***Not* a Brexit Election: Pessimism, Promises and Populism 'UK-style'**
**Matthew Flinders**
for publication in
*Britain Votes 2019*.
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.

The Nobel prize winning economist Elinor Ostrom once warned against 'the danger of self-evident truths' and suggested that 'the fact that something is widely believed does not make it correct' (2000, p.33). The role of the social and political scientist was, for Ostrom, not simply to examine and explore a specific topic, event or theme but also to be constantly aware of the need to step back and question, challenge and disrupt the dominant lens through which the object of analysis is generally conceived. This article injects Ostrom's provocative plea into the sphere of British politics in order to question the 'self-evident truth' that GE2019 was 'a Brexit election'. The 'danger' of accepting this interpretation is that it is arguably too obvious, too simple, too cosmetic. It risks *over*-emphasising the visible machinations of recent events while at the same time *under*-emphasising and failing to expose the deeper socio-political roots, tensions and drivers that manifested themselves in GE2019. Put slightly differently, to accept GE2019 as a Brexit election is to focus on the tip of the iceberg while the aim of this article is to look beneath the (political) waterline. As such, the central argument of this chapter is that GE2019 was not *a Brexit election* but *a disaffection election*.

This is an argument that demands a little unpacking. To some extent GE2019 was very clearly 'a Brexit election' for the simple reason that '[f]or most voters, how they cast their ballot in 2019 reflected where they stood in the Brexit debate' (Curtice, 2000, p.12). As such, the election proved an effective way of breaking the legislative deadlock that had emerged at Westminster and the contextual relevance of Brexit cannot be overlooked. And yet, stepping-back (*qua*. Ostrom) it is possible to question this 'self-evident truth' from at least two perspectives. First, as the work of David Cutts and his colleagues (2020) has demonstrated the outcome of GE2019 was shaped by a variety of long-term factors concerning shifts in the sources of support for the main parties, most of which pre-date Brexit. When viewed from a historical perspective – and as Andrew Gamble has emphasised (2019) - Boris Johnson's need to attract working class voters in Northern English towns was hardly a new challenge for the party, even

if the Brexit context was new. A second and closely related perspective focuses not on psephological variables or their implications for party dynamics but on the underpinning social attitudes that actually led people to support Brexit. In this regard the data and evidence is relatively clear: the 'Brexistential angst and the paradoxes of populism' that Colin Hay (2019) has highlighted have been and remain rooted in political apathy, democratic disappointment and anti-political sentiment (see, for example, Evans and Menon, 2017; Clarke and Newman, 2017; Jennings and Lodge, 2019). This was not *just* a Brexit election and a bolder thesis might actually suggest that the UK's relationship with the EU served as little more than the lightning-rod through which a far broader range of socio-political tensions were played out. The twist, hook or barb in this argument is that 'getting Brexit done' may not address, and may well amplify, many of these tensions.

The benefit of interpreting GE2019 as not (just) a Brexit election but primarily as a disaffection election is that it opens-up new ground and forges fresh connections in terms of understanding exactly *how* and *why* the Conservative Party was able to win a majority of 80 seats, the party's largest since 1987. It also offers new insights into the link between individual personality, political psychology and populism as a carefully calibrated statecraft strategy. This, in turn, can be used to demarcate a distinction between 'Brexit' and 'Brexit*ism*' that is highly significant in terms of understanding contemporary British political history, in general, and GE2019, in particular. In order to develop these points and substantiate the core argument concerning the need to reject over-simplistic 'Brexit election' interpretations this article is divided into three sections. The first section focuses on the build-up to GE2019 and underlines the existence of high levels of both democratic disillusionment and Brexit fatigue. The second section then focuses on the election campaign and the degree to which the leaders of the main parties were able funnel this frustration into positive support for their parties. This leads to a focus on Boris Johnson and utilises a very specific sub-strand of the literature on populism as a way of understanding exactly why his rather idiosyncratic or unconventional brand of political leadership appears to have been so effective. The argument being that it was carefully calibrated as a 'people versus the politicians' election in order to acknowledge and respond to the deep pool of social frustration that was highlighted in the opening section. Put simply, it was populism 'UK-style' which, in turn, feeds through to help promote

and inform critical questions concerning not only the political theatre and symbolism of 'Boris*onian* buffoonery' but also the long-term viability of the post-GE2019 'Boris bounce' into power. The final section picks up this thought through a focus on the polarisation of trust and the management of post-election public expectations in a post-Brexit but 'Covid-crisis' world.

## I. Democratic Disillusionment and Brexit Fatigue

This section focuses on the build-up to GE2019 and develops two main arguments. The first is that public trust in politics had plummeted in the run-up to the election and (secondly) that democratic dissatisfaction was positively correlated with support for leaving the EU. The Hansard Society's *16th Audit of Political Engagement* (2019) provides a powerful evidence base for the first of these arguments. The essence of the research is captured in the report's three headline findings:

- Opinions of the system of governing are at their lowest point in the 15-year Audit series – worse now than in the aftermath of the MPs expenses scandal.
- People are pessimistic about the country's problems and their possible solution, with sizable numbers willing to entertain radical political changes.
- Core indicators of political engagement remain stable but, beneath the surface, the strongest feelings of powerlessness and disengagement are intensifying.

It would at this point be possible to drill-down into each of these points through the provision of evidence-based insights such as: 72% of those surveyed said the system of governing needs 'quite a lot' or 'a great deal' of improvement; asked whether the problem is with the political system or the people running it the largest response group (38%) replied 'both'; 50% of those surveyed believed the main parties and politicians didn't care about people like them; 75% thought political parties were too internally divided to serve the best interests of the country; 63% thought Britain's system of government is rigged to advantage the rich and the powerful;

the number who 'strongly disagree' that political involvement can change the way the UK is run (18%) had hit a fifteen-year low; as had the 47% who felt they had no influence at all over national decision-making. If this was not bad enough the 2019 survey also detected hints of what might be interpreted as an *il*liberal swing away from the core tenets of liberal democracy. When it came to the public's levels of confidence and trust in different professions, for example, the 'military/armed forces' (74%) and 'judges/courts' (62%) scored far higher than MPs (34%) or members of the government (33%). Added to this was the fact that only 25% of the public had confidence in MPs' handling of Brexit (with the government faring only slightly better on 26%). Of particular significance for the argument made about populism 'UK-style' in the next section was that over half (54%) of those surveyed agreed with the statement that 'Britain needs a strong leader willing to break the rules', and 42% thought that many of the country's problems could be dealt with more effectively if the government didn't have to worry so much about votes in Parliament.

The link between the existence of a general democratic malaise, on the one hand, and the specific issue of Brexit, on the other, is illustrated through a demographic breakdown of the Hansard Society's findings. Across a wide range of dimensions (e.g. 'certainty to vote', 'interest in politics', 'knowledge of politics', 'knowledge of parliament', 'satisfaction with present system of governing') the relevance of social class, and therefore to a large extent economic status, is a constant and significantly deflationary variable. The link between this demographic divide and Brexit is reflected in the fact that in relation to all these dimensions Remainers scored significantly *higher* in the run up to GE2019 than Leavers, with London-based pro-European members generally scoring highest. Will Jennings and his colleagues at the TrustGov Project have used the British Election Study to make similar arguments about the link between political trust and leaving the EU. 'Though there were many forces at work in the

Brexit vote' Jennings argues (2020) 'political distrust and democratic discontent played their part in the public's rejection of the elite consensus on the UK's membership of the EU'. Not surprisingly there was a slight increase in public trust in the wake of the referendum but the evidence suggests that this quickly fell away and then declined even further throughout Theresa May's government. After the GE2017 the loss of the government's majority and the challenges this presented in terms of legislative deadlock combined with a broader sense of 'Brexit fatigue' in which an increasing proportion of the public suggested that they had become disgruntled and frustrated with the whole topic and just want it to be resolved one way or another. By June 2019 a YouGov poll found that a third of the public were actively avoiding news about Brexit; the following month a Deltapoll survey found that 60% of respondents agreed with the following comment: 'Right now, I no longer care how or when we leave the European Union, I just want it over and done with'; and by October a further YouGov poll found 70% of those surveyed diagnosing themselves with Brexit fatigue.

Looking back to the run-up to GE2019 arguably the only issue that actually united the country was antipathy towards the political omnishambles that seemed to have consumed Brexit. Boris Johnson may have won the July 2019 leadership election on the basis that he would 'get Brexit done' by 31 October (or 'die in a ditch' as he would later add) but even the most bullish Boris seemed unable to break the deadlock as he faced a series of major legislative defeats and even his decision to prorogue parliament was found unlawful by the Supreme Court. During September 2019 several attempts by the government to trigger a snap general election were rejected by MPs who feared a 'no deal' departure from the EU and were constitutionally protected by the *Fixed-Term Parliaments Act 2011* which required a two-thirds majority vote; and by mid-October a somewhat truculent Prime Minister was forced to request a further EU extension. There is, however, one critical element of rather wretched phase in British political

history that has generally been over-looked: Boris Johnson's strategy for reaching the apex of British politics had always revolved around constantly responding to, and to some extent amplifying, the populist signal, not least over Brexit. In this context, a scathing and unanimous Supreme Court defeat that would in all likelihood have marked the end of most political careers is yet another example of 'them' (that is, 'the elite', 'the experts', 'the establishment', the untouchables that wield power without responsibility) against 'us' (the Great British public). Framed from this angle, the great risk of the Supreme Court ruling and numerous defeats in the chamber was that they could be discursively framed to chime with an emergent populist signal, and associated ideas about the need for a strong leader (Hansard Society, 2019, above).

With this in mind and with the benefit of hindsight, three distinctive and inter-related features emerge out of this brief account of the build-up to GE2019: firstly, levels of both diffuse and specific political dissatisfaction were already as intense as they were socially polarised; secondly, the rules of political engagement appeared to be altering, almost beyond recognition; and finally, unconventional times created a 'window of opportunity' for an avowedly unconventional politician who was willing to break the rules, flaunt convention and flirt with populism. The next section develops this point through a more specific focus on political leadership and varieties of populism within the GE2019 campaign itself.

## II. Funnelling Frustration and Populism 'UK-Style'

The main argument of this article is that there is a need to challenge and refine the 'self-evident truth' that GE2019 was 'a Brexit election'. To some extent, of course, it was a 'Brexit election' but to uncritically accept that conclusion without delving into the deeper dynamics and broader

contextual factors is the scholarly equivalent of tracing the tip of an iceberg without any real understanding of the deeper (socio-political) sub-surface glacial dynamics that crush, push and vent certain pressures. Although David Cutts and his colleagues are correct to suggest that GE2019 should not be interpreted as a 'turning point', 'critical juncture' or major 'realignment' due to the manner in which the results align with longer-term voting trends (discussed above) it is possible to suggest that a highly critical and unique feature of the election was the emergence of a clear brand of populism. This is the core argument of this section and it chimes with the broader proposal that GE2019 should be seen as a 'disaffection election' above and before any other interpretation. Political scientists are particularly prone to making claims of 'uniqueness' and it is certainly true that the analysis of recent general elections have emphasised the extent of political apathy and the funnelling of frustration. For example, Flinders notes that GE2015 'took place in a context that was arguably unique in British political history due to the explicit debate concerning 'anti-politics' and disengagement' (2015, p.242). By 2017 the same author suggested that the Labour Party's 'glorious defeat' in GE2017 had resulted from 'the emergence of a strange form of hybrid populism… essentially synonymous with the adoption of a populist strategy that sought to re-frame the Labour Party as a fresh, new, anti-political, anti-establishment 'outsider' party' (Flinders, 2018, p.XX).

How can an argument about political trust and populism *vis-à-vis* GE2019 therefore claim to be novel or unique?

The first claim is that Flinders' interpretation of GE2015 as being in anyway 'unique' due to the existence of high levels of democratic dissatisfaction proved over-optimistic. As already discussed, public faith in British politics has fallen still further, with the polarising effects of Brexit being a key dynamic. Following on from that (and second), it is possible to argue that

one of the hallmarks of British politics since the 2016 referendum is that it has simply become more tribal and increasingly aggressive; the tenor and tone of political debate and rhetoric has therefore adopted a populist inflection with often nationalist undertones. This has produced an almost piratical vernacular with individual politicians being publicly abused in terms of 'traitors', 'turncoats' and 'treachery'. During GE2019 a decline in basic civility seemed to go hand-in-hand with an increase in assaults and threats against MPs, and although it would be wrong to blame Boris Johnson for the coarsening of political rhetoric and behaviour it is possible to argue that he benefited from it. Third and finally, although the emergence of a hybrid form of populism had been identified in GE2017 its location was squarely within the opposition party. It was part of 'the Corbyn effect' and was itself therefore part of a fairly placid politics ('populism wearing a cardigan' as one observer noted). The brand of populism that came to the fore in GE2019 was very different: its locus was the current prime minister and its articulation arguably came with a more aggressive stance combined with a clear willingness to assume the position of the strong leader that was willing to break the rules.

And yet it is not enough to simply highlight the populist playfulness of Boris Johnson because to do so would simply replicate another 'self-evident truth': that is, that Boris is a clown. At one level this is of course as true as it is accurate (just as GE2019 was 'a Brexit election') but what is arguably lacking from the existing research base is any analysis that digs beneath the veneer of Boris and his 'whiff-whaff' theatrics in order to expose and understand his deeper statecraft strategy. The key element of this strategy was that it explicitly focused upon fuelling and funnelling frustration amongst those sections of the public who were already most disaffected with 'conventional' politics. The benefit of this re-reading is that it chimes with this article's argument about GE2019 not simply being about Brexit but about Boris' ability to tap into a deeper pool of public disillusionment. Although intuitively challenging, it could be

argued that Boris, or more specifically those around him, was able to recognise and resonate with the *changing emotional landscape of British politics* and it was this that ultimately led to the success of the Conservative Party in Labour's traditional heartlands (see Flinders, 2020). It's also possible to use this argument to *politicize* the notion of 'clowning around' in terms of understanding why a man associated with personal indiscretions, professional mishaps and generating outrage was able to generate unexpected levels of public support.

In order to achieve this, however, it is necessary to refine and develop the analytical leverage and precision of our approach to understanding populism as this is a concept that has in recent years become as ubiquitous as it has contested, some have even described the term as meaningless (Serhan, 2020). In order to cut straight through this vast seam of scholarship it is possible to simply highlight the core and broadly accepted tenets of populism before focusing on a very specific sub-strand of this body of work which, it is argued, offers particular theoretical purchase for understanding Boris. Working at a high level of generality it is possible to suggest that populism operates through a three-stage argumentative logic:

Step 1. The world can be separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, *'us'* (i.e. 'the public', 'the people', 'the pure', etc.) and *'them'* (i.e. 'elites', 'immigrants', 'minorities', etc.);

Step 2. 'They' enjoy a privileged, protected and unfair position within society that they have used to exploit 'us' which is almost locked-in through the existing political system;

Step 3. In order to break this deadlock and change the system it is necessary for the public to put their faith in a strong leader who is willing to break the rules and drive through far-reaching reforms.

Populism is therefore a divisive political strategy that simplifies messy political realities and promotes simple answers to complex questions. It also revolves around not only funnelling pre-existing social frustrations but also fuelling them in order to generate political support. One of the prime ideological features of populist politicians and their 'insurgent' parties is a brand of nativism, a xenophobic form of nationalism. It would at this point be possible to use this three-part framework to analyse Boris Johnson's strategy within GE2019 but this temptation must be resisted temporarily in order to craft a slightly fresher and more focused conceptual approach. In this regard Benjamin Moffitt's *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style and Representation* (2017) offers a valuable reference point due to the manner in which it emphasises the performative aspects of populism before linking this with the heavily mediatised and 'stylised' milieu of contemporary politics. Moffitt therefore departs from the mainstream literature by conceiving of populism as a political style which is defined (with typical academic aplomb) as 'the repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performance made to audiences that are used to navigate the fields of power that comprise the political, stretching from the domain of government through to everyday life' (p.38). This, in turn, provides a way of understanding how populist identities are crafted and constructed, while also underlining the role of discourse and communication. Put very simply, what Moffitt brings to the discussion which has generally been over-looked is the performative component of populism and its verbal and non-verbal forms of communication (think tousled hair, unkempt appearance, hanging from zip-wires, casual rule-breaking, crude comments, the brandishing smoked kippers, etc).

Moreover, what is particularly significant about Moffitt's 'populist style' is the emphasis it places on the demonstration of bad manners by the populist leadership: that is, a rejection of the conventions of political or even polite discourse. The point that Moffitt seeks to tease-out and demonstrate is that populists do not simply rely on socially divisive rhetoric of narratives of crisis that seek to blame a designated 'other' but they actually utilise a sophisticated repertoire of performative tools in an attempt to underline their 'outsider' or 'radical status'. This might take the form of provocative or aggressive rhetoric, spectacular acts, exaggeration, calculated provocations, and the intended violation of political and socio-cultural norms. This is often reflected in the coarsening of political rhetoric and a disregard

for both appropriate modes of acting in the political realm, directness, playfulness, bullying, obscenity, disrespectful languages—and are ready to resort to anecdotes as evidence and to show a studied ignorance of that which does not interest them. Added to this are shifts in the political-economy of communication and the emergence a dominant 'media logic' which is itself often simplistic, personalised, entertainment-focused, polarising and prone to affective appeals which are themselves favourable to populism. In this sense populist and media styles have evolved to overlap in an almost parasitical relationship that revolves around dramatic composition which is why Moffitt suggests that populist style fuses 'matter and manner, message and package' (p.37).

One of benefits of utilising Moffitt's work is that it defines populist style in terms of a gradational phenomenon which can be pushed-forward or rolled-back by a politician or party to suit the strategic priorities of a specific context. Theresa May condemned her opponents for impeding the popular will and invoked the threat of their obstruction to justify the June 2017 snap election; while the analysis of that election clearly showed the Labour Party flirtation with a distinctive populist style. During GE2019 the Labour Party appeared to adopt a form of 'fiscal populism' in which a giveaway manifesto was followed by wave-after-wave of further spending commitments, notably the £60bn commitment to compensate the 'Waspi women' who had lost out in pension reforms, which served to re-open perennial questions about the financial competence of the party. For large sections of the public Jeremy Corby simply failed the *competence* and *credibility* tests: they just didn't trust him. The same could be said for the Liberal Democrats and their leader, Jo Swinson. The decision to kick-off their GE2019 campaign with the announcement that a new Lib Dem government would immediately revoke Article 50 *without* a second referendum was a bold move that ultimately backfired, and their campaign was memorable mostly for Swinson's repeated apologies for decisions her party had taken when in coalition with the Tories from 2010-2015. And yet a critical element of GE2019 (and the link between this section and the previous section) is that none of the main party leaders were popular (see Table 1, below).

**Table 1. Party Leader Public (Dis)Popularity Ratings (17<sup>th</sup> Oct.-6 Nov. 2019)**

| LEADER | APPROVAL RATING | DISAPPROVAL RATING |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Boris Johnson (Tory) | 39% | 40% |
| Jeremy Corbyn (Labour) | 20% | 58% |
| Jo Swinson (Lib Dems) | 23% | 39% |
| Nigel Farage (Brexit Party) | 26% | 42% |

Source. Opinium Polling/BBC News, 17 Nov. 2019.

From the available data, Boris Johnson appeared to be the *least unpopular* candidate, and a YouGov poll at the beginning of the GE2019 found 45% of the public believing that 'the party leaders are worse than *any* of their predecessors in history'. The 2019 Ipsos MORI Veracity Index – published just days before the election – found that public trust in politicians had fallen to just 14%, a five per cent fall from 2018. Professors were, by contrast, highly ranked at 86% but government ministers lowly ranked at 17% which all dovetails with the argument made in the opening section of this article and focuses attention on the simple fact that GE2019 was dominated as much by concerns regarding a lack of trust in politicians, in general, as it was about Brexit, in particular. This was clear from the first televised leaders question time when Jeremy Corbyn was criticised for refusing to take a position on Brexit and then (unexpectedly) announced that if a second EU referendum was to take place he would remain neutral. At the same event the main line of questioning to Boris Johnson focused on whether he was a person that the public could trust. Two elements of this event are particularly noteworthy. The first is that with Moffitt's theory of 'populist style' and its emphasis on bad manners in mind, Johnson not only dismissed criticism of his decision to delay the report from the Intelligence and Security Committee into Russian interference in elections but he also refused to apologise for using homophobic and racist language in his newspaper columns (see below). Secondly, a YouGov survey conducted in the wake of the first leaders debate found that 59% of those surveyed felt that Jeremy Corbyn was 'more in touch with ordinary people' compared with just 25% who sided with Boris. This might explain why Boris subsequently refused to attend the

second leaders debate and the bizarre sight of the leader of the Conservative Party being represented by a melting ice sculpture.

And yet the fact that Boris was still able to lead the Conservative Party to a glorious if unexpected victory demands explanation. It could be suggested that the Conservative victory was in large part a reflection of the weakness of the Labour Party and the inability of the Liberal Democrats to break through as a viable centrist third-party. Although undoubtedly part of the explanation, such negative interpretations risk overlooking the existence of a strategic and highly personalised approach to the campaign which Boris had arguably been cultivating for some time and which resonates with Moffitt's emphasis on populist style, in general, and bad manners, in particular. Indeed, it is only by exposing and understanding the distinctive performative style and constitutive elements, within a socio-political context that is almost defined by anti-political sentiment, that Boris' buffoonery and pantomime antics can be redefined not as the behaviour of a political clown but as the carefully calibrated statecraft of a sophisticated politician. Five inter-related themes or topics help to substantiate this argument. They also help to differentiate the dominant model of populism that was observable in GE2019 from other variants, and through this acknowledge its localised qualities (i.e. 'UK-style'). These are outlined in Table 2 and discussed in the remainder of this section.

**Table 2. Component Elements of Boris*onian* Populism in GE2019**

| ELEMENT | ESSENCE |
|---|---|
| Breaking the Rules | A constant willingness to court controversy in order to underline his 'unconventional' and 'outsider' status. |
| Distracting Dramaturgy | The capacity to dominate the headlines in ways that play to the media, entertain the public and ensure that substantive policy issues are rarely discussed. |
| Territorial Targeting | Clarity of a 'politicians versus the public' message that is carefully targeted to 'England-beyond-London' and promises a 'levelling-up' economic agenda |
| Brexit and Brexit*ism* | A strategy whereby Brexit's specific and technical focus is consciously expanded to encompass a broader range of social challenges and concerns (i.e. Brexit*ism*). |
| 'Upper Crust' Populism | The capacity to promote a populist style that resonate with dominant cultural expectations while refracting his highly elitist and establishment-based background. |

One of the key insights of Moffitt's comparative analysis is the manner in which populists not only engage in sophisticated forms of 'othering' in order instigate simplistic blame-games but that they also seek to emphasise and underline their 'outsider' status (and disruptive potential) by refusing to abide by the pre-existing rules and conventions. This is a particular challenge for politicians who evolve out of mainstream parties and who must therefore work harder to convince the public that they really are willing to 'do' politics differently. Put slightly differently, their 'style' must designate difference and this is often associated with, for example, a disregard for established modes of acting in the political realm, an intolerance of opposition and a willingness to use disrespectful or even obscene language in order to cultivate debate. In a context of political frustration and fatigue being willing to break the rules and be bad mannered can be interpreted by sections of society as a breath of fresh air and evidence of a commitment to change the *status quo*. From this perspective, being 'bad' can actually be 'good' in terms of promoting popularity and this is arguably a strategy that Boris and his advisers understood. As the Hansard Society's audit (discussed above) illustrated, the public appeared increasingly frustrated and therefore willing to entertain the idea of a strong leader who was willing to break the rules. Boris responded to these signals in a number of ways. The most obvious example is probably the prorogation of parliament but an equally instructive instance was the September 2019 decision by Boris Johnson to expel 21 MPs from the parliamentary Conservative Party after they rebelled against him over Europe. The fact that these MPs included two ex-chancellors of the exchequer, a number of former senior ministers and even Winston Churchill's grandson simply underlined his willingness to reject existing

constitutional mores. 'I don't recognise this' the former chancellor, Father of the House of Commons and MP for over half a century, Kenneth Clarke, remarked at the time 'It's the Brexit Party, rebadged'.

Other examples might include the refusal of the Prime Minister's Chief Adviser, Dominic Cummings, to appear before a select committee (see HC1115, 2018), or the Government's decision to withhold ministers from appearing on the BBC's flagship Radio 4 *Today* programme. Even the Conservative Manifesto's comments about 'getting away from the idea that Whitehall knows best' (p.26) and 'MPs devoting themselves to thwarting the democratic decision of the British people' (pp.47-48) – not to mention its commitment to establishing a 'Constitution, Democracy and Rights Commission' to review the relationship between the executive, legislature and courts in order to 'restore trust in out institutions' (p.48) – all indicated a willingness to break and then redefine the rules as part of a 'people versus the politicians' election. The key point being made is that a central element of Boris Johnson's populist style revolves around a consistent and strategically groomed willingness to flaunt the rules, break conventions and engage in offensive behaviour. He was censured by colleagues for describing the *European Union (Withdrawal) (No.2) Act* the 'surrender act' but under pressure to apologise simply hardened his tone to call it 'the capitulation act'. In fact, he dismissed concerns about increasing public aggression towards MPs as 'humbug' and then raised the possibility that his government may refuse to comply with the legislation if it were passed. Even Mr Johnson's journalism reveals a powerful penchant for provocation: gay men are 'tank-topped bumboys', single mums 'uppity and irresponsible', black people portrayed as 'smiling piccanninies', tribal leaders possess 'watermelon smiles' and veiled Muslim women looked like 'letter boxes' or 'bank robbers'. The suggestion is that this is not buffoonery but a distinctive populist style; something that is *done* by politicians and political actors not as an

ideology but as a way of *being*, 'a way of speaking, acting, and presenting oneself' (*qua.* Moffitt, 2017) which brings us to a focus on performative style.

*Distracting Dramaturgy*

The previous sub-section emphasised the role of 'bad manners' within the populist style and associated this with Boris Johnson's style of leadership in the run up to GE2019. The significance of this argument for the UK stems from the manner in which the constitutional configuration is founded on the self-restraint of those who hold power. 'In the UK, we have trusted politicians to behave themselves' Andrew Blick and Peter Hennessy (2020, p.3) note 'We have long assumed that those who rise to high office will be 'good chaps', knowing what the unwritten rules are and wanting to adhere to them. Recent events suggest it is worth considering the implications of a decline in the viability of the 'good chap' system in this country.' The link back to the first section of this article is that levels of anti-political sentiment may well have created a political environment that has nurtured 'chaps' who are less inclined to be 'good'. This may well be true but a second element of populist style which seems particularly apt in relation to understanding GE2019 relates less to breaking the rules and more to adopting a distracting dramaturgy. This is, once again, a core strand of Moffitt's work on understanding the global rise of populism but it has possibly been under-acknowledged in relation to more specific analyses of the rise of Boris Johnson.

This argument concerning distracting dramaturgy can be set out in five points. The first point relates to context and the existence of a double-dynamic concerning: (i) the existence of significant proportion of the public who have become distrusting, disengaged and to some

extent bored with 'normal' politics; plus (ii) the existence of a 24/7 sensationalised new media that operates largely through snippets and pictures. Into this context (the second point) a distinctive politician emerges who is more than willing to serve-up a constant flow of mishaps, horseplay and tomfoolery in a manner that chimes with demands of 'disaffected democrats' for rule-breakers while also feeding a voracious news industry. The third point is that it is too easy to dismiss this populist style as 'clowning around' when in fact (point four) such behaviour fulfils a highly political role in terms of both attracting attention while at the same time distracting attention away from substantive issues. The eccentric appearance, exaggerated gestures, outlandish props, jokes and japes are all parts of a performative act that is intended to connect with the media's insatiable appetite for simplistic, personalised, entertainment-focused and polarising stories which are themselves favourable to populism. And yet the core argument of this sub-section is that this *distracting dramaturgy* proved incredibly effective during GE2019 as Boris remained 'the story' irrespective of whether it focused on melting ice sculptures, describing the leader of the opposition as 'Stalin', his plans to move his girlfriend into No.10 while still being married or even his 'submarine strategy' of not being interviewed. The constant swirl of drama surrounding Boris Johnson arguably acted as a distancing tool which prevented the discussion of deeper policy-related issues which is exactly why Moffitt argues that populist style fuses 'matter and manner, message and package' (p.37). And yet, one of the few areas where it is possible to suggest that the distracting dramaturgy did give way to the promotion of a clear policy was in relation to territorial targeting.


*Territorial Targeting*

One of the most obvious outcomes of GE2019 was the manner in which the Conservative Party was able to win seats in what were traditionally thought to be Labour's northern heartlands. This is often linked to narratives concerning 'the collapse of the red wall' and was undoubtedly a key feature of the election. But what's interesting is the manner in which this success was not based upon the standard nativism and nationalism that is generally a hallmark of populist politics but was in fact based on a more sophisticated form of sub-nationalism and territorial targeting. As analyses of GE2017 had underlined, in recent years it has been possible to identify a powerful new socio-political cleavage within *English* politics (see Flinders, 2017). That is, the emergence of an increasingly stark divergence between the worldviews and wants of those who live in major cities and those that live in provincial or coastal towns. The former are often referred as 'cosmopolitans' and the latter as 'the left behind' and the extent and depth of this new cleavage has been captured in Jennings and Stoker's emphasis on the bifurcation of politics and the 'two Englands' thesis' (2016; see also 2017). Two elements of this thesis connect with this article's core argument about GE2019 not (*just*) being a Brexit election. The first is that a central element of Jennings and Stoker's argument concerning polarisation is that it is not simply a Brexit realignment. What are becoming more acute are the symptoms of *long-term trends* connected to global growth patterns and the changing nature of work that have fallen disproportionately on citizens residing in different geographical locations.

Brexit was certainly a key part of the GE2019 story but arguably more in terms of the symptomatic manifestation of a number of complex deep-seated social pressures, many of which went far beyond the UK's relationship with the EU.

But this leads to a second argument concerning the link between populism 'UK-style' and territorial targeting in the sense that what is interesting about Boris Johnson's statecraft during

the election was that to define and dismiss it simply as nationalist nativism would be to miss an underlying subtlety. There was, of course, an element of nostalgic jingoism. There was also a generic and effective appeal to 'get Brexit done'. But there was also a much *sharper strategy of territorial targeting* that helps explain the collapse of the red wall. Put very simply, while the Liberal Democrats sought to attract Remainers and the Labour Party adopted a strategy that seemed to confuse everyone the Conservative Party under Boris Johnson toned-down the talk of 'Global Britain' and instead focused on a much tighter constituency: 'England-beyond-London'. This was a strategy that dovetailed not just with those sections of the public that had lost faith in politics but also with those that had increasingly identified as English, rather than British. These were the traditional working class communities for whom the Labour Party seemed to offer no coherent vision. In this context and with Dominic Cummings playing a critical strategic role, Boris was able to offer an effective twin-track narrative which combined dealing with the past (i.e. 'Get Brexit Done') and defining the future (i.e. 'addressing domestic structural inequalities by 'levelling-up''). There is an added dimension to this strategy that is worth mentioning: to some extent Boris served as the saviour of Englishness. For some time seen as almost a 'forbidden' identity associated with racist rhymes, tatty white flags and tattoos, it was the dismissal of Englishness as a valid identity by a generally detached cosmopolitan elite which served to fuel frustration in 'backwater' areas of England. It was exactly this frustration that Boris was able to fuel and funnel through his strategy of territorial targeting.

As the first results came in on election night it quickly became clear that this strategy had worked. In terms of territorial representation and party political balance an argument could be made that the strategy worked *too well*. The Conservative Party is now almost completely a party of England with 345 of 365 (i.e. 95%) of its MPs holding English seats. The intra-party dynamics of this situation will be discussed in the final part of this article but before this it is

necessary to complete this discussion of populism 'UK-style' by trying to tease-apart Brexit from Brexit*ism* and exploring how a man with a background (or should I say 'pedigree') like Boris Johnson can engage in populist politics.

*Demarcating Brexit from Brexit*ism

In many ways the core argument of this article is that GE2019 was about far more than just Brexit. To accept 'the self-evident truth' that it was a Brexit-election therefore risks missing far more than it reveals. More specifically, it risks overlooking the emergence of a distinctive and particularly British form of populism that was able to in some sense utilise the topic of Brexit as a foil through which to connect a vast range of social tensions and funnel those frustrations into the ballot box. As such, the core argument of this sub-section is that Boris (and I would argue that it was 'Boris-with-Cummings' as distinct from the Conservative Party) was able to almost locate or cloak the specific topic of Brexit *within* a far broader strategic narrative which, in turn, underpinned a distinct populist style. In this sense it is necessary to distinguish Brexit from Brexit*ism*. The inspiration for this argument comes from Alan Finlayson's (2017) belief:

> [T]hat this political philosophy – call it Brexit*ism* – has congealed into something about so much more and yet so much less than Brexit. It is now a central feature of our landscape: an anti-political politics organised around resentment at past losses and scepticism about promised futures.

Looking back at GE2019 it is possible to suggest that Boris Johnson's success was indeed based on the promotion of a brand of Brexit*ism* rather than a simple focus on Brexit due precisely to the manner in which his strategy sought to focus on those who felt 'left behind' and had become democratically disaffected. It was not therefore a 'Brexit election' in the

simple sense but an election defined by 'Brexit*ism*' in a far broader sense. The main shift in the nature of Brexit*ism* that it is possible to associate with Boris Johnson and which distinguishes it from Finlayson's initial diagnosis is that during GE2019 it *did* include an emphasis on 'promised futures'. This is a critical point. Finlayson was correct to highlight an almost nihilistic-turn amongst many Brexit enthusiasts in the sense that the future was viewed as being inevitably uncertain. Viewpoints or concerns based upon instinct or expert advice were simply dismissed. '[A] line unambiguously divides the known from the unknowable' Finlayson notes '[C]ross it and you confirm the Brexiter's prejudices: that you are a liar, an arrogant liberal intellectual, a 'virtue-signaller'.' 'Remoaners' are through this view simply gripped by fear while those in favour of leaving are willing to submit to fate and providence. The distinctive element of Boris's Brexit*ism* is that it dismissed the previous conviction that there is no knowable future and sought to promote an imagined (and largely English) community through the notion of 'levelling-up'. Whether Boris will be able to manage let alone fulfil the very significant public expectations created by this electoral strategy is the focus of the final section. But before concluding this article it is necessary to conclude this section with at least some acknowledgement that Boris Johnson is not the most obvious candidate to be adopting a populist style.


*Upper Crust Populism*


Possibly the most obvious and paradoxical element of GE2019 is that it featured a form of populism that was almost dripping in elitist trappings. Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson can hardly claim to be a 'man of the people.' The son of a former Conservative Member of the European Parliament, Boris went to Eton before heading up to Balliol College where he

became President of the Oxford Union and a member of the male-only Bullingdon Club. Not mentioning an array of sackings and resignations, blunders and bloopers, his career broadly proceeded through journalism, into parliament, into government and now to No.10. The anti-politician, anti-establishment, anti-elite narratives that generally accompany a populist style therefore sit very oddly with someone who has been a professional politician for two decades, whose establishment credentials could hardly be stronger and who has circulated within and amongst elites all his life. The distinctive insight from GE2019 is therefore that populism 'UK-style' seems to have taken the form of what might be labelled 'upper crust populism' in order to denote its particularly English class credentials. This provokes two inter-related questions: how was an establishment figure able to adopt a populist style, and why have large sections of the public apparently been willing to accept it?

One way of engaging with these question is to draw upon Robert Barr's (2009) work on political mavericks. These are politicians who rise to prominence within an established, competitive party but then either launch a form of internal takeover in order to fundamentally reshape their party, or they abandon it to compete as an independent within a new 'insurgent' party. The critical element which reintroduces Moffitt's work on 'bad manners' is that mavericks often seek to distinguish themselves from the mainstream by adopting a performative strategy in which they are consistently seen to be breaking the rules (hence Blick and Hennessy's concerns regarding *Good Chaps No More?*). In this regard Boris Johnson's 2015 political novel - *Seventy-Two Virgins* – may offer unintended insight due to the manner in which the fictional narrator claims to be *akratic*. That is, they suffer from a weakness of will and an inability to act in accordance with one's moral values. The authorial connections are too obvious too make but what is possibly more interesting and more in line with this article's central thesis is that it is Boris's ill-discipline that actually encapsulates his populist appeal. It

is possible to suggests that people watch his speeches and read his articles not because of what he has to say but because of the way he says it, while critics respond in ways that simply heighten his visibility and populist appeal. But is there also a particularly English cultural dimension that needs to be teased-out?

In her influential analysis of the quirks, habits and foibles of the English people the anthropologist Kate Fox (2005) underlines the centrality of what she calls 'the importance of not being earnest' as a dominant culture marker. Taking things too seriously is therefore something of a cultural taboo that could be seen as almost legitimating Boris's frequent failure to master the detail. The impact of his subsequent errors, such as the impact of his ill-informed comments about why Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe was visiting Iran when he was Foreign Secretary in November 2017, are not always funny but Molyneux and Osborne (2017) are correct to note that populists adapt their content from their host culture. 'Boris Johnson's buffoonery' is therefore held out as 'an example of what we could call the idiocy of power in democratic societies'. Idiocy here meaning a non-elitist simplicity or genuineness that resonates with those that have become disaffected with conventional politics. The specific link to English culture is that Boris is a modern day Bertie Wooster (i.e. blustering, blundering, bloody-minded...David Cameron is a 'girly swot', Corbyn 'a big girls blouse') which leads opponents to make the mistake of dismissing him as a buffoon while large sections of the public appear to find him strangely endearing. This is the genius of the Johnson act; but it is a carefully contrived performative act which leads us to reflect upon its long-term sustainability.

**III. The Boris Bargain and Delivering Promises**

The central argument of this article is that GE2019 was not (just) a 'Brexit election' and might more accurately be interpreted as a 'disaffection election'. Under Boris the Conservative Party absorbed the populist tradition that had until that point resided in UKIP and then the Brexit Party. It was a shift in (populist) style as much as it was a shift in policy and it included as a core element a willingness to if not break the rules then certainly to transgress certain conventional boundaries. The implications of this shift are particularly stark in the context of British politics with its (in)famously uncodified and unwritten 'political constitution' for the simple reason that it requires a sense of self-restraint on the part of the occupant of No.10 Downing Street to make it work. Boris Johnson is well-known for possessing a range of personal qualities but 'self-restraint' is not one that it commonly mentioned. In this context it is noteworthy that Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt's *How Democracies Die* (2019) offers a set of 'key indicators of authoritarian behaviour' which starts by asking 'do they reject the constitution or express a willingness to violate it?' The answer to this question in the recent British context is arguably unsettling which leads me to make three final points about pessimism, populism and promises in the context of GE2019.

The adoption of a populist-style may well be effective in the short-term and as an electoral strategy but it is unlikely to form the basis of a 'strong and stable' government in the long-term. This is the first point. There is a link here between Mario Cuomo's famous dictum about 'campaign in poetry, govern in prose' in the sense that Boris campaigned in a highly performative populist style but must now demonstrate the capacity to understand that *being* Prime Minister is not a joke. This is particularly true in the post-Brexit British context which is almost defined by social polarisation. Successfully 'facing the disillusioned in a new decade', to paraphrase the sub-title of a recent NatCen/ONS report (2020), is unlikely to occur with a populist style. What's interesting about GE2019 is that the British Election Study's data suggests that political trust has itself become more polarised with 'Leave' supporters now being significantly more trusting of MPs in general and more satisfied with UK democracy than 'Remainers' (see Figure 1, below).

**Figure 1. Satisfaction with UK democracy, Feb. 2014-Dec. 2019**
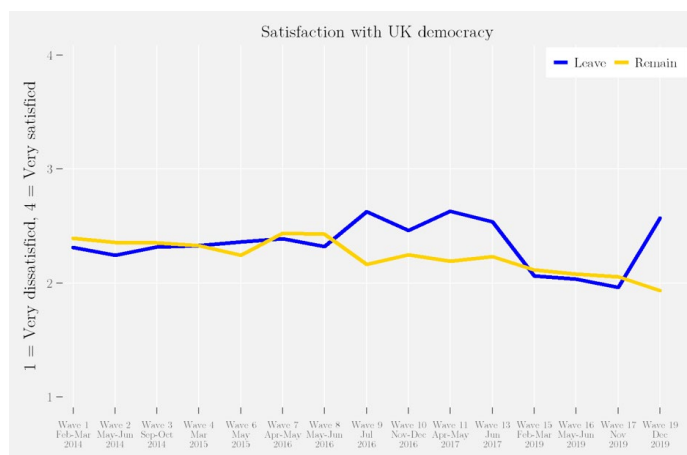


Source. Jennings, Stoker, Gaskell and Devine (2020)
'Political trust realigned after the general election'
https://ukandeu.ac.uk/political-trust-realigned-after-the-general-election/

'This is despite the fact that levels of political trust have typically tended to be higher among the educated, professional demographics that were more likely to vote Remain' Jennings and his colleagues note 'Brexit identity seems to now condition trust in the UK's politicians and democracy. Confirming this, when asked how often the government in Westminster can be trusted to do the right thing, 23% of Leavers said 'most of the time', more than double the number for Remainers (10%).' This flows into my second point: the 2019 general election was perhaps unique for the rather reluctant manner in which traditionally Labour voters and non-voters did vote Conservative. This was an election fuelled by frustration and fatigue rather than conviction and confidence. 'Your hand might have quivered over the ballot paper as you put your cross in the Conservative Box' Boris conceded during his victory speech before acknowledging that a large number of people had 'lent him' their support. In a democracy the consent of the citizens to allow an individual or group to govern is only ever given on a temporary basis but in GE2019 the extent of social fragmentation, the shift in social allegiances and the simple hatred and venom that defined debates has given what looks like a 'strong' majority a certain sense of fragility. The Boris Bargain was simple: vote for me and not only

will I 'get Brexit done' but I'll also address long-term structural inequalities through a process of 'levelling-up' beyond London through massive economic investment. If public trust is not to fall and anti-political sentiment increase Boris will now have to deliver on that bargain in a context where very high and often contradictory expectations have been generated around the sunlit uplands of a post-Brexit world (for a discussion see Hay 2019).

The third and final point is that what might be termed 'the trust terrain' of British politics has already shifted far beyond the socio-political terrain that shaped GE2019. The emergence of Covid-19 as a global pandemic has to a large extent swept Brexit off the agenda and put in its place a very different and yet closely related set of questions concerning public trust in politicians, political processes and political institutions. It has also raised questions about Boris Johnson's leadership skills, his ability to absorb the detail and to keep his flippancy in check. Apart from his suggestion that the government's urgent search for medical ventilators should be called 'Operation Last Gasp', the Prime Minister has appeared suitably restrained and also aware of the existence of a serious trust-deficit amongst the public. The latest Ipsos MORI Veracity Index of late November 2019 found that public trust in politicians had plummeted to just 14%, a five per cent fall from 2018, while professors and scientists enjoyed trust-levels of 84% and 86% respectively. This might explain why the Prime Minister has stage managed his daily briefings so that the Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Adviser are quite literally standing over his shoulder. The deeper implication of this performative element, however, is that if public trust in politics has been heavily influenced in recent years by Brexit then there is little doubt that moving forward the future of British democracy is likely to be defined by the public's perception of how Boris Johnson's government is able to cope with the Covid-19 pandemic.

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