

The ambiguous impact of populist trade discourses on the international economic order

MONIKA BRUSENBAUCH MEISLOVÁ AND
ANGELOS CHRYSOGELOS*

Is there a populist playbook in trade? The explicit protectionism of United States President Donald Trump led many to view protectionism as an inescapable feature of populism.¹ The history of populism supports this idea. Trump was the last in a series of populists in the US opposing free trade.² Historically, populist leaders like Juan Perón and others in Latin America in the mid-twentieth century, and African leaders post-decolonization, were also protectionist.³ Much of the contemporary debate around the impact of populism on trade revolves around the assumption that populism and opposition to free trade are naturally linked.⁴

And yet, populism and protectionism just as often part ways. The first modern populist movement, the agrarian People's Party, which emerged in the US in the 1890s, opposed the US policy of protectionism of the time. Neo-liberal populists in Latin America and Europe in the 1990s adopted the tenets of the Washington Consensus, including free trade.⁵ Today, most prominent populist leaders across the global South, like Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and India's Narendra Modi, espouse free trade.⁶ The picture is further complicated by the fact that, often,

* This article is part of a special section in the September 2024 issue of *International Affairs* on 'The effects of global populism', guest-edited by Daniel F. Wajner and Sandra Destradi. We wish to express our sincere gratitude to the guest editors and to the editors of *International Affairs* for their invaluable support and guidance throughout the publication process. We also extend our thanks to the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions on previous versions of our article. In Monika Brusenbauch Meislová's case, writing of this article was supported by Masaryk University's project: Perspectives of the European integration in the context of Global Politics VI (MUNI/A/1475/2023).

¹ See, for example, Pierre Lemieux, 'Populism and protectionism', *Regulation* 40: 2, 2017, pp. 6–7.

² Paul Krugman, 'The uncomfortable truth about NAFTA: it's foreign policy, stupid', *Foreign Affairs* 72: 5, 1993, pp. 13–19, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20045808>; Ross Perot and Pat Choate, *Save your job, save our country: why NAFTA must be stopped—now!* (New York: Hyperion Books, 1993).

³ Robert H. Johnson, 'The new populism and the old: demands for a new international economic order and American agrarian protest', *International Organization* 37: 1, 1983, pp. 41–72, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300004197>.

⁴ See, indicatively, Francis Fukuyama and Robert Muggah, 'How populism is poisoning the global liberal order', World Economic Forum, 6 Feb. 2018, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/02/how-populism-is-poisoning-the-global-liberal-order>. For more nuanced views, see Dani Rodrik, 'Populism and the economics of globalization', *Journal of International Business Policy*, vol. 1, 2018, pp. 12–33, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s42214-018-0001-4>; Jeroen van der Waal and Willem de Koster, 'Populism and support for protectionism: the relevance of opposition to trade openness for leftist and rightist populist voting in the Netherlands', *Political Studies* 66: 3, 2018, pp. 560–76, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321717723505>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 17 Jan. 2024.)

⁵ Kurt Weyland, 'Neoliberal populism in Latin America and Eastern Europe', *Comparative Politics* 31: 4, 1999, pp. 379–401, <https://doi.org/10.2307/422236>.

⁶ Alan Beattie, 'The populist strongmen who are strangely keen on globalisation', *Financial Times*, 27 April 2022.

populist movements of the same ideological outlook hold opposing preferences. In two prominent such cases in recent years, right-wing populists in the US and the United Kingdom espoused opposing trade positions: protectionism for Trump and support for free trade for Brexiteers (those on all sides of the political spectrum who supported Brexit—the UK's exit from the European Union), Conservatives and UK Independence Party (UKIP) supporters alike.⁷

This discrepancy gives rise to two questions. First, does populism have a consistent outlook in international relations and foreign policy? Second, does populism have any discernible impact on international affairs? The literature has shown that populism on its own cannot be identified with specific policy content beyond a binary view of a struggle between 'people' and 'elites'. The policies of populists are cued by other factors, such as their 'thick' ideologies.⁸ If this is so, and if populists of even the same ideological ilk have widely different preferences, is populism a relevant concept at all for understanding international change?

This article addresses both questions by examining comparatively the relationship between trade and populism in the US and the UK after the victories in 2016 of Trump and the pro-Brexit movement respectively. We develop a discursive framework and methodology to show that, despite the different trade preferences of these two populist movements, the discourses used to legitimate them were remarkably similar. Two antithetical trade policies were articulated similarly as a struggle of the 'people' against the 'elites'. In this way, populist discourses offered a strong defence of controversial new policies: protectionism in the US, and reorientation of trade away from the EU and towards global markets in the UK.

Our argument builds on, but also extends, a number of important contributions. First, we build on a growing literature on the international dimensions of populism and its impact on foreign policy. This literature largely accepts that populism matters, not because it cues specific policies, but because it articulates foreign policy as a struggle against a technocratic international order, and because it uses it as a tool in domestic political competition.⁹ Nevertheless, this literature has not until now consistently studied trade. Second, our work extends analyses of populist trade policies using a critical and discursive perspective.¹⁰ However, these

⁷ Note Bale's argument that British right-wing populism was initiated from inside the Conservative Party, well before it was adopted by UKIP: Tim Bale, 'Who leads and who follows? The symbiotic relationship between UKIP and the Conservatives—and populism and Euroscepticism', *Politics* 38: 3, 2018, pp. 263–77, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395718754718>. On the mix of populism and traditional conservative ideology in UKIP, see Karine Tournier-Sol, 'Reworking the Eurosceptic and conservative traditions into a populist narrative: UKIP's winning formula?', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 53: 1, 2015, pp. 140–56, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12208>.

⁸ Kirk A. Hawkins, Ryan E. Carlin, Levente Littvay and Cristóbal Kaltwasser, eds, *The ideational approach to populism: concept, theory, and analysis* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2019).

⁹ Jean-Christophe Boucher and Cameron G. Thies, "I am a tariff man": the power of populist foreign policy rhetoric under President Trump', *Journal of Politics* 81: 2, 2019, pp. 712–22, <https://doi.org/10.1086/702229>; David Cadier and Kacper Szulecki, 'Populism, historical discourse and foreign policy: the case of Poland's Law and Justice government', *International Politics*, vol. 57, 2020, pp. 990–1011, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-020-00252-6>; Sandra Destradi and Johannes Plagemann, 'Populism and International Relations: (un)predictability, personalisation, and the reinforcement of existing trends in world politics', *Review of International Studies* 45: 5, 2019, pp. 711–30, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210519000184>.

¹⁰ Nicolas Lamp, *How should we think about the winners and losers from globalization? Three narratives and their implications for the redesign of international economic agreements*, Queen's University Legal Research Paper No. 2018–

works are overwhelmingly focused on cases of protectionism, and do not examine how populist discourses can also express preferences in favour of free trade. The case of Brexit is especially fascinating for the study of the links between populism and free trade, with the latter dominating the economic discourse of a movement whose core voters otherwise held material preferences very much opposed to the open economics of globalization.¹¹ Finally, our analysis demonstrates that conventional rationalist and materialist assumptions¹² are not always enough to make sense of processes of trade policy and preference formation by populists.

With respect to other arguments of this special section, our analysis showcases how populism has a consistent *politics* and *polity* impact, even if the content of *policies* differs. Understanding populism as a discourse galvanizing the unity between populist leaders and followers, we show how populists use foreign policy and international issues as a method of domestic mobilization around the ‘people vs elite’ divide. The practical impact on the international order is less direct than a uniform opposition to free trade. Rather, despite their nominally different objectives, Trumpism and Brexit contributed to the weakening of multilateral institutions, the infusion of a more transactional mindset into the international economic order, and its fragmentation and politicization.¹³

The article proceeds as follows: the first section presents populism as a discourse that articulates foreign policy as a binary struggle between ‘people’ and ‘elites’ and uses external policies like trade as a field where this opposition plays out. We then present our discursive methodology and the data used to support our argument. The third section identifies three discourse topics present in the articulation of trade by Trump and the pro-Brexit movement in the years after their victories in 2016. The fourth section summarizes findings and their implications for our understanding of the impact of populism on the international order.

Trade, Trump and Brexit: making sense of populism as a discourse of international relations

For years, protectionism in the US and the UK’s exit from the EU were idiosyncratic propositions, identified with specific societal interests like the organized labour on the left of the Democratic Party in the US, or ideological milieus such as the Eurosceptic right wing of the Conservative party in the UK. Both positions were largely marginalized in the years after the end of the Cold War, as they went against the economic orthodoxy of the time.¹⁴

102 (Kingston, ON: Queen’s University Faculty of Law, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3290590>; Amy Skonieczny, ‘Emotions and political narratives: populism, Trump and trade’, *Politics and Governance* 6: 4, 2018, pp. 62–72, <http://dx.doi.org/10.17645/pag.v6i4.1574>.

¹¹ Justin Gest, *The new minority: white working class politics in an age of immigration and inequality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹² Andrew Moravcsik, ‘Taking preferences seriously: a liberal theory of international politics’, *International Organization* 51: 4, 1997, pp. 513–53, <https://doi.org/10.1162/002081897550447>.

¹³ Kent Jones, ‘The populist damage to the trading system’, Centre for Economic Policy Research, 19 Jan. 2022, <https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/populist-damage-trading-system>.

¹⁴ Krugman, ‘The uncomfortable truth about NAFTA’; Simon Lee and Matt Beech, eds, *The Conservatives under David Cameron: built to last?* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

The reorientation of trade policies in the US and the UK after 2016 followed the rise of Trumpism and the Brexit movement, both of which we conceptualize as populist movements encompassing a variety of actors and audiences.¹⁵ Although both started from the political margins, they found roots in conservative parties that had supported free market ideas and (less enthusiastically and consistently) multilateralism. These emerging movements changed the outlook of these parties, making them vehicles for discontent with globalization, especially for the depressed post-industrial working class.¹⁶ Interestingly, both movements emphasized trade—in particular Trump, for whom it was emblematic (for Brexiteers, trade was interlinked with a mix of other issues, including democratic sovereignty, immigration and perceived overreach by EU institutions).

More strikingly, despite similarities in ideology and the socio-economic profile of their core followers, these two populist movements produced very different trade positions. Trump was staunchly protectionist, but UK Brexiteers presented exit from the EU as an anti-protectionist initiative.¹⁷ Although it is unarguable that populism disrupted the politics and foreign policies of both the US and the UK after 2016,¹⁸ the very different stances on trade of two otherwise very similar populist movements still remain under-studied. It raises the dual question of whether populism has a consistent outlook in international relations and foreign policy and, relatedly, whether it has any discernible impact on world politics.

Answering these questions is complicated by the fact that, until recently, most works on populism and foreign policy were using the ideational approach of populism studies that understands populism as a ‘thin-centred’ ideology structured around pro-people sentiments and anti-elitism intertwined with ‘thick’ ideologies providing specific policy content.¹⁹ Based on this approach, however, it is difficult to claim that there is a distinctive profile of populism in foreign policy, as evidenced by the substantial policy differences between populist movements. We believe that the picture changes if we use the discursive rather than the ideational approach. The discursive approach has already been used in the analysis of populism and foreign policy in the cases of the US and the UK,²⁰ although not

¹⁵ Paris Aslanidis, ‘Populism and social movements’, in Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul A. Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo and Pierre Ostiguy, eds, *The Oxford handbook of populism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Boucher and Thies, “I am a tariff man”.

¹⁶ Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin, *National populism: the revolt against liberal democracy* (London: Penguin, 2018); Gest, *The new minority*.

¹⁷ Franco Zappettini, ‘The official vision for “global Britain”: Brexit as rupture and continuity between free trade, liberal internationalism and “values”’, in Veronika Koller, Susanne Kopf and Marlene Miglbauer, eds, *Discourses of Brexit* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 123–39.

¹⁸ For overviews, see Corina Lacatus and Gustav Meibauer, ‘Elections, rhetoric and American foreign policy in the age of Donald Trump’, *Politics* 41: 1, 2021, pp. 3–14, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395720935376>; Benjamin Martill and Adrian Rogstad, ‘The end of consensus? Folk theory and the politics of foreign policy in the Brexit referendum’, *Global Affairs* 5: 4–5, 2019, pp. 347–67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23340460.2019.1701950>.

¹⁹ See, for example, Bertjan Verbeek and Andrej Zaslove, ‘The impact of populist radical right parties on foreign policy: the Northern League as a junior coalition partner in the Berlusconi governments’, *European Political Science Review* 7: 4, 2015, pp. 525–46, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773914000319>.

²⁰ Corina Lacatus and Gustav Meibauer, “Saying it like it is”: right-wing populism, international politics, and the performance of authenticity’, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 24: 3, 2022, pp. 437–57, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13691481221089137>.

in the area of trade.²¹ According to the discursive approach, populism must be understood as a discourse that orders politics around competition between two antagonistic camps—the people and the elites. Populist discourses construct a broad identity of the ‘people’ that absorbs multiple demands and groups excluded from official power.²²

There are two implications of the discursive approach. First, it sees the notion of the ‘people’ as central in any populist movement. Populism’s distinct feature is its specific logic of articulation that absorbs multiple frustrated demands, often contradictory but always united by their condition of exclusion from political power.²³ Second, the discursive approach sees populism as a constructed phenomenon. It is not an objectively existing set of ideas; rather, it emerges when the ‘people’ are brought into being by actors collating multiple frustrated demands in an overarching call for representation and recognition.²⁴

Thus, the discursive approach highlights political agency as the root of populist articulations. This is of course the case for strongly personalistic populist movements such as Trumpism, but it is also true for looser movements like the Brexit movement, formed around the demand for the UK’s exit from the EU, which operated both inside and outside the British partisan arena. In both cases, the discursive approach calls attention to the use of populist articulations (binary discourses pitting the ‘people’ against the ‘system’).²⁵ That said, the study of populist discourses often gravitates towards leaders,²⁶ either because a personalistic leadership is important as a channel for spreading populist discourse, or because ostensibly leaderless movements often end up in alliances with structured and hierarchical political parties or under the tutelage of political entrepreneurs.²⁷

Based on the discursive approach, foreign policy made by populists is distinguished by how a state’s external relations are articulated in terms of the people/elite polarity. It is not about the content of foreign policies, but about the practice of articulating concurrently, and in antagonistic terms, the relationship of the state with the outside world and that of the people with political authority.²⁸ This can especially be the case with trade, which uniquely embodies multiple

²¹ For partial exceptions see Rubrick Biegon, ‘A populist grand strategy? Trump and the framing of American decline’, *International Relations* 33: 4, 2019, pp. 517–39, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117819852399>; Amy Skonieczny, ‘Narrative analysis and U.S. trade politics’, in *SAGE research methods cases part 2* (London: SAGE Publications, 2019).

²² Ernesto Laclau, *On populist reason* (London: Verso, 2005); Francisco Panizza, *Populism and the mirror of democracy* (London: Verso, 2005).

²³ Yannis Stavrakakis, ‘Antinomies of formalism: Laclau’s theory of populism and the lessons from religious populism in Greece’, *Journal of Political Ideologies* 9: 3, 2004, pp. 253–67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1356931042000263519>; Yannis Stavrakakis et al., ‘Extreme right-wing populism in Europe: revisiting a reified association’, *Critical Discourse Studies* 14: 4, 2017, pp. 420–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2017.1309325>.

²⁴ Benjamin De Cleen and Yannis Stavrakakis, ‘Distinctions and articulations: a discourse theoretical framework for the study of populism and nationalism’, *Javnost* 24: 4, 2017, pp. 301–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2017.1330083>.

²⁵ De Cleen and Stavrakakis, ‘Distinctions and articulations’.

²⁶ See, for example, Stavrakakis, ‘Antinomies of formalism’.

²⁷ Aslanidis, ‘Populism and social movements’.

²⁸ Cadier and Szulecki, ‘Populism, historical discourse and foreign policy’.

dimensions of exclusion on which populists can mobilize: groups disadvantaged economically by a state's existing trade policies; opposition to loss of sovereignty to foreign adversaries; and a sense of exclusion from decisions made by political, economic and technocratic elites due to trade's technical complexity which makes it difficult for the general public to follow and scrutinize policy-making.²⁹

Applying the discursive approach to the study of foreign policy helps us understand better its distinct character and implications. Foreign policy is used by populists not to promote or aggregate various societal preferences, but to rearrange politics around a binary competition between the 'people' and the 'system'. As such, foreign policy serves primarily to strengthen the identity between leaders and followers of broad and heterogeneous populist movements.³⁰ This allows formerly idiosyncratic ideas and preferences to be rearticulated as demands for popular emancipation and protection against domestic elites and foreign foes, thus attracting broader support from multiple marginalized groups.

Regardless of the policies they articulate, all populist discourses are expected to exhibit certain common characteristics: to present foreign policy as a tool to help the 'people' overcome some kind of crisis, and to use it for the mobilization of a unified popular political subject encompassing multiple excluded groups so that the 'people' may regain control of its own fate from the system and its elites.³¹ This discursive logic generally highlights sovereignty, independent decision-making and high-profile activism in the international arena, to realize its promise of reinstating the primacy of the 'people' over international organizations and technocratic networks with complex procedures that thwart the pure expression of the popular will.³²

In short, what can be generalized about populist foreign policy is the process (the 'how') rather than the content (the 'what'). While many populists are isolationists and protectionists, many others are not.³³ Populists articulate their interactions with international institutions as part of the polarity between 'people' and 'elites' and as a way of demonstrating that popular sovereignty is reinstated. Sometimes this may inform a logic of withdrawal, or even an outright undermining of multilateralism,³⁴ but at other times the people's sovereignty may necessitate a positive engagement or active presence on the international stage.

²⁹ Lamp, 'How should we think about the winners and losers from globalization?'; Skonieczny, 'Emotions and political narratives'.

³⁰ Boucher and Thies, "I am a tariff man"; Lamp, 'How should we think about the winners and losers from globalization?'.

³¹ Cadier and Szulecki, 'Populism, historical discourse and foreign policy'.

³² Angelos Chrysosgelos, 'State transformation and populism: from the internationalized to the neo-sovereign state?', *Politics* 40: 1, 2020, pp. 22–37, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395718803830>; Angelos Chrysosgelos, 'Disentangling populism and nationalism as discourses of foreign policy: the case of Greek foreign policy during the Eurozone crisis 2010–19', *International Relations*, publ. online 29 April 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00471178221094242>. See also Ryan Beasley, Juliet Kaarbo and Kai Oppermann, 'Role theory, foreign policy, and the social construction of sovereignty: Brexit stage right', *Global Studies Quarterly* 1: 1, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksab001>.

³³ Destradi and Plagemann, 'Populism and International Relations'; Walter Russell Mead, 'The Tea Party and American foreign policy: what populism means for globalism', *Foreign Affairs* 90: 2, 2011, pp. 28–44.

³⁴ Tanja A. Börzel and Michael Zürn, 'Contestations of the liberal international order: from liberal multilateralism to postnational liberalism', *International Organization* 75: 2, 2021, pp. 282–305, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818320000570>.

While it cannot always be framed in direct causal terms, the impact of populist discourses is no less real, since any political action is ‘prepared, accompanied, controlled and influenced by language’.³⁵ Or, put differently, ‘discourse matters, because “moral and political aberrations almost always start with linguistic neglect” ... The language used, the tone chosen, and the narratives employed all make an important difference’.³⁶ The discursive approach yields specific expectations about the impact of populism on *policies*, *politics* and *politics* of international relations.³⁷

As discussed, all populists do not pursue the same *policies* in an issue area. But, regardless of their content, all populist policies will be articulated and implemented in a way that demonstrates the reinstatement of popular sovereignty. At the same time, investigating discourses helps us delineate the boundaries of acceptability, providing insights into what actions *not* to expect, such as Trump’s unlikely pursuit of free trade deals or Brexiteers’ championing of protectionism. Second, foreign policy is a field where the divides of domestic *politics* are reproduced, with external goals and objectives rearticulated according to the political needs and strategies of populists, especially with respect to the mobilization of their followers and the bolstering of populist leaders’ profiles.³⁸ This points to a new process of policy-making that increases the contingencies of domestic politics over international regimes such as trade, resulting, finally, in more fragmented, transactional and unpredictable international *politics*.

Studying populist trade discourses: data and methodology

For our analysis, we compiled a corpus of primary sources (public speeches) by former US president Donald Trump and former UK prime ministers Theresa May and Boris Johnson. Even though May and Johnson’s approaches to Brexit varied, with May adopting a reluctant pro-Brexit stance after the vote and Johnson championing Brexit fervently, both accepted the outcome of the referendum and exit from the EU as the expression of ‘the will of the people’. Also, while May is less frequently associated with populism than Johnson, many aspects of her Brexit policy and rhetoric included populist elements.³⁹

To ensure balance between the breadth and depth of the analysis, the data corpus comprises 20 speeches for each actor, that is, 60 in total (the complete list of speeches is available in our online appendix).⁴⁰ We included speeches

³⁵ Christina Schäffner, ‘Editorial: political speeches and discourse analysis’, *Current Issues in Language & Society* 3: 3, 1996, pp. 201–4.

³⁶ Christine Graeff, ‘Mind your language—populist discourse and the future of Europe’, *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development*, vol. 9, 2017, <https://www.cirsd.org/en/horizons/horizons-autumn-2017-issue-no-9/mind-your-language-populist-discourse-and-the-future-of-europe>.

³⁷ See the introduction to this special section: Daniel F. Wajner, Sandra Destradi and Michael Zürn, ‘The effects of global populism: assessing the populist impact on international affairs’, *International Affairs* 100: 5, 2024, pp. 1819–33, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaae217>.

³⁸ Destradi and Plegemann, ‘Populism and International Relations’.

³⁹ Anatol Stefanowitsch, ‘Delivering a Brexit deal to the British people: Theresa May as a reluctant populist’, *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 67: 3, 2019, pp. 231–63, <https://doi.org/10.1515/zaa-2019-0022>. For a background on populism as a major thread running through the Conservative Party for years, see Bale, ‘Who leads and who follows?’.

⁴⁰ Please see online appendix hosted by the authors: <https://repository.londonmet.ac.uk/9210/>.

with substantial relevance to trade policy, identified by keywords such as ‘trade’, ‘commerce’ or ‘tariffs’. To ensure representativeness, speeches were chosen from different time periods. We also factored in availability of speeches, including only those that were publicly accessible. We analysed all texts in their original versions. As detailed in table 1, the timeframe of our analysis stretches from 2016 to 2022, covering in their entirety the premierships of May (2016–19) and Johnson (2019–22) and the presidency of Trump (2017–21).

Table 1: Distribution of analysed speeches by May, Johnson and Trump, by year, 2016–2022

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Total
May	3	8	4	5				20
Johnson				7	7	3	3	20
Trump		5	6	6	3			20

As highly performative texts, political speeches are a ‘coherent stream of spoken language that is usually prepared for delivery by a speaker to an audience for a specific purpose on a political occasion’,⁴¹ understood here as institutional discourses. As such, they belong to a discursive genre strategically aimed at ‘influencing others, using rhetoric to persuade, excite, and claim leadership’.⁴² Interpreting populist communication as ‘the combination of interrelated discursive dimensions involving both form (style) and content (proposition)’,⁴³ we adopt the general orientation of the discourse historical approach to critical discourse studies.⁴⁴

More specifically, the article uses Michal Krzyżanowski’s two-step procedure. The first level (thematic analysis) is content-oriented, zooming in on easily identifiable discourse topics that define the populist trade discourses. Conceptually, the discourse topics ‘summarize the text, and specify its most important information’.⁴⁵ The discourse topics were identified through indicative analysis, i.e. ‘decoding the meaning of text passages—usually taking place via several thorough readings—and then ordering them into lists of key themes and sub-themes’.⁴⁶ The second

⁴¹ Jonathan Charteris-Black, *Analysing political speeches: rhetoric, discourse and metaphor* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. xiii.

⁴² Beata Beigman Klebanov, Daniel Diermeier and Eyal Beigman, ‘Lexical cohesion analysis of political speech’, *Political Analysis* 16: 4, 2008, pp. 447–63 at p. 448, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pan/mpn007>.

⁴³ Mats Ekström, Marianna Patrona and Joanna Thornborrow, ‘Right-wing populism and the dynamics of style: a discourse-analytic perspective on mediated political performances’, *Palgrave Communications* 4: 83, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-018-0132-6>. For a similar approach to studying populism, see also Claes H. de Vreese et al., ‘Populism as an expression of political communication content and style: a new perspective’, *International Journal of Press/Politics* 23: 4, 2018, pp. 423–38, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161218790035>; Benjamin Moffitt, *The global rise of populism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).

⁴⁴ Michal Krzyżanowski and Ruth Wodak, *The politics of exclusion: debating migration in Austria* [2009] (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2017); Martin Reisingl and Ruth Wodak, *Discourse and discrimination: rhetorics of racism and antisemitism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001).

⁴⁵ Teun van Dijk, *Racism and the Press* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 113; Michal Krzyżanowski, *The discursive construction of European identities: a multilevel approach to discourse and identity in the transforming European Union* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2010), p. 81.

⁴⁶ Krzyżanowski, *The discursive construction of European identities*, p. 81.

level (in-depth analysis) documents the structure of the discourse, concentrating on rhetorical and linguistic devices. In what follows we pay attention to both these levels, while also referring to concrete textual examples derived from the speeches to illustrate our points.

Findings: three populist discourse topics about ‘people’ and ‘trade’

Our analysis on the discursive linkages between trade and populism shows that trade essentially plays out as a ‘floating signifier’.⁴⁷ A floating signifier might simultaneously and/or alternately mean different things to different people. It differs from an ‘empty signifier’, which is a term or symbol that is filled with whatever interpretation best suits a certain group’s objectives or ideology at a given moment, in the sense that while an ‘empty signifier’ serves as a rallying point around a broadly interpretable concept, a ‘floating signifier’ shifts its meaning based on varying contexts and interpretations, engaging in a constant process of meaning-making.⁴⁸ In populist discourse, trade is highly polysemic and chameleonic, with Brexiteers and Trump reconstructing various (often contradictory) meanings.

But despite the floating signifier of trade being unstable, flexible and variable, there were striking similarities in discursive representation of trade in both countries. Both sides conceptualized the people in classic populist terms.⁴⁹ Essential to their discourse were continual references (in May’s case to a much larger extent than in Johnson’s) to the ‘ordinariness’ of these people. While for Brexiteers, they were qualified as ‘ordinary people’,⁵⁰ ‘ordinary working people’,⁵¹ or ‘ordinary working-class people’,⁵² Trump referred to them as ‘hardworking, ordinary citizens’⁵³ and/or ‘everyday Americans’.⁵⁴ Both sides’ discourse systematically featured dichotomous messaging: a binary logic of people vs elite, ‘us’ vs ‘them’, wealth vs poverty, divisiveness vs togetherness, and so on.⁵⁵

Our analysis identifies three prevalent discourse topics through which populist discourse on trade—in spite of Brexiteers’ and Trump’s radically different under-

⁴⁷ Laclau, *On populist reason*.

⁴⁸ Pierre Ostiguy, Francisco Panizza and Benjamin Moffitt, eds, *Populism in global perspective: a performative and discursive approach* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2021).

⁴⁹ Jack Holland and Ben Fermor, ‘The discursive hegemony of Trump’s Jacksonian populism: race, class, and gender in constructions and contestations of US national identity, 2016–2018’, *Politics* 41: 1, 2021, pp. 64–79, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395720936867>; Ruth Wodak, Majid KhosraviNik and Brigitte Mral, eds, *Right-wing populism in Europe* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

⁵⁰ Theresa May, ‘Theresa May’s speech to the 2018 Conservative Party conference’, *PoliticsHome*, 3 Oct. 2018, <https://www.politicshome.com/news/article/read-in-full-theresa-mays-speech-to-the-2018-conservative-party-conference>.

⁵¹ TIME, ‘Read Theresa May’s speech laying out the UK’s plan for Brexit’, 17 Jan. 2017, <https://time.com/4636141/theresa-may-brexiteer-speech-transcript>.

⁵² Theresa May via UKPOL, ‘Theresa May—2016 speech at Conservative Party conference’, 5 Oct. 2016, <https://www.ukpol.co.uk/theresa-may-2016-speech-at-conservative-party-conference>.

⁵³ White House Archives, ‘Remarks by President Trump at the World Economic Forum, Davos, Switzerland’, 21 Jan. 2020, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-world-economic-forum-davos-switzerland>.

⁵⁴ White House Archives, ‘Remarks by President Trump at the World Economic Forum’.

⁵⁵ Ostiguy, Panizza and Moffitt, *Populism in global perspective*.

lying trade philosophies—was projected onto the international sphere and which were common for both types of populism, namely trade policy as a tool to 1) emancipate the people from the elites; 2) give control back to the people; and 3) redeem the people. We explore these discourse topics in depth.

Trade policy as a tool to emancipate the people from the elites

The discourse topic of trade as a tool of emancipation of the people from the elites highlights the emancipatory potential of trade. This topic was predicated on the articulation of the people/elite cleavage in material economic terms. Irrespective of their trade preferences, Trump and the Brexiteers constructed and claimed to represent the people against the elites. Serving as evidence that the populist dichotomy can extend also to trade, both sides appealed to the need for people's self-assertion and utilized the instrumental strategy of othering to continue reproducing the identity of the 'people'.⁵⁶ This also chimes with the characteristic populist messaging of the common enemy.⁵⁷

Trump and Brexiteers differed slightly in how they conceptualized this elite. For May, it was qualified as 'a privileged few' that the current trade system was bringing advantages to⁵⁸ and 'the powerful and the privileged' that 'ignore(d) the interests of the people'.⁵⁹ For Johnson, the elite was embodied by the establishment in London, as in: 'Free trade is being choked and that is no fault of the people, that's no fault of individual consumers, I am afraid it is the politicians who are failing to lead'.⁶⁰ Trump engaged in an antagonistic dialogue between an elite 'Other' and the people more often than Brexiteers, having focused his discourse mainly on the US elite which was serving foreign governments rather than the US. Labelling them as the 'failed political class' and the 'Washington establishment',⁶¹ there are numerous examples that illustrate Trump's tendency to offer a vision of the elite in Washington as corrupt, immoral and having failed to negotiate in the US' best interests: 'For many years, Washington betrayed workers like you with trade deals that were rigged to benefit foreign countries and the lobbyists.'⁶²

Both Trumpism and the Brexit movement projected the imagery of the adversary elite onto the international level, too. They discursively embraced free trade/protectionism as solutions to the constraints and deficiencies of European and international trade regimes respectively, both of which were associated with

⁵⁶ Martin Reisingl and Ruth Wodak, 'The discourse-historical approach', in Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, eds., *Methods of critical discourse analysis* (London: SAGE, 2009), pp. 87–121.

⁵⁷ Tamás Toth, 'Target the enemy: explicit and implicit populism in the rhetoric of the Hungarian right', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 28: 3, 2020, pp. 366–86, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2020.1757415>.

⁵⁸ Theresa May via UKPOL, 'Theresa May—2016 speech to CBI annual conference', 21 Nov. 2016, <https://www.ukpol.co.uk/theresa-may-2016-speech-to-cbi-annual-conference>.

⁵⁹ May, 'Theresa May—2016 Speech at Conservative Party conference'.

⁶⁰ Boris Johnson, 'PM speech in Greenwich: 3 February 2020', HM Government, 3 Feb. 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-speech-in-greenwich-3-february-2020>.

⁶¹ NBC News, 'President Trump's 2020 RNC acceptance speech', 28 Aug. 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2020-election/read-full-text-president-donald-trump-s-acceptance-speech-rnc-n1238636>.

⁶² White House Archives, 'Remarks by President Trump at a USMCA celebration with American workers, Warren, MI', 30 Jan. 2020, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-usmca-celebration-american-workers-warren-mi>.

unfair practices of the ‘international Other’⁶³ explicitly construed as threatening the people on a material (and to a lesser extent, also non-material) level.

For both sides, the key international foe was the multilateral nature of economic governance that harmed the economic interests of the people. Framed strongly within a neo-liberal dimension,⁶⁴ Brexiteers foregrounded the image of the EU as an oppressor inimical to free trade who was unacceptably interfering in domestic affairs by deciding the ‘terms of our international trade’⁶⁵ and denying the UK the ability to ‘negotiate trade deals with other countries around the world’.⁶⁶ It was only after leaving the EU that the country would be able to have an independent trade policy and seize economic opportunities that it was rightfully entitled to.⁶⁷

In Trump, assessment of free trade and globalization typically amounted to an act of violence against the US, with these ‘Others [having] gamed the system and broke[n] the rules’.⁶⁸ Just like the Brexiteers, Trump railed against the EU as one of the main culprits, saying that the ‘European Union is terrible to us on trade, terrible’.⁶⁹ Apart from that, other structures of multilateral economic governance were also qualified as culprits, especially the WTO.⁷⁰ Additionally, countries such as China, Japan and South Korea, subsumed under the collective category of ‘trade cheaters’, were constructed as having outsmarted the US with abusive and predatory trade practices and as exploiting the system: ‘Other countries cheated and broke the rules.’⁷¹ Finally, a common central point is the representation of trade policies effectively functioning as a symbol of (re)gained national sovereignty in the case of Brexiteers and of liberation in the case of Trump.

Trade policy as a tool to give control back to the people

Once the hostile elites harming the interests of the people are identified, the next step is to elevate this ‘people’ as the leading actor of politics. Thus, the second identifiable discourse topic is that of trade policy as a tool to give control back to

⁶³ Marcia Macaulay, ‘Bernie and the Donald: a comparison of left- and right-wing populist discourse: international perspectives’, in Marcia Macaulay, ed., *Populist discourse: international perspectives* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 165–96.

⁶⁴ Zappettini, ‘The official vision for “global Britain”’, pp. 123–39.

⁶⁵ Theresa May via UKPOL, ‘Theresa May—2019 speech on Brexit’, 10 March 2019, <https://www.ukpol.co.uk/theresa-may-2019-speech-on-brexiteer>.

⁶⁶ Prime Minister’s Office and The Rt Hon Theresa May, MP, ‘PM speech in Grimsby: 8 March 2019’, 8 March 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-speech-in-grimsby-8-march-2019>.

⁶⁷ Monika Brusenbauch Meislová, ‘In quest for discursive legitimization of ongoing policy processes: constructing Brexit as a success story’, *Journal of Common Market Studies* 61: 3, 2023, pp. 815–33, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13427>.

⁶⁸ Donald Trump, ‘Trump’s 2017 U.N. speech transcript’, Politico, 19 Sept. 2017, <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/09/19/trump-un-speech-2017-full-text-transcript-242879>.

⁶⁹ Donald Trump, ‘Donald Trump speech transcript at Greenville, North Carolina rally “MAGA” event’, Rev, 17 July 2019, <https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-maga-event-speech-transcript-north-carolina-rally>.

⁷⁰ White House Archives, ‘Remarks by President Trump at APEC CEO summit, Da Nang, Vietnam’, 10 Nov. 2017, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-apec-ceo-summit-da-nang-vietnam/>.

⁷¹ Factbase Videos via YouTube, ‘Speech: Donald Trump delivers a speech on trade at a steel plant in Illinois’, 26 Jul. 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F9lIDW4BJyc>.

the people. Reminiscent of the typical populist discursive repertoires,⁷² both sides claimed to represent, and speak for, the people, as the necessary part of the collective 'we'. The Brexiteers equated free trade with the people's vote for Brexit: 'They [the people] voted for an independent trade policy';⁷³ '[People voted for] doing free trade deals'.⁷⁴ What is more, May continued to stress that trade policy was one of the issues that 'mattered' to the people.⁷⁵ Despite this being less pronounced in Trump, for him, too, demands for the transformation of trade policy were part of the 'earthquake' that propelled him to the White House.⁷⁶

This discourse topic was interspersed with references to the 'people' as homogeneous and united by their common interest in specific trade preferences. Such an appeal to the people as 'a whole without a class, cultural or ideological distinction' is another key characteristic of populism.⁷⁷ This discursive posture was particularly notable with Trump ('In the United States, we are building an economy that works for everyone, restoring the bonds of love and loyalty that unite citizens and [power] nations'⁷⁸) and May ('We are all united in our belief that that world will be built on the foundations of free trade, partnership and globalization'⁷⁹). There were a few instances where specific societal sectors were targeted, but these were rather outliers in their broader discourse of trade policy. The core of the rhetoric remained focused on the premise of trade policy being for, and driven by, the people as a whole.

Serving the purpose of self-legitimation, enactment of the trade policies was framed as a 'duty'⁸⁰ and a 'mission'.⁸¹ Further to that, the Brexiteers often claimed in this context to be serving the people;⁸² obeying the people⁸³ and addressing people's concerns.⁸⁴ Another constant refrain in the Brexiteers' discourse was the 'delivery' element, with the politicians delivering on the people's priorities,⁸⁵

⁷² Ostiguy, Panizza and Moffitt, 'Introduction', in Ostiguy, Panizza and Moffitt, eds, *Populism in global perspective*, pp. 1–18; Wodak, KhosraviNik and Mral, *Right-wing populism in Europe*.

⁷³ Theresa May via UKPOL, 'Theresa May—2019 response to vote of no confidence motion', 16 Jan. 2019, <https://www.ukpol.co.uk/theresa-may-2019-response-to-vote-of-no-confidence-vote>.

⁷⁴ Boris Johnson via UKPOL, 'Boris Johnson—2020 statement on leaving the European Union', 1 Feb. 2020, <https://www.ukpol.co.uk/boris-johnson-2020-statement-on-leaving-the-european-union>.

⁷⁵ May, 'PM speech in Grimsby'; May, '2019 speech on Brexit'.

⁷⁶ Donald Trump, 'Donald Trump's Congress speech', CNN, 1 March 2017, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/02/28/politics/donald-trump-speech-transcript-full-text/index.html>.

⁷⁷ Macaulay, 'Bernie and the Donald', p. 168.

⁷⁸ White House Archives, 'Remarks by President Trump at the World Economic Forum'.

⁷⁹ Theresa May via UKPOL, 'Theresa May—2017 speech in Davos', 20 Jan. 2017, <https://www.ukpol.co.uk/theresa-may-2017-speech-in-davos>.

⁸⁰ May, '2019 response to vote of no confidence motion'; Trump, 'Trump's 2017 U.N. speech transcript'.

⁸¹ May, 'Theresa May's speech to the 2018 Conservative Party conference'; CBC News via YouTube, 'Trump's full address to joint session of Congress Feb 28, 2017', 28 Feb. 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hPWS-CN_Xio.

⁸² Boris Johnson, 'Boris Johnson's speech to the 2019 Conservative Party conference', *PoliticsHome*, 2 Oct. 2019, <https://www.politicshome.com/news/article/read-in-full-boris-johnsons-speech-to-the-2019-conservative-party-conference>; Theresa May via UKPOL, 'Theresa May – 2018 keynote speech on Brexit', 3 March 2018, <https://www.ukpol.co.uk/theresa-may-2018-keynote-speech-on-brexite/>.

⁸³ Johnson, '2020 statement on leaving the European Union'.

⁸⁴ May, '2017 speech in Davos'; May, 'Theresa May's speech to the 2018 Conservative Party conference'.

⁸⁵ Johnson, 'Boris Johnson's speech to the 2019 Conservative Party conference'.

the changes they wanted⁸⁶ and their will.⁸⁷ Besides, Johnson also ‘follow[ed] the instincts and the instructions of the British people’,⁸⁸ even talking about his government as ‘this people’s government’.⁸⁹

Trade policy as a tool to redeem the people

Finally, the Brexiteers and Trump used the discourse topic of trade policy as a tool for redeeming the people. Existing trade regimes were systematically evaluated as harming the people and thus in need of urgent change. Such discursive positioning sits well with populists’ inherent need for a crisis.⁹⁰ In both cases we see the invocation of economic crisis that justified a new trade policy, further polarizing the people and the elite that was held responsible for those economic failures. In this way, populist discourses moved from a critique of the elites and their established trade policies to an articulated vision of new pro-people trade regimes.

Substantively, both sides systematically argued that deficient trade policies were to blame for varying economic problems. While Trump lumped these problems together under the ‘economic surrender’ term,⁹¹ Johnson opted for ‘hibernation’.⁹² Of the two movements, it was especially Trump who focused on massive losses of manufacturing jobs, huge trade deficits, an imbalance in the distribution of wealth and declining competitiveness.⁹³ Yet, the theme of a lopsided economy and big regional discrepancies was notable for Brexiteers too.⁹⁴

By selectively and causally connecting these adverse developments, both sides saw prior trade arrangements as a process in which large portions of the people lose out. The main thrust was the representation of previous trade policies as not benefiting everyone. This was particularly strong with May: ‘Some markets are still not working in the interests of ordinary people ... This is why some people still feel that our economy isn’t working for them’.⁹⁵ Notably, in order to mobilize the discourse of economic insecurity, both sides invariably cast the people as victimized, especially by being ‘left behind’ and having lost their faith in the international trade system. While for May these people were ‘left behind by the forces of capitalism’⁹⁶, ‘left behind by globalisation’,⁹⁷ for Johnson they

⁸⁶ Boris Johnson, ‘Boris Johnson’s keynote speech—we’re getting on with the job’, *Conservatives*, 6 Oct. 2021, <https://www.conservatives.com/news/2021/boris-johnson-s-keynote-speech---we-re-getting-on-with-the-job>.

⁸⁷ May, ‘2019 response to vote of no confidence motion’.

⁸⁸ Johnson, ‘PM speech in Greenwich’.

⁸⁹ Johnson, ‘PM speech in Greenwich’.

⁹⁰ Jonny Hall, ‘In search of enemies: Donald Trump’s populist foreign policy rhetoric’, *Politics* 41: 1, 2021, pp. 48–63, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395720935377>; Moffitt, *The global rise of populism*.

⁹¹ Donald Trump, ‘State of the Union 2018’, CNN, 31 Jan. 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/01/30/politics/2018-state-of-the-union-transcript/index.html>.

⁹² Johnson, ‘PM speech in Greenwich’.

⁹³ Donald Trump, ‘Trump’s full address to joint session of Congress’; Donald Trump, ‘Trump’s 2018 UN speech transcript’, *Politico*, 25 Sept. 2018, <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/09/25/trump-un-speech-2018-full-text-transcript-840043>.

⁹⁴ For instance, Johnson, ‘Boris Johnson’s keynote speech’.

⁹⁵ May, ‘Theresa May’s speech to the 2018 Conservative Party conference’. By the same token, also see May, ‘2016 speech to CBI annual conference’.

⁹⁶ May, ‘2016 speech to CBI annual conference’.

⁹⁷ Theresa May via UKPOL, ‘2017 statement at the G7 summit in Sicily’, 1 June 2017, <https://www.ukpol.co.uk/>

were ‘forgotten’ and ‘left behind’,⁹⁸ or ‘left behind, ignored’,⁹⁹ and for Trump ‘forgotten and left behind’,¹⁰⁰ ‘neglected, betrayed, forgotten’¹⁰¹ and ‘taken advantage of’.¹⁰² Against this background, both sides proposed a shift in trade policies as an instrument of economic empowerment. The following quote from May encapsulates this perspective well: ‘For we believe in free markets. They are the means by which we spread opportunity and lift people out of poverty’,¹⁰³ explicitly tying the concept of (more) free markets to enhanced opportunities for those ‘left behind’ by existing economic conditions.

Simultaneously, both Trump and the Brexiteers also self-positioned as saviour figures of the people—another distinctive trait of populists.¹⁰⁴ They cast themselves as courageous and determined agents who, having understood the will of the people in its entirety, would defend it through new trade measures. In pursuit of these arguments, both sides systematically narrated their own agency and competence, priding themselves primarily for being very knowledgeable. They had ‘a plan for Britain’;¹⁰⁵ knew what the problem was and how to solve it;¹⁰⁶ they could ‘see some real experts on trade policy and [knew] quite what can be done’.¹⁰⁷

What also figured prominently in both sides was a strong promissory language around benefits of new trade policies invariably presented as the sine qua non of the ‘bright(er) future’. For the populists considered here, it was a tool to renew the role of their country in the world, boost the economy, enhance its competitiveness, create jobs, improve productivity and build prosperity. Significantly, the communicative behaviour of both sides was centred around the representation of new trade policies as identical with the ‘interests of ordinary people’,¹⁰⁸ ‘interests of the British people’,¹⁰⁹ ‘our own interests’,¹¹⁰ and ‘the interests of our country, our companies, and our workers’.¹¹¹

theresa-may-2017-statement-at-the-g7-summit-in-sicily.

⁹⁸ Boris Johnson, ‘Boris Johnson’s first speech as prime minister’, *PoliticsHome*, 24 July 2019, <https://www.politicshome.com/news/article/read-in-full-boris-johnsons-first-speech-as-prime-minister>.

⁹⁹ Johnson, ‘Boris Johnson’s speech to the 2019 Conservative Party conference’.

¹⁰⁰ Trump, ‘Trump’s 2017 U.N. speech transcript’.

¹⁰¹ White House Archives, ‘Remarks by President Trump at the World Economic Forum’.

¹⁰² Trump, ‘Trump’s full address to joint session of Congress’.

¹⁰³ May, ‘2016 speech to CBI annual conference’.

¹⁰⁴ Danielle Albertazzi and Sean Mueller, ‘Populism and liberal democracy: populists in government in Austria, Italy, Poland and Switzerland’, *Government and Opposition* 48: 3, 2013, pp. 343–71, <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2013.12>; Marcia Macaulay, ‘A short introduction to populism’, in Macaulay, *Populist discourse*, pp. 1–26.

¹⁰⁵ TIME, ‘Read Theresa May’s speech laying out the UK’s plan for Brexit’.

¹⁰⁶ White House Archives, ‘Remarks by President Trump at the World Economic Forum’.

¹⁰⁷ Prime Minister’s Office and the Rt Hon Boris Johnson, ‘PM’s speech at the Centre for Policy Studies: 22 November 2021’, HM Government, 22 Nov. 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-speech-at-the-centre-for-policy-studies-22-november-2021>.

¹⁰⁸ May, ‘Theresa May’s speech to the 2018 Conservative Party conference’.

¹⁰⁹ Theresa May via UKPOL, ‘Theresa May—2017 speech at 20th anniversary of Bank of England independence’, 29 Sept. 2017, <https://www.ukpol.co.uk/theresa-may-2017-speech-at-20th-anniversary-of-bank-of-england-independence>; Prime Minister’s Office and the Rt Hon Boris Johnson, ‘Oral statement to Parliament. PM statement on the Commonwealth, G7 and NATO summits: 4 July 2022’, 4 July 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-on-the-commonwealth-g7-and-nato-summits-4-july-2022>.

¹¹⁰ May, ‘PM speech in Grimsby’.

¹¹¹ ‘Trump Davos speech transcript’, Politico, 26 Jan. 2018, <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/01/26/full-text-trump-davos-speech-transcript-370861>.

At the same time, the focus on national interests did not contradict some populists' broader global ambitions. Instead, these two dimensions were conceived as intertwined: securing domestic interests through more balanced and fairer trade policies contributes to a global system that is more equitable and beneficial for all. It was especially Johnson who conveyed worldwide ambitions in this sense, as he claimed that free trade deals would 'bring the world together'.¹¹² For the Brexiteers especially, the positive topos of benefit was further reinforced by recontextualizing past achievements, with free trade constructed as an instrument that 'has done more than anything else to lift billions out of poverty'¹¹³ and 'the greatest agent of collective human progress ever devised'.¹¹⁴ They reconciled this with their exclusionary rhetoric against the EU as the international Other who prevented the right kind of free trade. Hence, the necessity to defy it by choosing to exit.

Conclusion: the real-world implications of populist trade discourses

Despite their differences, our analysis depicts a consistent pattern of Brexiteers' and Trump's discourses on trade, something that vindicates the use of the discursive perspective to analyse the foreign policy practices of populists. A conventional policy-based analysis would struggle to account for a consistent and distinctly populist outlook in terms of foreign policy, since populists in the US and the UK pursued opposing trade policies. Yet, the discursive approach reveals remarkable similarities in articulating protectionism in the US and global free trade in the UK as a way to elevate the people, deliver them from crisis, and construct a broad popular identity that unites multiple frustrated demands and groups ignored by the elites. In this way, our analysis is a corrective to arguments that attach to populism specific policy profiles like protectionism,¹¹⁵ while it extends the growing literature that uses discursive perspectives to study populism and foreign policy¹¹⁶ to a highly technical and economic area like trade.

By framing trade in terms of a 'people vs elite' divide, these discourses have important implications for domestic and international politics. Returning to the argument of this special section, we see how populist trade discourses matter both for domestic *politics* and the international order (*polity*). In domestic politics, using new trade policies as a symbol of reinstating the power of the people amid political and economic crisis served not only to bring populists to power, but also to sustain them there. Articulating protectionism (in the US) and globally oriented free trade (in the UK) as a way to wrest power away from domestic elites and

¹¹² Conservatives, 'Conservative Party Conference 2020 speeches: The Prime Minister—keynote speech of conference day 4', 7 Oct. 2020, <https://www.conservatives.com/news/2020/conservative-party-conference-2020-speeches>.

¹¹³ Johnson, 'Boris Johnson's first speech as prime minister'.

¹¹⁴ May, 'Theresa May's speech to the 2018 Conservative Party conference'. See here Destradi and Plagemann's argument that populists can present a positive view of engagement with global affairs if it benefits their own 'people': Destradi and Plagemann, 'Populism and International Relations'.

¹¹⁵ Fukuyama and Muggah, 'How populism is poisoning the global liberal order'.

¹¹⁶ Cadier and Szulecki, 'Populism, historical discourse and foreign policy'.

their international allies, these discourses allowed populists in power to continue implementing new trade policies long after it had become clear that they were not fulfilling their material promises.¹¹⁷ Significantly for the trade regime at the global (WTO) and regional (EU, NAFTA) level, populist discourses allowed once marginal ideas to have a far larger impact than before.

Of course, cloaking trade preferences in populist discourses helps populists rearticulate even contradictory decisions in an internally consistent way as promoting the ‘people’s’ interests. Indeed, the analysis underscored the inconsistent nature of some discourse topics, with the key tension pertaining to the extent of agency accorded to the people. This manifests most clearly in the tension between the topics of trade as a tool of emancipating the people and redeeming the people. While the former attributes a higher level of agency to the people, viewing them as active drivers of change, the latter casts them as somewhat passive and in need of a leader who will rescue them from harmful existing trade policies. These observations resonate with the literature which highlights how seemingly contradictory perspectives can coexist within populist discourses.¹¹⁸ This duality serves to maintain a flexible and broad appeal that pragmatically caters to different audiences and contexts.

In practice, Trump’s imposition of tariffs in the first part of his presidency was followed by renegotiations with Canada, Mexico and China. Similarly, for all her Brexit rhetoric, May tried to safeguard Britain’s access to the EU market with her failed deals. Johnson, on the other hand, ended up signing an exit agreement that was close to the ‘hard’ end of the Brexit spectrum. His and successor Conservative governments tried to showcase the new freedoms that ‘Global Britain’ enjoys in trade by highlighting the dozens of new ‘deals’ it signed post-Brexit—even though 68 out of 71 were identical rollovers of agreements the UK had with these countries as an EU member.¹¹⁹ The strength of the populist framing of free trade is evident in the fact that these trade deals, that generally reproduce a liberal and ‘hyper-global’ economic model that will not necessarily benefit the left-behind groups that supported Brexit, are still constantly promoted as symbolic of the new popular sovereignty.¹²⁰

The strength of populist discourses becomes more evident in how new policies survive their proponents’ term in office. Trump’s successor in the US, Joe Biden, and Boris Johnson’s successors in the Conservative party, as well as new Labour prime minister Keir Starmer, feel compelled to continue these policies because

¹¹⁷ See, for example, Rajesh Kumar Singh, ‘Trump steel tariffs bring job losses to swing state Michigan’, Reuters, 10 Oct. 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-steel-insight-idUSKBN26U161>; Tom Espiner, ‘UK–Asia trade deal to boost UK economy by 0.08%’, BBC News, 31 March 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-65124741>.

¹¹⁸ Moffitt, *The global rise of populism*; Aslanidis, ‘Populism and social movements’.

¹¹⁹ See Stephen Hunsaker and Tom Howe, ‘Trade tracker: UK trade deals’, UK in a changing Europe, 16 March 2023, <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/trade-tracker-uk-trade-deals>. Perhaps the main new trade deal post-Brexit UK has made is joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), which has created a major Asia–Pacific free trade zone with great potential but with uncertain immediate benefits for the UK.

¹²⁰ Tim Oliver, ‘Reflections: the UK after Brexit’, *International Politics*, publ. online 3 June 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-023-00472-6>.

they were effectively framed as the will of the people.¹²¹ Biden's 'US foreign policy for the American middle class', the 'Buy American' procurement rule and continued steel tariffs showcase how long the tail of Trumpian protectionism is. Similarly, Brexit will tie the hands of British policy-makers for decades.¹²² Such examples demonstrate the potency and lasting impact of populist discourses, even as political leadership changes.

Overall, our analysis has shown the power of populist discourses even in a technical policy area like trade. Populism may not have a consistent policy effect, with substantial decisions more often than not reflecting populists' thick ideologies or the material interests of their constituencies, but is consistent as a discourse.¹²³ It is a distinct mode of political persuasion and as such it can indeed upset the 'rules-based liberal international order'.¹²⁴ Regardless of policy content, populists introduce to the international order a high degree of contingency, transactionalism, unpredictability and suspicion of multilateralism, leading to the disruption of some (although not all) international institutions. A significant danger is that they paint a picture of international institutions as deficient and, in doing so, create unrealistically high expectations of what non-deficient institutions should look like. If these expectations do not materialize, multilateralism can be subjected to renewed waves of delegitimation. Indeed, overly promissory discursive behaviour or 'hyperprojectivity' (a phenomenon confined not only to populism) endangers political legitimacy and the sense of 'discrepancy between high expectations ... and ... incapacity to find sustainable solutions to ongoing problems'.¹²⁵

¹²¹ See the rather striking choice of words by Labour's then shadow foreign secretary, David Lammy: 'British foreign policy must seek to take back control. The Brexiters were right about that.' Royal Institute of International Affairs, 'What is Labour's foreign policy? In conversation with David Lammy, the UK shadow foreign secretary', members' event recording and transcript, 24 Jan. 2023, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/events/all/members-event/what-labours-foreign-policy>.

¹²² Eleanor Langford, 'Labour sees no "political case" for rejoining EU single market, Ukraine issues plea for more tanks', *PoliticsHome*, 20 Jan. 2023, <https://www.politicshome.com/news/article/labour-no-political-case-eu-single-market-ukraine-plea-tanks>.

¹²³ Destradi and Plagemann, 'Populism and International Relations', pp. 727–29; Hall, 'In search of enemies', pp. 48–63.

¹²⁴ Georg Löfflmann, 'Introduction to special issue: the study of populism in International Relations', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 24: 3, 2022, pp. 403–15 at p. 405, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13691481221103116>.

¹²⁵ Anders Hanberger, 'Public policy and legitimacy: a historical policy analysis of the interplay of public policy and legitimacy', *Policy Sciences*, vol. 36, 2003, pp. 257–78 at p. 269, <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:OLIC.0000017471.88620.9a>.