

Contesting International Economic Governance: The ‘People’ and Trade in the Trump and Brexit Rhetoric

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Introduction

Populism is often seen as a ‘thin ideology’ (Mudde 2004) whose policy content mostly derives from its association with thicker ideologies. Yet populists often invest significant time and resources in developing their own policy proposals. Trade has been a hallmark of populist movements historically and populists have held both pro and anti-free trade positions. North American agrarian populists were pro-free trade in the turn of the twentieth century, while populists in today’s US are mostly protectionist. Post-colonial populist leaders from the Global South often demanded protection, whereas today’s populists in emerging economies like Turkey and India seek to harness globalization. Given this variety of populist preferences, is there a distinct impact of populism on trade?

Populism is understood here as a discourse that articulates politics as a binary opposition between the system and the people. These discourses emerge at times of severe upsetting of state–society relations due to developments that often have their roots in international politics. Trade is an appropriate area for populism to articulate its opposition between the people and the ‘system’: as an economic policy, it can address material grievances on the basis of a juxtaposition between ‘people’ and ‘elites’; and as a policy through which the costs and benefits of a state’s adaptation to the international system are distributed domestically, trade can help political actors launch appeals for rebalancing society’s relationship with the political system (Rodrik 2017, pp. 15–16).

The chapter examines comparatively two populist trade discourses during a period of upheaval in Anglo-Saxon democracies starting in 2016: the election and presidency of Donald Trump in the US and the contestation of Brexit following the EU referendum in Great Britain. Both have been described as populist, yet they represent opposite positions on trade. Contrary to the protectionist Trump, Brexiteers largely support free trade (Rodrik 2017, p. 11). The analysis demonstrates how the distinctiveness of populism is its articulation of preferences as binary opposition between people and official power. If populism is understood in this way as a discourse of international relations, the actual trade policy preferences of populists – whether they support or oppose free trade – are less important than how they are articulated as opposition to the elites and institutions of the international order.

This conceptualization of populism helps explain two other paradoxes of populist trade discourses: the fact that they are often popular despite their expected negative economic impact; and the fact that, in the US and UK, the populist challenge to the international trade regime has

emerged from ostensibly pro-market centre-right parties. Taken together, these paradoxes show how the nature of populism and the timing of its emergence are conditioned by a combination of the international political and economic pressures in which a state operates, and the domestic political openings that are created by discontent with these pressures. The chapter closes with a discussion of the implications of the argument for the future of the international order.

Populism as Discourse of International Relations

The view of populism as a discourse is associated with Ernesto Laclau (2005a, 2005b; see also Panizza 2005; Stavrakakis 2004). According to Laclau, populism is a mode of politics that divides the political field into two blocs, the people and the elites, in fundamental opposition to each other. The populist discourse constructs a political identity based on the empty signifier of the ‘people’ – empty because it is used as a rhetorical vessel to appeal to a variety of excluded groups. Populism binds together various social grievances – economic, cultural, ideological – in a single chain of demands connected by the very fact that they are ignored (Stavrakakis 2004, p. 257). It thus endows a new political subject with the privileged self-conception of the ‘real people’ (Abts and Rummens 2007, p. 418; Arditì 2010, p. 490; Laclau 2005a, p. 81).

The above means that class differences and social stratification become politically consequential only when they are linked in a chain of equivalence based on their opposition to official power (Stanley 2008, pp. 97–98). In this sense, the purpose of populist policy formulations is less to represent the material preferences of societal interests and more to construct a popular identity on the basis of its exclusion from the system. Much like the ‘people’, ‘trade’ can become an empty signifier that helps broaden this political identity opposing the system.

As has been shown elsewhere – e.g. in the case of the EU refugee crisis in 2015 (Börzel and Risse 2018) – populist parties can impose new understandings of the identity of the ‘people’ that challenge the fit between the national political community and the boundaries or character of the supra- or international orders a state belongs to. In cases of worsening, actual or perceived, discrepancy between the national political community and the international order it is subject to, populism articulates the claim for representation as a repatriation of political control from international institutions or governance processes. Therefore, international or regional orders often become the target of populists’ critique (Chryssogelos 2020). Consequently, populist positions on trade are part of the discursive articulation of the political identity of the ‘people’, and, therefore, trade issues matter as part of the antagonism between people and the ‘system’ rather than for their actual content. Importantly, this approach to populism challenges the standard view of trade preferences as reflecting concrete and elaborated societal interests (Moravcsik 1997).

The precise use of trade positions in the construction of the popular identity confronting official power will reflect the shape of state–society divisions in a state and will, in turn, be context-specific (Hadiz and Chryssogelos 2017). This chapter focuses on a specific pathway that can lead conservative parties – normally reliable supporters of free trade and the international liberal trade regime since the end of the Cold War – to adopt populism: the embrace of liberal economic policies and the internationalization of the economy by formerly working-class, social-democratic mass

parties. This opens up new opportunities for centre-right parties to expand their influence towards working-class voters who feel unrepresented by the parties they historically voted for.

In established democracies, societal interests have historically been expressed by mass parties representing the preferences of groups with self-awareness of their ideational and material interests. Typical examples include European labour and Christian-democratic parties mobilizing around the class and confessional cleavages in the nineteenth century (Bartolini and Mair 1990; Lipset and Rokkan 1967). In contrast to these parties of society, there emerged parties representing the interests of groups that traditionally had access to political power but decided to adopt methods of mass mobilization of their opponents (Ziblatt 2017). Despite their different origins, both mass and conservative parties aimed to bridge the gap between state and society, either by representing specific societal groups, or by generating popular support for the groups that had hitherto dominated the state (Mair 2000, p. 9).

Rather than representing societal interests, populism's aim, on the other hand, is to subsume them in a broad and ideologically loose popular identity that will either challenge the state head-on or, if it manages to occupy it, use it to incorporate social demands in a top-down, hierarchical fashion (Mouzelis 1985, pp. 331–332). Paradoxically, while populism promises to emancipate the 'people', it does so by depressing or fusing separate societal demands whose specific programmatic preferences are lost in the general call of opposition to the 'system'. Equally paradoxically, while populism may appear like a disruptive force, it just as often can act as a way to dilute social demands at a time of acute international and domestic pressures on the state.

Such was the provocative argument of Mair (2000), who, after the end of the Cold War, saw a paradoxical overlap between two otherwise different party families: on the one hand, radical far right parties, and on the other hand, Third Way-style, post-ideological 'cartel' parties (Katz and Mair 1995) such as Tony Blair's New Labour. Despite their vast ideological differences, both party types shared the key populist feature of putting forward an appeal to a 'people' composed of atomized citizens, rather than distinct societal groups with separate preferences and interests (Mair 2000, pp. 8–10).

The emergence of both these types of parties during globalization, when the absorption of national elites into transnational or supranational governance networks accelerated (Bickerton 2015, pp. 54–55; Zürn and Deitelhoff 2015, p. 211), points at a more general point: that populism, either in its consciously disruptive form or as an unforeseen consequence of the de-ideologization of mass parties, is often a by-product of internationally induced upheaval in state–society relations that neither mass parties of society nor conservative parties of traditional power can address. Perhaps unconsciously, but no less due to their unwillingness to address the material demands of their working-class constituencies (Zürn 2014, p. 66), Third Way social-democrats played into the discourse of the populist far-right about society as an amorphous 'people' disgruntled with an increasingly hollowed out state (Bishop and Payne 2019; Della Salla 1997).

The appeal of populism among the declining industrial class in the 'rust belts' of the US Midwest and Northern England is characteristic of how international economic pressures, and the domestic effects created by the representational deficits, upset formerly stable and class-aligned

party systems. The work of Justin Gest (2016) in decaying working-class communities in Ohio and East London precisely offers a vivid depiction of this. In both cases, the retreating working class must cope with the corruption or indifference of the parties traditionally tasked with representing them (the Democratic Party in the US and the Labour Party in the UK) amid urban decay, unemployment, and the dismantlement of communal life.

Many accounts of Western politics have discussed how far right populist parties filled the representational gaps created by the move of social-democratic parties to the centre by appealing to working-class voters. Yet, there is also a third potential trajectory for populism to enter a party system from the centre-right: conservative parties seeing an opportunity to broaden their appeal by adopting an anti-system discourse. During tensions in state–society relations, conservative parties, and the traditional elites they represent, may utilize populism as a way to mobilize anew mass support in the form of anti-systemic appeals based on themes of sovereignty, economic protection, and cultural demarcation. As we will see, this is precisely the way that populism penetrated US and British politics, with trade serving as the touchstone of anti-establishment discourses.

Trade Discourses and Populism in the US and the UK

Trump, Trade and ‘Bringing Back Jobs’

There is no external policy area where Trump has had a stronger practical impact than trade. Trump had been calling for the US to adopt protectionist measures since the 1980s, although back then the main source of angst was Japan rather than China (Lamp 2018, pp. 4–5). At the same time, his rhetoric was built on a long-standing tradition of anti-establishment politicians using trade to highlight and encapsulate the costs for broad segments of American society of the external choices of elites. Thus, trade allowed Trump to re-articulate the internationalization of large parts of US economy as a problem of political representation. The contours of US politics since the 1990s explain why there was a shift from the long anti-trade stances emanating mostly from the Democratic left and organized labour, towards a newly emerged anti-trade populist rhetoric from the Republican right.

Trade was the original touchstone of domestic dissent after the end of the Cold War. Early populist upheavals in the 1992 presidential election – Pat Buchanan’s challenge to President George H. W. Bush in the Republican primary and the successful third-party candidacy of Ross Perot – focused on trade, especially the ratification of NAFTA (Perot and Choate 1993). Despite sectional opposition coming from organized labour, protectionist sentiments seemed to be most effective when woven around identarian and anti-immigration feelings, such as the ones expressed by Buchanan, or loose anti-elite sentiments like those expressed by Perot.

Free trade was supported by businesses, the establishments of both parties, and the overwhelming majority of academic economists, who largely dismissed anti-trade sentiment as

irrational and illiterate (for a characteristic sample of this line of thinking at the time see Krugman 1993). Despite being initiated by pro-business Republicans, NAFTA, the founding of the WTO and the integration of China in the world market were all completed under the auspices of Bill Clinton's Democrats (Skonieczny 2001). Clinton's Democrats functioned like the prototypical 'cartel party' (Katz and Mair 1995) that went from representing sectional mass (labour) interests to manipulating and neutralizing them with the promise of benefits for the whole of society and ad hoc compensation for 'globalization losers' (Shoch 2000).

However, the 2008 financial crisis, along with the debacle of the Iraq War, highlighted the extent to which the US commitment to the post-Cold War multilateral order went against the preferences and interests of large parts of the American society. Together with foreign military entanglements and rising immigration, trade became a symbol of how internationalization undercut the link between a national political community and a political system largely absorbed by considerations of global affairs. Such a political system works towards furthering the needs of strata best positioned to benefit from international economic openness, but ignores those who cannot.

In this context, it is telling that Trump's disruptive 2016 campaign articulated protectionism as an opportunity to castigate the establishment, rather than a well thought out agenda for recalibrating America's political economy (Skonieczny 2018). In Trump's rhetoric, trade was the method by which the 'people' were being 'cheated' by hostile outsiders in collusion with indifferent domestic elites: China (Reuters 2016), Mexico, Japan, and, after he took over the presidency, even long-standing US allies like Canada (Politico 2018) and the EU (CNBC 2019a).

Secondly, the international economic exposure had a relatively concentrated negative economic impact on the decaying post-industrial white working class of the US Midwest, which only exacerbated the support for an anti-trade rhetoric and underpinned Trump's populist strategy (Lamp 2018, pp. 8–9). This allowed him to weave multiple dimensions of exclusion and peripheralization – economic, cultural, regional – and construct a broad and inclusive identity of the 'people', all while pursuing narrower tactical goals, namely, to win the electoral votes of crucial swing states in the 2016 presidential election (Trump 2016).

The potency of Trump's trade policy as an anti-systemic discourse rather than a developed programmatic agenda can be seen also in the way it was applied during his presidency (Lamp 2018, p. 26). He effectively terminated the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), raised tariffs against China, threatened Mexico and Canada into accepting a renegotiation of NAFTA (Gertz 2018), and forced the EU into trade negotiations after threatening punitive tariffs against European exports (especially German cars). He also attempted cross-issue linkages with trade, e.g. threatening Mexico with tariffs if immigration were not reduced (CNBC 2019b). Throughout this time, most economic experts agreed that Trump's policies would fail to achieve their stated economic goals, instead generating costs felt particularly by some of Trump's core supporters (New York Times 2019).

Of course, the line between the applied policies and threats in Trump's trade policy was always blurred. Actual policy mattered less than his ability to display a highly personalistic leadership

with little regard for international institutions and negotiation processes (Lamp 2018, pp. 11–12). This was expressed not only in applying tariffs and punishing others for ‘cheating’ America, but also in trade agreements that he could tout as personal achievements, e.g. the revamped NAFTA (now called USMCA), and the trade truce with China in January 2020 . Rather than pursuing economic goals, Trump’s trade policy ultimately served as a performance of an elected leader in direct communication with a nationally demarcated ‘people’ (Boucher and Thies 2019), all while remaining indifferent to the exigencies of the international order (Lamp 2018, pp. 7–8).

It is also interesting how Trump’s populist trade discourse was accommodated by the Republican Party although it broke with its economic orthodoxies. Indeed, along with his criticism of the Iraq war, Trump’s protectionism was his main anti-system credential in the 2016 Republican primary. However, once he secured power, Trump pursued classical Republican policies such as tax-cuts for the rich and the, ultimately failed, repeal of Obamacare. In the absence of policies that would reassure his newfound supporters, Trump turned to new trade policies to claim that he pursued the interests of the ‘people’. Despite difference with their orthodox economic ideas, Trump’s trade populism thus dovetailed with the Republicans’ broader strategy of presenting themselves as the party of the ‘real people’. When Trump’s economic protectionism was recast in cultural terms (e.g. in his linkage between immigration and tariffs on Mexico), Republicans found it easier to justify a departure from their economic credos (Associated Press 2019).

Trump’s trade policy functioned as a populist discourse rather than a coherent programme of economic recalibration in favour of the parts of American society exposed to international competition. It was interwoven with various other themes of Trump’s populism – his attacks on cultural elites, immigration, the political system – while serving as a powerful symbol of reinstating popular control over a policy that had been seen for too long as benefiting other countries rather than US interests (Lamp 2018, p. 37). Protectionism, often expressed as a threat and a sentiment rather than a coherent policy (Skonieczny 2018), mediated between the domestic and the international realms by reinstating the primacy of the former over the latter.

Brexit, Trade and ‘Taking Back Control’

Trade became an unlikely bone of contention of the debate following the British referendum on EU membership in 2016. The success of the Leave campaign in the referendum was widely attributed to its effective and emotional message of the UK ‘taking back control’ of its borders, especially of immigration. In this sense, the vote for Brexit and the subsequent debate in the UK have been seen as emblematic of the rise of right-wing national populism in Western democracies driven by cultural disaffection (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018; see generally Kriesi et al 2008). To the extent that Brexit was entwined with the immigration debate, it can indeed be seen as the British expression of the same dynamics that have bolstered the populist radical right across Europe.

At the same time, Brexit distilled decades of British Euroscepticism (Forster 2002; Gifford 2014a), especially in one of the UK’s two major parties, the Conservatives (Bale 2010). Indeed, its association with an anti-immigration agenda came primarily through the activism of Nigel

Farage's United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and the opportunistic adoption of this issue by Conservative leaders of the Leave campaign. Notably, Brexit's origins lie in the long-standing advocacy by a pro-free market, libertarian milieu of the Conservative Party where it was presented as a project of sovereignty and liberation from a 'protectionist' EU that inhibited the UK from harnessing globalization (Baker et al. 2008; Hannan 2012).

As a result, the new Conservative prime minister Theresa May, who assumed power immediately after the 2016 referendum to negotiate the UK's exit from the EU, made trade independence a core criterion of 'delivering Brexit'. In her speeches, both trade and immigration became symbols of 'taking back control', the slogan of the Leave campaign in the referendum (May 2017). However, within the framework of the Brexit debate, 'trade' became intertwined with both national independence internationally and a recalibration of state-society relations domestically. Such free trade discourses in post-referendum Britain revealed a lot about the populist character of Brexit.

When it comes to political economy, the pro-free market Conservatives demanded the UK to be unshackled from the 'protectionist' EU, which is in stark disagreement with the needs of the depressed, post-industrial working class of North England – the constituency largely credited with delivering victory to Leave in the referendum (Rodrik 2017, p. 22). In addition, the economic agenda of the right-wing of the Conservative Party demanding deregulation and the rolling back of the UK's commitment to EU environmental, social, and labour standards (Dromey 2017), was visibly at odds with the material needs of the depressed working class. In the post-referendum period, proposals produced by pro-Brexit groups, such as the Economists for Free Trade, were received with great suspicion by experts and the media. Following initial difficulties to roll over existing free trade agreements it had signed as part of the EU (The Guardian 2019), the new Department for International Trade celebrated the signing of these rolled-over agreements as new 'trade deals', when all they did was largely replicate EU-era provisions (Financial Times 2020). By most objective measures, five years after the referendum, the free trade promise of Brexit was faltering.

Even so, the real value of the call for free trade lay in its populist character. First, the demand for reinstating the UK's independent trade policy was a powerful symbol of regaining national sovereignty, the vision of a confident 'buccaneering' Britain striking out on its own on the international stage and shrewdly making deals for itself without delegating authority to Brussels (Byrne 2017). Free trade was also associated with an emotional image of rediscovering connections with the Commonwealth. Here, Brexiteers' trade discourse often came across as imperial nostalgia, emphasizing ties with countries like Canada, Australia, and New Zealand that would replace economic relations with the EU (Bell and Vucetic 2019). By helping reinstate both national sovereignty and the imperial connection, free trade provided the slogan 'taking back control' with both a sentimental effect and the tangibility of a practical policy (Siles-Brügge 2019).

In turn, this international reorientation reflected the demand of recalibrating state-society relations after decades of widening representational gaps. Since the 1980s, the UK experienced heightened economic deregulation which brought about the material and cultural peripheralization

of a once robust working class. State retrenchment initiated by the Thatcherite Conservatives in the 1980s and 1990s was furthered by a new Conservative government elected amid the Great Recession in 2010 and implementing a harsh programme of austerity (Lee 2011). As the centrist wing of the Conservative Party that supported Remain in the 2016 referendum was largely associated with austerity (Vail 2015), in the minds of many the EU became identified with declining welfare.

Euroscepticism had taken over the Conservative Party following its heavy defeat in 1997 at the hands of Tony Blair's New Labour (Lynch and Whitaker 2012). New Labour's post-ideological politics, largely continuing Thatcherite economic policies, was linked with participation in the EU, which Blair strongly supported. For the Blairite project, EU membership was a way to further disentangle public policy from what were seen as parochial sectoral demands (Bulmer 2008). In this way, the absorption of New Labour in the logic of the state (Mair 2000) was interconnected with the absorption of the British state in the EU (Bickerton 2015; Gifford 2014b).

The 1997–2010 tenure of New Labour, however, was also associated with an agenda of social modernization and renewal. Labour's permissive attitudes towards European immigration, opting not to apply transitional limits on the freedom of movement from new EU member states after the 2004 enlargement, matched the party's openness to multiculturalism, but also agreed with an economic mindset that demanded deregulation and welcomed the influx of cheap workers. To this end, representational frustrations with a largely technocratic mode of policymaking, economic discontent and cultural alienation brought about by mass immigration aligned in an explosive mix against a New Labour strongly committed to the EU (Goodhart 2017).

Thus, Brexit as a populist phenomenon constructed a broad chain of frustrations – political, economic, cultural – against the British state. That much was understood by Theresa May who, in her first party conference speech as prime minister, famously admonished internationalized elites as 'citizens of nowhere' (May 2016). More than just a strategy of extending the Conservative Party's appeal to popular strata, the discourse adopted by its pro-Brexit wing struck explicitly populist tones – carrying on from Michael Gove's pre-referendum assertion that 'the people have had enough of experts' (Mance 2016) to Jacob Rees-Mogg's framing of the EU as a project of the 'metropolitan elites' (Logan 2017) and Boris Johnson's warnings of an 'elite conspiracy to thwart Brexit' in the years since (Kaonga 2019).

In light of this, Brexiteer free trade advocacy rather crystallized a chain of popular frustrations with the political system than offered consistent policy suggestions of economic policy. Trade became an avatar for 'taking back control', its promise of repatriating powers from Brussels to London a symbol of realigning the policies of the state with the democratic accountability towards the 'people'. Brexit allowed a largely idiosyncratic and unsubstantiated policy proposal – escape 'EU protectionism' and reorient British trade to the 'Anglosphere' – to be accepted by large parts of British society. Especially it was to be accepted by socially, culturally, and geographically peripheralized groups who stood to gain very little from a policy of open trade and market deregulation.

This free trade discourse on the other hand – in conjunction with the anti-immigration one, the other pillar of Brexit– also served an immediate tactical goal of the Conservative Party. Euroscepticism came to dominate the Conservative Party during its time in the political wilderness, when New Labour and its modernizing agenda seemed to have displaced it as the dominant party of British politics. During this period, libertarian Euroscepticism was seen as a problem for the party, thwarting its appeal to moderate voters in a modernizing society. Nonetheless, the populist nature of Brexit helped recast Euroscepticism. This allowed the right wing of the Conservatives to outflank the centrist wing of their party, ultimately leading in 2019 to the emergence of Boris Johnson as leader of the party and prime minister and later, to his crushing victory in the elections of December of the same year.

As with Trump and his revamped trade deals, populist trade discourse in the UK did not go as far as complete rupture between the UK and the EU. If anything, the image of a sovereign government negotiating down to the wire, hours before ‘cliff-edge deadlines’ were about to expire, agreements with the EU – the exit agreement ahead of formal exit on 31 January 2020 and the future relationship treaty before the end of the transition period on 31 December 2020 – vindicated the populist call for ‘taking back control’. Even if both deals went a long way towards maintaining existing trade arrangements, they fulfilled the promise of ‘delivering Brexit’, a major symbol of the UK’s new ability to strike its own trade deals.

Conclusion: Populism as a New Equilibrium between Contestation and Global Governance
Populism in the US and populism in the UK between 2016 and 2020 presented intriguing analogies. In both cases, populism emerged from within an established conservative party while adopting some of the rhetoric and demands of the left, especially the frustrations of the post-industrial working class; it thrived in the space abandoned by centre-left parties who abrogated their role as representatives of class interests; and it articulated the ‘people vs. system’ divide in terms of an inside-outside opposition, reflecting the fact that under globalization the ‘elites’, ‘power’, and ‘system’ are not only above the people, but also outside the realm of the nation-state.

Given these analogies, it may appear paradoxical that Trump and Brexiteers expressed opposite attitudes on trade, with the former being protectionist and the latter glorifying free trade. This difference can be accounted for by the differing geopolitical position of the two states, the one – a global superpower that offloaded on its domestic working class the cost of supporting the open system of globalization; the other – a middle-sized state that exited a continental economic and legal order. Both kinds of populism articulated trade as a solution to problems of representation engendered by economic globalization and state internationalization: protectionism in the US and independent trade policy in the UK both promised to reinstate popular control over a state that was no longer responsive.

The articulation of trade policy as a claim to representation explains the appeal of populist trade positions despite their very doubtful validity and questionable benefits to the supporters of these populist movements. US and British populists spoke for a broad and loose identity of the ‘people’ whose heterogeneous demands were collapsed in the blanket call for recognition and

representation, an emotive demand of repatriating ‘control’ to the territorial state where democratic communities reside. Populism’s ability to frame the grievances of left-behind groups as a demand for representation of the ‘real people’ challenges the norms of openness, efficiency, and rules-based policymaking upon which the legitimacy of international regimes, like the WTO and the EU, lies.

As observed, the practical impact of populist trade discourses is significant, but also has its limits. In practice, the trade policies that result from populist effervescence rarely go as far as initial promises of fully satisfying the material grievance of the ‘people’. In the face of tactical considerations – Trump’s attempted re-election (which, to many seemed very probable before the COVID pandemic) or the British Conservatives’ winning a majority in Parliament – populists are perfectly capable of pivoting to more pragmatic positions. This often leads to trade truces, like the one the US signed with China in early 2020, or compromise agreements, like the EU–UK exit agreement in early 2020 and the future relationship deal in late 2020 amid the recession caused by the COVID pandemic.

Thinking about the contestation of the international order more broadly, the US and UK cases show the disruptive potential of societal contestation, emerging from grievances among large segments of the population, but also the possibility of it being domesticated in national political systems and, by extension, the structure of the global order. Britain’s EU exit and US tariffs were of course a new concerning development for global governance. But despite the uncertainty they created, they also channelled popular discontent towards a new equilibrium between national representational processes and international engagement. In this equilibrium, elements of the international order like the global trade regime do not collapse completely, but become more contingent and uncertain, subject to the ebbs and flows of domestic politics and the varying ability of governments to channel societal contestation.

It is important to note then that the new equilibrium is not one of reinstating the globalization business-as-usual through a populist backdoor. Brexit is a reality and it continues to play out as an acrimonious brinkmanship between London and Brussels over checks and customs in Northern Ireland, endangering peace there. Meanwhile, the new US president Joe Biden does not appear willing to return to the unfettered free trade status quo ante without some conditions being satisfied first. Indeed, in a range of issues, from steel and aluminium tariffs and his ‘Buy American’ message to vaccine export and foreign travel bans, he has proven to be as sovereignty-minded as his predecessor, if not more. These developments foreshadow bigger fragmentation regardless of whether populists are in power or not, as states instrumentally oscillate between pushes for openness and protectionist retreats depending on the domestic and external pressures they face. As such, contestation is now structurally embedded in the new international order, with a carefully choreographed theatre of contestation between states serving to neutralize societal contestation at home.

In this sense, populism can be understood as both generating and forming part of a new equilibrium between contestation and global governance, absorbing genuine societal contestation into more antagonistic state policies that, however, can always result in bilateral, regional or

plurilateral agreements under the right conditions. More than stagnation, but less than return to the old globalization normal, global governance's future seems to be one of fragmentation, unpredictability, and periodical crises bookended by last-moment bargains. Given the intensity of societal contestation witnessed in the US and the UK in 2016, this may well be the best that could be hoped for.

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