model: the Liberal Economic Nationalists and the Democratic Socialists.

Britain's modern Liberal Economic Nationalist policy paradigm looks to change Britain's neoliberal growth model from being debt-driven to focus on increasing British exports, and is advocated by an influential group of politicians in the Conservative Party, such as Michael Gove, Liz Truss, and Boris Johnson.

The Conservatives used the populist frame to critique the EU for limiting Britain's sovereignty and generate support for their own export-oriented trade policies. An example of this can be seen in [Michael Gove's announcement](#) in support of the Vote Leave campaign:

The EU is built to keep power and control with the elites rather than the people... Every single day, every single minister is told: 'Yes Minister, I understand, but I'm afraid that's against EU rules'. I know it. My colleagues in government know it. And the British people ought to know it too: your government is not, ultimately, in control in hundreds of areas that matter.

After chastising EU 'elites' for limiting British sovereignty that harms 'the British people', Gove then [redeployed the populist frame](#) in a different speech to show how leaving the EU resolves this problem for 'the people':

I am not asking the British people to have faith in me, I am asking them to have faith in themselves. I am asking the British people to take back control from those [EU] organisations which are distant and elitist.... With trade it is really important that we take back control.

Therefore, for the Conservatives, Brexit provides an opportunity for British neoliberalism to be reoriented around an export-driven growth model supported by non-EU trade.

Rather than focus on the EU, the Democratic Socialists in the Labour Party directly critiqued market-based neoliberal policies for benefiting the 'few' at the expense of 'the many': a clear transposition of the populist elite/people frame. One example comes from Jeremy Corbyn's [speech](#) to the 2017 Labour Party Conference:

Ten years after the global financial crash the Tories still believe in the same dogmatic mantra – Deregulate, privatise, cut taxes for the wealthy, weaken rights at work, delivering profits for a few, and debt for the many. Nothing has changed.

To rebalance inequalities in favour of 'the many', they propose a post-Brexit full paradigm shift towards socialism, by nationalising industries and limiting market activity. Corbyn promoted such policies to the public using the populist discursive frame in the 2017 Labour Party manifesto:

the distribution of ownership of the country's economy means that decisions about our economy are often made by a narrow elite. More democratic ownership structures would help our economy deliver for the many and lead to a fairer distribution of wealth.

These examples demonstrate how these opposing political actors have used the populist discursive frame to construct a challenge to Britain's debt-driven neoliberal growth model and generate voter support for their own economic policies. Therefore, rather than focusing on how different political actors adopt incongruent policies to appeal to the public, we argue it is the shared deployment of the elite/people discursive frame that provides a more complete account of constitutes as populism in the case of Brexit. This offers a more compelling generalisable constitutive theory to understand the phenomenon of global populism and how it manifests in specific cases.

Note: the above draws on the authors' [published work](#) in The Review of International Political Economy. *All articles posted on this blog give the views of the author(s), and not the position of LSE British Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science. Featured image credit: by [Christian Lue](#) on [Unsplash](#).*