



**USING GAME THEORY AND NESTED POLITICS TO ASSESS BORIS
JOHNSON' BREXIT STRATEGY AND ALIGNMENT WITH
POPULISM**

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Introduction

Right and left forms of populism are a manifestation of the crisis that capitalism and democracy find itself in in the 21st century (Ryder, 2020). What is populism? Populism can be perceived as a desire for a strong leader, who is charismatic, at times messianic, and willing to support issues popular with the masses despite offending the political and cultural sensibilities of supposed elites. Populism is said to be able to effectively connect with the masses through speech acts, which resonate with emotions such as patriotism, resentment and nativism.

Populism appeals to folkloric traditions and a desire to preserve and maintain idealised notions of national identity that are perceived to be at risk from cosmopolitan elites and globalization. Populism can also be said to encompass conspiratorial fantasy and forms of communication that can be deceptive, giving rise to the term 'post-truth' politics.

Populism is an outlook, derided by some, as lacking refinement and complexity, considered by some as voicing the most base thoughts and anxieties of the masses. Sentiments that in previous times, might have been easily dismissed as demagoguery or opportunism. At the core of this political phenomenon is a critique of the establishment and adulation of 'the people' portrayed as 'decent' and 'hardworking' whose collective positions must prevail (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). In using the term populist care is needed though for there are variants and different shades.

In terms of the populist surge that has seen leaders like Bolsonaro, Erdogan, Modi and Trump come to power, it can be said that the rightwing and nationalist variant of populism has been more successful. The premiership of Boris Johnson needs to be appraised in this context and presents an important case study being one of the few leaders in western Europe who can be ascribed as a populist. Berlusconi, the former prime minister of Italy could be described as the first such western European leader in the cold war period though. Fascism in the inter-war period had traits of populism and it was to avert the recurrence of such political extremes that the post-war order was framed in Europe, with its emphasis on liberal democracy, human rights and cooperation through economic partnerships and free trade that evolved into the European Union. However, this economic, social and political consensus has faced considerable stress and challenge in recent decades and the premiership of Johnson has contributed greatly to this sense of crisis.

Anxiety and trauma, in particular since the financial crisis of 2008 has been articulated through a global wave of populism where radical new frames of thought are being advanced

centred on nativism, chauvinism and authoritarianism, which manifested itself in Britain through Brexit. Former Conservative Prime Minister John Major in comments highly critical of the rhetoric and division generated by Brexit, noted:

I caution everyone to be wary of this kind of populism. It seems to be a mixture of bigotry, prejudice and intolerance. It scapegoats minorities. It is a poison in any political system – destroying civility and decency and understanding. Here in the UK we should give it short shrift, for it is not the people we are – nor the country we are (Sculthorpe, 2017).

This paper is an attempt to assess Major's warning, reframed in the following questions: To what degree does the premiership of Johnson reflect the traits of authoritarian populism? Is this approach to politics out of character with who the British are? The paper seeks to ask these questions through the exploration of a key moments in Johnson's premiership, namely Brexit.

Much of the analysis in the paper rests upon game theory and the concept of nested politics. Game theory is an analytical tool where individual agents or institutions are assumed to interact strategically to achieve goals, it is a useful tool to decipher the machinations involved in 'delivering Brexit'. This paper relies upon several game theories such as the prisoners' dilemma, the chicken run and Mexican standoff, these are elaborated upon in the paper. Game theory is especially conducive in understanding negotiating strategy that involves bluff and threats to achieve concessions. With reference to nested politics, it is an assumption that the behavior of one unit cannot be understood without reference to the influence of the rest of the units that make up a system. In the context of politics and negotiation we should therefore consider a "nested politics" model— "nested" because the three layers of political authority (individual sovereignty, domestic hierarchy, and international anarchy) are nested within one another like the dolls in a Russian matryoshka, and their relationship to one another drives the most important outcomes in the international system (Tsebelis, 1990, Braumoeller, 2004). Political leaders need to operate in a number of realms and the actions and events in a single realm can have multiple consequences evident in different realms that in turn impact on strategy.

In an international negotiation like Brexit key realms include the public and their socio-cultural and political outlooks. Elites constitute another important arena, the leader's party and the opposition but also economic and media elites. Of course in the equation we must

also consider the entity that the state is negotiating with: What do the majority in each realm favour? How will they react if there are concessions? Such discussions are relevant to the agency-structure debate. Are important decisions solely made by leaders or are they shaped by wider institutional, socio-economic and cultural questions? As Karl Marx argued, people make history, but not under circumstances of their own choosing. Approaching the question of Brexit from such a conceptual and analytical framework may provide important insights into the thinking and strategizing of Boris Johnson.

Boris Johnson

Before dissecting the different realms that Johnson had to operate within to achieve Brexit it is worth reflecting on Johnson's life story. Johnson became an MP in 2001, following a career as a journalist for newspapers like the Times, a paper from which he was fired for falsifying a quote from a relative. His political career was propelled through a larger than life personality and humour that found him becoming a media personality and whose antics gave him something of the air of an anti-politician. His public popularity enabled him to escape what for other politicians would be career destroying episodes. He was sacked as a frontbench spokesperson in 2004 for apparently lying to his party leader about an affair he was having but despite this setback was elected as Mayor of London in 2008, a political platform that brought him more fully to the attention of the nation and designation as heir apparent to David Cameron as prime minister.

As has been well publicized David Cameron was keen to have Johnson in the 'remain' camp for the referendum, believing his fame and popularity could help realize a remain vote. However, Johnson chose to align himself with the 'leave' campaign and his active campaigning had a significant impact on the result. Following the referendum result Cameron resigned but Johnson's leadership campaign was undermined when his campaign manager Michael Gove withdrew and publicly stated he did not believe Johnson had the qualities to be a prime minister. Johnson withdrew from the race and Theresa May was elected as prime minister. May though appointed Johnson as foreign secretary but he eventually resigned from that post in frustration at May's Brexit negotiation strategy that he believed was reneging on the referendum by conceding too much to the EU in negotiations. With the Conservative Party deeply split and unable to effectively deliver on her vision of Brexit May resigned as a second leadership challenge to her seemed to gain momentum. Johnson had been prominent in the camp rallied

against May and was rewarded by being elected as leader of the Conservative Party and hence prime minister in 2019.

Johnson faced serious challenges in a number of realms. He had attained the leadership because he had the support of a key faction in the Conservative Party that favoured a hard Brexit but he had inherited a slight majority and a small faction in his party favoured a softer Brexit. The Conservative Party was also under considerable pressure from the newly formed Brexit Party led by Nigel Farage that sought a hard Brexit and posed a considerable electoral risk to the Conservatives that could if a snap election was held allow the opposition Labour Party to win as the centre-right vote would be split. In terms of the wider elite the great majority of the print media favoured a harder form of Brexit. However, economic elites were divided with some fearing the impact of losing unfettered access to the single market but with some favouring a more hyperglobalist economic approach leading to Britain adopting a 'Singapore model' based on low tax and limited social protection. With reference to the EU, it was hesitant to give ground in the negotiations that might undermine the European model of the free market combined with environmental and social protections.

Delivering Brexit

Brexit has dominated British politics since 2016 and has been marked by profound and deep emotion, anguish and discord but also risk and brinkmanship. Game theory can give important insights into the political strategizing behind Brexit.

The 'chicken game', is one game theory model that involves a situation where two cars are heading for each other, if one driver does not swerve and give the road to the other there will be a collision (Muthoo, 2019). Who will blink first? Who will swerve? Johnson's position at the start of his premiership was to get a deal that would ensure UK sovereignty was undiluted, meaning the EU should have little if any influence on British decision making. If such a deal could not be achieved then Britain should leave without a deal. In making such a threat we can employ Thomas Schelling's (1960) 'madman theory'. The madman theory involves a principal player in a strategic game conveying sufficient irrationality to convince other players that more than a game of bluff is being played out and that the principal player is sincere in taking a course of action that could be painful to both parties. Belief in the sincerity

of these threats and desire to avoid the serious consequences can lead to an opponent caving in, relenting and offering serious concessions.

Johnson's love of showmanship and bravado also made him well suited to play the role of the volatile 'mad man', this may also have owed something to the political playbook of Donald Trump, then president of the USA. Before becoming prime minister Johnson in an address to a closed meeting that was recorded and leaked to the media gave some off guard indication as to the purpose of his use of colourful invective. Johnson expressed admiration for Trump by quipping that he thought Trump might be a good person to lead Brexit negotiations:

I have become more and more convinced that there is method in his madness... imagine Trump doing Brexit. He'd go in bloody hard... There'd be all sorts of breakdowns, all sorts of chaos. Everyone would think he'd gone mad. But actually you might get somewhere. It's a very, very good thought (Dallison, 2018).

In other words, emotive and securitised rhetoric designed to cause discord and controversy and provide media headlines was a valid strategy. Dominic Cummings, who had steered and mastermind the Vote Leave campaign was appointed as Johnson's key adviser, unsurprisingly therefore Johnson's administration resembled the leave referendum campaign itself by demonstrating bombast, challenge and a form of emergency politics. All common traits of populism. As with May Johnson placed the 'will of the people' argument at the centre of his strategy and sought to depict the dissenters in parliament as an obstructive elite. In one of his live broadcasts on facebook titled 'peoples' question time' Johnson (Cited in Gritten, 2019) stated "There's a terrible collaboration, as it were, going on between people who think they can block Brexit in parliament and our European friends". Johnson was accused of framing his opponents as collaborators and weaponizing his rhetoric with the intent of demonising remain politicians, a charge that gained increasing traction through his tenure as prime minister.

Johnson's central aim appeared to be to outflank the Brexit Party and through a harder Brexit position than that advocated by Theresa May stem the flow of support to the Brexit Party that was bleeding votes away from the Conservatives. Johnson also wanted to remove the Northern Ireland backstop that he, in tandem with the hard Brexiteers in his party, denounced as undemocratic. The backstop was a proposal by the EU to prevent a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland that could be a trigger for renewed attacks by Republican and Protestant terror group, the proposal entailed Northern Ireland remaining part

of the EU regulatory system of the single market, thus dispensing the need for a hard border. Critics, including Johnson, denounced this arrangement as undermining the sovereignty and integrity of the United Kingdom. Johnson (2018) wrote: “We have opened ourselves to perpetual political blackmail. We have wrapped a suicide vest around the British constitution – and handed the detonator to Michel Barnier (EU chief negotiator)”.

Although Johnson expressed a preference for a negotiated withdrawal agreement over a no deal in the first months of his administration there was scant evidence of efforts being made to find a new agreement with the EU. Johnson was accused of ‘running down’ the clock in pursuit of a no deal Brexit, a fear accentuated by Johnson’s bravado in declaring that if the EU did not give concessions on the backstop then Britain could crash out without a deal on the 31st October, the point of time by which the two years assigned to negotiate a deal by the initiating of Article 50 would expire.

Such fears moved dissenting MPs to seek to constrain Johnson’s room for manoeuvre. In what became known as the ‘Benn Act’, named after its principal sponsor Hilary Benn, MPs seized control of the House of Commons agenda and mandated Johnson to seek an extension on Britain’s departure from the EU in the event of a deal not being negotiated by the latter part of October. Benn’s proposal was passed in parliament with a number of Conservative MPs being in support that led to the party whip being withdrawn from 21 Conservative MPs including prominent figures like Phillip Hammond and Ken Clark. In sympathy with the rebel MPs the cabinet minister Amber Rudd resigned. Johnson was vehement (2019c) in his opposition to the Benn Act, he declared

This is not a bill in any normal sense of the word. It is without precedent in our history – it is a bill that, if passed, would force me to go to Brussels and beg an extension. It would force me to accept any terms offered. It would destroy any chance of negotiations or a new deal. And indeed it would enable our friends in Brussels to dictate the terms of the negotiation, that is what it does. There is only one way to describe this bill – it is Jeremy Corbyn’s surrender bill. It means running up the white flag. I want to make clear to everybody in this house – there are no circumstances in which I will ever accept anything like it. I will never surrender the control of the negotiations in the way the leader of the opposition is demanding. We promised the people we would get Brexit done. We promised to respect the result of the referendum

and we must do so now. Enough is enough. This country wants this done. They want the referendum respected.

Johnson's emotive reference to 'surrender' and populist language that inferred Britain would be emasculated in the negotiations caused deep anger. Some critics charged Johnson with using populist language and tactics to create a cleavage between parliament and the wider public with a fabricated image of an out of touch elite frustrating Brexit being manipulated for electoral purposes. Tensions were ratcheted up further when Dominic Cummings was reported to have been behind an anonymous briefing to a Sunday newspaper that claimed the MPs behind the Benn Act had been liaising with the EU and would be investigated (Syal, 2019).

Johnson had assumed the premiership just before the summer recess in July and did not properly face MPs in parliament until September. However, Johnson reduced further any chance of scrutiny of his Brexit proposals by proroguing (suspending parliament) for five weeks before a new Queen's Speech, even though the party national conferences would be held during this period, the length of the prorogue was exceptionally long. Critics charged Johnson with using the prorogation as a means to silence parliament and reduce their scope to challenge and question his Brexit strategy. Cameron, the former prime minister who was launching his memoir felt the prorogation was a "sharp practice" on the part of Johnson (Proctor, 2019). This assertion was upheld by the Supreme Court ruling that declared the prorogation was illegal and given the critical situation regarding Brexit there was a need for parliament to scrutinise the government's intentions (Supreme Court Judgement, 2019). However, even this setback suited Johnson's narrative as he could depict it as further evidence by a political elite to frustrate the will of the people. In a parliamentary exchange with Corbyn Johnson (2019d) declared:

Worst of all, they see ever more elaborate legal and political manoeuvres from the Labour party, which is determined, absolutely determined, to say 'We know best', and to thumb their noses at the 17.4 million people who voted to leave the European Union. The Leader of the Opposition and his party do not trust the people.

The opposition parties and rebel Conservatives effectively liaised to present a united front and stated they would only acquiesce to an election if and when crashing out of the EU was

clearly not an option. Towards the end of October Johnson produced a new outline agreement that received a positive reception from the EU. The proposal as noted earlier accorded opportunities for divergence from the EU regulations but entailed Northern Ireland remain aligned to EU regulations by remaining in the EU customs territory for the whole transition period for at least four years, removing the fears around border checks between the Republic of Ireland Northern Ireland and in effect creating a new border between Britain and the EU down the middle of the Irish sea. Johnson (2018) had himself denounced such a proposal as one which no British prime minister could agree to, at no less a place that the Democratic Ulster Unionist (DUP) conference in Belfast, because Northern Ireland would diverge from the rest of the United Kingdom and undermined the level of uniformity between the different parts of the United Kingdom. As a consequence of the policy change the DUP withdrew their support for the government's Brexit stance which along with the loss of support of Conservative rebels meant the Johnson administration did not enjoy a majority and would have trouble navigating its vision of Brexit through parliament.

A prominent counter-argument to Johnson's strategy and tactics was that he was undermining the fabric of British democracy. Jess Phillips (2019) a Labour MP wrote in an article:

False divides are opening up everywhere. People who have been left with nothing by years of cuts feel they have nothing to lose and need someone to blame. These are the seeds from which fascism grows..... He (Johnson) has moved to close down parliament, close down scrutiny, and close down the voices of democratically elected representatives. It doesn't have to be a military coup to be dangerous. It doesn't have to be unprecedented to be unacceptable. It doesn't have to be illegal to be unethical. The warning signs for our country are flashing a burning, urgent red.

Many of the attacks against Johnson centred on his moral probity (*ad hominem*). A frequent charge was that he was a compulsive liar. The former Conservative minister Chris Patten (2019) accused Johnson of being "a mendacious chancer". Patten proceeds to state "It is no exaggeration to say that Johnson has lied his way to the top, first in journalism and then in politics. His ascent owes everything to the growing xenophobia and English nationalism that many Conservatives now espouse". For Patten a lack of moral rigour in Johnson and the increasing influence of extreme nationalism within the Conservative party was leading to Britain being a "failed state" in terms of representative democracy and its institutions being undermined.

A lack of trust in Johnson was a principal factor which explained why when Johnson did present his withdrawal proposal opposition MPs failed to be persuaded that Johnson would seek the highest standards in regulatory frameworks, but were also unwilling to agree to approve the terms before the legal framework had passed through parliament. The amendment to enable such a sequence was championed by Sir Oliver Letwin a Conservative grandee who had been among the 21 MPs to lose the party whip. The Letwin amendment thus closed a loophole that would have allowed Johnson to stage a vote on the deal as mandated in the Benn Act and thus not having to seek an extension but there was the danger that if the Withdrawal Agreement Bill did not progress through parliament the UK could still crash out of the EU. This delay meant it was no longer possible to leave the EU as promised by Johnson on the 31st October and thus under the provisions of the Benn Act, he was compelled to write to the EU Commission asking for an extension. Johnson did indeed send a letter seeking an extension, but it was unsigned and accompanied by a second letter stating he did not think it was a good idea, an act that further damaged his reputation for moral rectitude and some argued had broken the law by seeking to undermine the Benn mandate. Although Johnson's Withdrawal Agreement Bill received a second reading, parliament refused to agree to the short timetable (programme motion) for a debate of three days as set by the government with MPs arguing that much longer was needed to scrutinize such an important piece of legislation. On the part of the government there were fears MPs would amend the deal to frame a soft Brexit by for example inserting a clause on a customs union or revising the Bill to ensure there was no chance of crashing out of the EU without a deal or parliament's approval.

Labour had, as noted earlier, resisted Johnson's call for a General Election to resolve the impasse until a no deal Brexit was taken off the table, something it was able to do under the Fixed Term Parliament Act that stipulated two thirds of MPs were needed to sanction an election. The EU sensing that an election was likely decided to grant an extension until the end of January 2020 and as the imminent threat of no deal had been removed so had the obstacle to an election. Thus, parliament by a simple majority on an amendment to the Fixed Term Parliament Act agreed to hold an election for the 12th December 2019.

Johnson in his actions clearly aligned himself with those seeking a harder Brexit and thus distanced himself from softer conceptions of Brexit that might have attracted the support of a majority of MPs. His strategy maintained the support of the bulk of his party and pacified Brexiteers like Farage but alienated a small faction of Conservatives leading to the loss of his

parliamentary majority and hence leading to an election where he could not only lose power but the whole idea of Brexit might also collapse in the process. By playing the chicken game Johnson had kept the rump of his party together and framed his actions as a desire to maintain the integrity of Brexit and not betray the mandate the referendum created. However, the country was deeply divided and through his strategy the goodwill of the EU had been sorely tested.

The British Character

Having detailed how Johnson strategized at the elite level in the institutional setting of parliament and EU negotiations it might be worth considering broader socio-economic patterns in the chemistry and make-up of the UK and how these impacted on Johnson's Brexit strategy.

The referendum had revealed a deep demographic divide within the UK with the older, less educated and rural sections of the population supporting Brexit. In contrast the young, urban and educated favoured remaining in the EU. The Leave vote was secured by just a few percentage points. The older generation perhaps had different conceptions of the UK having been born in some cases into a UK that was monocultural and still had colonies, some had been imbued with a sense of British exceptionalism, a product of Empire, that was hostile to notions of pooling sovereignty in the EU. Monocultural notions of identity were inflamed by forms of nativism prompted by freedom of movement in the EU with large numbers of East Europeans arriving in the UK but which also acted as a proxy for hostility towards other migrant groups, many of which originated from the UK's former colonies. It was this section of the population that Johnson seemed to wish to appeal to and hence his reluctance to embrace a form of soft Brexit that would have retained free movement. This was the section of the population that had supported Brexit and was likely to support the Conservatives in the forthcoming election so long as the Conservatives could avoid any charges of diluting Brexit.

Johnson's rhetoric was reliant on binary codes creating an 'us' and 'them', with the EU in particular being depicted as a meddling outsider. German thinker Carl Schmitt was one of the intellectual inspirations for the concept of agonism, for him identity could only be constituted and defined by the identification of an adversary. Schmitt's concept of 'us and them' was nationalistic and nation building and his case supportive of the Nazi movement, it is illustrative of the dangers that can be released when dialogue and compromise are pushed to

the margins of politics. The Schmittian conception of antagonism creates a public enemy who ultimately cannot be engaged with in partnership, they can only be vanquished (Edwards, 2013). As will become evident Johnson has been drawn to such binaryism. Johnson's strategy and rhetoric took great advantage of the social and cultural cleavages of the UK framing himself as a defender of the British way and traditions who through bold reform could thwart EU interference and restore the UK to a semblance of its former greatness.

The hardline stance of Johnson led to Farage being satisfied and only fielding Brexit Party candidates in Labour seats, a major boost to Johnson's electoral chances. The sections of the population ranged against Brexit with a more cosmopolitan and civic sense of nationalism found their votes splintered by supported a range of anti Brexit parties such as Labour, the Liberals, Welsh and Scottish nationalists and Greens, failure to form an anti Brexit electoral pact was of critical importance in bolstering Johnson's chances of victory in a first past the post electoral system. Added to this the culture war of Johnson's rhetoric appealed to sections of Labour's traditional vote who were resentful of the migration EU membership had facilitated, given many of these Labour constituencies had supported leave in the referendum there was the chance that Johnson's strategy might lead to Labour parliamentary seats becoming Conservative. Johnson also sought to appeal to these working class voters with his pledge to govern in the tradition of 'One Nation' conservatism and deliver a more active economic policy arguing that once outside of the EU a British Government would be freer to intervene and subsidise economic activity.

In terms of national character Johnson was also aligning himself with a vision of the UK that sought to return a sense of greatness, hence the mantra of 'Global Britain'. In a parliamentary exchange between Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn (Labour leader) using mythopoesis as a rhetorical strategy, Johnson provides insights as to why he was committed to Brexit:

Since I was a child, I remember respectable authorities asserting that our time as a nation has passed and that we should be content with mediocrity and managed decline, and time and again. They are the sceptics and doubters, my friends. Time and again, by their powers to innovate and adapt, the British people have shown the doubters wrong, and I believe that at this pivotal moment in our national story, we are going to prove the doubters wrong again (Johnson, 2019a).

Such rhetoric seemed to imply that Brexit could herald a return to the buccaneering ethos of the nineteenth century that had brought unprecedented economic dominance. Johnson was promising transformative change and a return to greatness, a promise that rested on the trope that Britain had stagnated. Here Johnson appeared to want to achieve this aim by departing more radically than any previous prime minister from notions of the social contract and policy of alignment that the EU had done much to nurture in order to avoid downward competitive spirals in social, consumer and economic protections. Hence, in the political declaration for the Withdrawal Agreement Johnson negotiated it avoided the UK wide level playing field rules that May had included in the statement for her deal (Busby, 2019). During the Conservative leadership contest Johnson (2019b) in an article for the website Brexit-Central clearly signalled his desire for such non-alignment “We will be free to substantially diverge on tax and regulation,” he said. “I have had enough of being told that we cannot do it – that the sixth biggest economy in the world is not strong enough to run itself and go forward in the world.”

The thirst for non-alignment and deregulation seemed at odds with Johnson’s frequent claim in the leadership contest and declarations of intent to be guided by ‘One Nation’ Conservative thinking as reflected in his flagship policies to develop the NHS and sanction a more interventionist economic policy ostensibly based on expansion in public spending. In reality though such economic activism would clash with the hyperglobalist agenda that Johnson’s ‘buccaneer’ and ‘non-alignment’ vision of Brexit implied. As will be elaborated upon later a UK free from level playing field requirements and the Europe social model would shift the UK closer to America in terms of being a highly competitive and low social protection economy very much at variance with One Nation post-war Conservative consensus politics.

The Brexit Endgame

Some assumed that Brexit under the Johnson premiership would reach some form of closure or ‘endgame’, either crashing out without a deal or some form of deal being negotiated. Johnson himself encouraged such a perception by declaring through an oft used slogan, that was also the conservative national conference strapline and was put on the side of the Conservative campaign bus for the General Election, that he wanted to get Brexit “done” and to proceed to address other national concerns and bring the country together. The ingenuity of this simple slogan was that it appealed to and played upon the public frustration and

exhaustion over Brexit, with promises of a return to political normality and closure (Kirkup, 2019). The reality of course was that the wrangling would continue in the next phase of Brexit as negotiations would centre on the new trade deal with the EU which presented a potential new cliff edge and chance to still crash out of the EU without a deal.

The conservatives were adept at using simple visual devices to bolster the promise to get 'Brexit done' with Johnson wearing boxing gloves and a cooking apron with the slogan emblazoned on them and even driving a JCB with the banner 'Get Brexit done' and smashing through a polystyrene wall and the metaphorical wall of opposition to Brexit. Many of these photoshoots were taken in blue-collar work environments and signalled the Conservatives strategy to build a majority by taking working class Labour seats that had voted heavily to leave.

Although opinion polls indicated that a majority now wished to remain in the EU the opposition vote to Brexit was divided between Labour and the Liberals and a number of smaller parties. An alliance had been formed between the Liberal Democrats, Welsh Nationalists and Greens but neither Labour or the Liberals were prepared to form a pact with Swinson stating she could not countenance supporting Corbyn because of his radical leftism (Hughes, 2019). In contrast Farage assisted the Conservatives by withdrawing Brexit Party candidates in Conservative held seats in part because he was encouraged by Johnson's declaration that he would not seek an extension beyond 2020 in negotiating a trade deal.

To return to Game Theory the opposition to Brexit for its part resembled something of a 'Mexican Standoff', another game theory exercise, with three antagonists facing each other in a duel but unclear as to who was the greatest threat or who might be worth forming a temporal alliance with to avert the most direct and immediate danger. One Nation Conservatives, Labour, Liberal and Nationalist MPs though had at times before the election been able with some success to come together in efforts to thwart a hard Brexit. With reference to the election another game theory has relevance the 'Prisoner's Dilemma', where although it might appear to be in the interests of two actors to cooperate either might be more willing to countenance turning against the other to maximise potential return. In this imagined scenario if each prisoner cooperates and refuses to testify against each other they might be released or face reduced sentences but if one testifies a deal can be agreed and the police might release them whilst the other prisoner faces a long sentence. In the election though cooperation by the

opposition party machines and tactical voting by members and supporters was clearly not sufficient to thwart a Conservative victory. Some felt they had placed narrow party interests above the national interest.

In the election the Conservative secured a majority of 78 seats, many of the seats gained were at the expense of Labour in northern working-class communities. Labour's tally of 203 seats was the worst result in terms of seats that it had suffered since 1935. The Conservative secured 43.6 percent of the vote, Labour 32.2 percent and the Liberal Democrats 11.5 percent and the Brexit Party a mere 2 percent. Despite Johnson's decisive victory 52 percent of voters had supported pro remain parties, 17 million people voted for parties that wanted a second referendum compared with fewer than 15 million for leave. The result reflected a deep cultural divide between large cities that had sided with remain parties and small towns, the countryside and de-industrialised communities that had voted Conservative.

Addressing parliament after the election Johnson emphasised a desire to "reunite" the country and "to begin the healing for which the whole people of this country yearn". However, evidence of concessions and compromise were sparse. In the wake of the election Johnson appeared to be tilting his vision of Brexit in a 'hard' form as the Withdrawal Agreement Bill he presented to parliament specifically prevented MPs extending the Brexit transition period beyond the end of 2020, the Bill was also shorn of previously pledged protections on workers' rights, though assurances were given they would feature in a separate Bill. Ministers would also no longer be bound to provide updates on the future trading relationship or to make sure parliament approves the government's negotiating objectives. A mere three days were allocated for scrutiny. On the 20th December the Bill passed its second reading by 358 votes to 234.

However, as the public was to learn this would not be the end of Brexit. Talks with the EU were to continue over the nature of the UK's trading relationship with the EU and dispute and controversy remained evident. The final withdrawal agreement with its trade border between the EU and UK cut across the Irish sea meant that the province of Northern Ireland remained within the regulatory sphere of the EU to some extent. This has created new bureaucratic hurdles and supply shortages. Political tensions have also become inflamed with with a resurgence of violent street protests reminiscent of the past 'troubles'. Many unionists in Northern Ireland felt betrayed by the UK government who had indicated that Northern

Ireland's position within the United Kingdom would not be compromised. There are growing fears that Brexit could undermine the Good Friday Agreement that brought peace to the province. These fears and tensions were evident in June 2021 over an argument over the shipment of chilled meats into Northern Ireland from other parts of the UK, with the EU arguing this violated the Northern Ireland protocol. In response the UK has indicated it might unilaterally extend grace periods (Phinnemore, 2020). Some have raised concerns about whether the UK is serious in honouring its international agreements and whether Johnson is a leader who can be trusted. Did Johnson know precisely what he was doing when he supported the new agreement so he could promise in the 2019 election that he would 'get Brexit done'? Did he do so with the intention of reneging on the agreement and then framing EU recalcitrance as the EU being difficult? Concerns also remain as to the interpretation of level playing field agreements, the fear being that Johnson will seek to renege on what the EU consider to be part of a stringent agreement.

Conclusion

To return to the questions posed at the start of the paper: To what degree does the premiership of Johnson in terms of managing Brexit reflect the traits of authoritarian populism? Is this approach to politics out of character with who the British are? Answering questions objectively is not easy. The consequences of Brexit in terms of trade and economic position is only slowly emerging and the pandemic has been something of a distraction from some of the more alarming trade figures that have appeared following the UK's departure from the EU.

With reference to the charge of authoritarian populism Johnson's polarizing rhetoric and tactics featured prominently in the referendum, his path to the leadership and navigating the UK's departure from the EU. In all probability such traits will feature in the expected round of future tussles and hostilities with the EU with regards to interpretations on whether the Withdrawal Agreement is being respected. Is such positioning and strategizing out of character with who the British believe they are? Again, this is not an easy or straightforward question to answer, the answer is naturally shaped by whatever vision one may have of national identity. Certainly, a civic conception of national identity would shy away from the jingoism and binaryism of Johnson. If one takes a narrow interpretation of nation centred on self-interest it could be questioned whether Johnson's strategy will bring meaningful benefits to the great majority. A 'race to the bottom' Brexit where the UK is locked into a downward spiral of competitiveness with the EU could lead to significant deterioration in wages and workers' rights, making the UK into

what has been termed a hyperglobalist ‘Singapore on stilts’ on the edge of Europe. Such visions of the UK hark back to its economic dominance in the nineteenth century based on innovation and free market capitalism, but it was an economic approach that had a hugely negative impact on the poor. The social contract of the European Union seems to want to protect and bolster the social and welfare rights and benefits of European citizenry.

Hyperglobalism, a commitment to a more unfettered form of neoliberalism and the reorientation of the Conservative Party as a populist party has prompted some to reflect upon the predictions of Polanyi and Dahrendorf that neoliberalism might transform into forms of authoritarianism. Although these detours initially might appear to be in contradiction with globalisation as reflected by sentiments favouring a retreat into the nation state and opposition to free movement of labour, the fusion of neoliberalism and nationalist/authoritarian populism seems to be a relatively simple form of political merger, facilitating further downsizing and dilution of social protections (Fekete, 2016). It could be argued that for the greater part of the post-war period (1945 – 1979) at least until the time of Thatcher the UK had a deep commitment to social rights. Johnson though has clearly aligned himself with a more Thatcherite vision of where the UK wants to be as a nation, a commitment that will inevitably undermine his claim to represent a more compassionate, caring and interventionist form of One Nation Conservatism.

On the question of the rule of law Johnson could also be termed a populist. Populist leaders like Viktor Orbán have flouted EU principles and values and proclaimed Hungary to be an ‘ill-liberal democracy. Johnson in terms of how he navigated Brexit through parliament that involved the suspension of parliamentary proceedings to stifle debate and potential breaking of an international treaty with reference to Northern Ireland (discussed above) has placed his administration in the populist tradition. For many years the UK proudly boasted to be the ‘mother of parliaments’, a beacon and example of democracy. UK politicians prided themselves on the representative democracy of Westminster where dialogue and deliberation might lead to informed decision making. If these are sentiments that still reflect the character and aspirations of UK citizens then again the premiership of Johnson may be at odds with these political traditions.

The question of who and what a nation is has to be attentive to the fact that there may be competing notions of what national identity represents. Also national identity is in a constant

state of flux, ever shifting and changing. It should also be noted that Johnson is a rather fickle politician with a tendency to promise but equally a tendency to renege and change direction. Johnson the populist prime minister has been different to Johnson the One Nation Conservative mayor of London. Time will tell what direction the UK will take in the future. It could be a choice between hyperglobalism and authoritarian populism or a renewed social contract centred on forms of intervention and statism. The assessment of this paper and use of game theory and nested realms of activity indicate that Johnson has favoured taking strong positions (chicken run) and facing down opponents to secure a harder form of Brexit, where concessions have been given attempts have been made to dilute them or renege upon them. In terms of national character Johnson has aligned with the most reactive and traditional public outlooks and elite economic interests that endorse a more hyperglobalist form of capitalism.

Tsebelis (1990) in his conception of nested realms and political gaming of political activity notes that party leaders are often torn between compromising with other leaders and refusing to compromise to gain the support of their party rank and file. He finds that this dissonance between the incentives in each game elicits the party leaders to make determinations about the importance of each game. In other words, each leader must decide how much emphasis to place on each game, where more emphasis on one leads to less on the other. Johnson's concessions, as noted, have often been diluted and or reneged but he seems to have been most constant in his pursuance of a hyperglobalist vision and thus his priority game appears to be satisfying the aspirations of a section of the economic elite wedded to aggressive free marketism, advocating policies that extend neo-liberalism's assault on corporate regulation and the redirection of wealth upward.

At present the EU is flatly rejecting the UK's appeal to revise the Northern Ireland protocol, now outside of a custom union bureaucratic requirements are impeding the speed and scale of trade and labour shortages are causing disruption in the care sector, transport and agriculture, leading in some cases to food shortages, these are the consequences of the hard Brexit the government aspired to. Some might muse that the sensible path would be for Johnson to eat humble pie and seek, as far and as fast as possible, readmission to the single market but strong political positions assumed hitherto as part of a 'chicken run' strategy and the populist traits of Johnson's leadership are likely to impede such pragmatism or the options for manoeuvre

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