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# Just Ordinary Folk? British Populist Voters' Perceptions of Politician's Eliteness

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## Abstract

This paper uses qualitative analysis through interview to understand what qualities British populist voters see as emblematic of elite, their perceptions of contemporary frontline politicians' eliteness, and whether respondents' political leanings influence their perception of said politicians' elite characteristics.

**Keywords:** Populism, Qualitative Research, Brexit, Trump, Electoral Psychology

## Introduction

Populism has become a mainstay of political discourse in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century, with populist movements on the left and right not only influencing discourse, but also achieving electoral success. A record number of anti-establishment politicians, seeking to consolidate power in the executive and challenge democratic values, have achieved success (Foa & Mounk, 2017). While a Leave vote and the Trump Presidency were considered fantasy before election day, the success of both movements illustrates the new political reality the Western World finds itself in. This populist wave has not only come from the right of the political spectrum, but the left as well. In the wake of the Greek Debt Crisis, SYRIZA saw electoral victory, with their leader Alexis Tsipras becoming Prime Minister of Greece in 2015. Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party saw unexpected success in the 2017 election, receiving their highest share of seats since the financial crash. Spain's Podemos captured the public mood in the aftermath of the 15-M Movement, receiving 21% of the national vote in their first election after their inception.

The main underlying theme of populism is the concept of 'the people', and fulfilling democracy's promise of power to said people, considering themselves 'true democrats' (Canovan, 1999). In opposition to the people is 'the elite', who seek to maintain their entrenched social, economic and political power, at the expense of the people. This dissertation's aims are to understand what populist voters consider to be hallmarks of the

elite, whether they perceive politicians at the forefront of populist movements as elites, and if so, whether populists still consider said politicians as 'on the side of the people'. I will test this through interviewing those who have voted for populist parties or movements on 1) whether they consider selected populist politicians as elite, 2) the traits they consider to make an individual an elite and 3) whether elitehood can be 'overcome' by being 'on the side of the people'. My expectation is that left-wing populists, which for simplicity this paper will take to be Corbynite members of the Labour Party, will see their party leadership as not being elites and as being on the side of the people, while those on the right, represented by Leave voters, will be more likely to consider their leadership as part of the elite, but by their policy platform be considered to be on the side of the people. My hypothesis' differing expectations for those on the left and right is due to the left's desire for ideological purity, especially true under Corbyn's Labour (Harris, 2018). I believe this purity does not lend itself to leftist leaders being perceived as more elite as those who elect them, as this would imply a lack of equality. This is not a problem for those on the right, as conservatism relies on the idea that people have different talents and levels of ability (Dorey, 2010). I also expect that both sides will identify ideologically oppositional leaders as members of the elite who are not on the side of the people.

The inspiration for this dissertation comes from an article by Gary Younge, discussing the use of populism as a weapon by the wealthy in order to maintain their privilege (Younge, 2018). The article referred to leaders like Donald Trump, George W. Bush and Boris Johnson promoting themselves as 'ordinary folk', while being of the same ilk as the elite they position themselves against. While the article drew a distinction between the leadership of the right and left-wing populism, further research into leaders on the left of this movement indicated that these populist left leaders have traits that would be considered typical for the elite: private education, advanced degrees, long term roles as elected politicians to name but a few. While the policy objectives of populist movements and leaders depend on their positioning on the ideological spectrum, their focus on the people, and by extension the elite is a consistent theme.

Political scientists have struggled with finding a clear definition for what constitutes populism. It has been described as a 'pathology' or 'syndrome' of democracy, a political style, and a doctrine (Stanley, 2008). For the purposes of this dissertation, I will utilise Ernesto Laclau's formulation of populism, as it focuses on the role and makeup of the people in the populist paradigm (Laclau, 2005). Laclau posits that the minimum requirement for populism is social demand. Demands that can be implemented within the framework of the status quo (intra-systemic) are considered democratic demands, while those that can't (anti-systemic) are considered popular demands. These popular demands become the foundation of populist leaders' rhetoric, which constructs the people as a collective that will confront the status quo, while also forming an antagonistic group that seeks to preserve it. This definition is useful, as it applies to populism across the political spectrum, and forms the basis for classification of the elite as oppositional to the people's social demands.

## **Literature Review**

As mentioned, the populist wave has in turn led to a breadth of literature on the phenomenon; attempting to define it, seek its causes, and understand its influence on the political discourse. Aside from Laclau's definition, Cas Mudde's defines populism as 'as an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people' (Mudde, 2004). Daniele Caramani defines populism as a form of representation, that has political action be guided by the 'unconstrained will of the people'. To Caramani (2017), the role of the populist leader is to be responsive, and to equate the general interest 'with a putative will

of the people'. All of these definitions agree on the importance of the people's will to classifying movements and parties as populist. Margaret Canovan (2005) observes that while election victories are hailed as popular mandates, opponents to the victors still can, and do, call for issues to be put to the people, or further than that, for political power to be taken from politicians and returned to the people.

The main focus of this dissertation is the elite, namely the apparent elites that find themselves leaders of populist movements. The aforementioned Gary Younge article posits that much of the surge of right-wing populism has been driven by wealthy and well-connected leaders, who are seeking to entrench their own socio-economic power; populism being the tool with which they achieve this, through mobilisation of the people against the elite as they define it. This bears striking resemblance to Antonio Gramsci's (1971) theory of cultural hegemony, which states that the ruling classes will utilise various apparatus to convince the lower classes that their interests are the same, to maintain the status quo that benefits the ruling classes. Agnes Akkerman, Mudde and Andrej Zaslove (2014) also touch on this, that populist movements are often centred around centralised and personalised parties, even when the end goal of populism is supposedly more direct democracy for the people. The role of this 'personal touch' to populist leaders being combined with a centralised party is backed up by research on the 2016 Trump Campaign. Nick Dietrich and Kevin Reuning (2018) found that Trump saw his support improve with increased media attention, where most politicians see it as a hinderance. Canovan (2005) references Ross Perot's presidential run as representative of a new populism, when many would argue billionaire status would preclude someone from being representative of ordinary people. Robert Barr (2009) states that the labelling of Perot, as well as Alberto Fujimori and Jean-Marie Le Pen, as populists is only suggestive of their character, and may not accurately reflect their relationship with the political establishment. This would give further credence to the idea that these populist movements are often led by those that could be considered part of the elite. Barr conceptualises political outsiders by their experience within the party system, or rather lack thereof, which this paper will utilise as part of its rubric for elite. Ian Leslie (2016) raises a similar point, writing that in spite of Trump's wealth, he is 'forever the Queens guy trying to break into Manhattan society. For his supporters, this is a feature not a bug'. This would indicate that amongst supporters of populism, while their leaders can have attributes that would make them part of the elite, their focus is on the leader's status as an outsider. I posit that this outsider status promotes sympathy amongst voters who feel disconnected from the political establishment, which allows them to ignore other aspects of their politicians that would to non-supporters include them in the elite. Barr (2009) raises doubts on this 'bimodal conceptualisation [of] insider or outsider' with reference to populist politicians, again indicating that the elite/people dichotomy is not an exact binary, but should be modelled on a spectrum, or requires an individual to meet certain criteria in a rubric.

Much like Canovan says about 'the people' being a 'fuzzy' term, the same can be said for the elite. Alan Zuckerman (1977) discusses the 'paradox' attached to the concept of political elite. Attempts at finding empirical values for what constitutes a member of the elite has led to a 'morass of conflicting definitions'. He highlights the conflicting attempts at definitions by various political scientists and theorists, with no consensus. Robert Dahl (1961) precluded divided leadership structures from making up an elite, but I find this to be counterproductive as a disqualifying factor. Elites do not become any less elite simply because they work in opposition to one another. The Blair and Cameron ministries had different policy aims, but both administrations received criticisms for elitism, and featured attributes that many would consider elite. *The Establishment* by Owen Jones (2015) attempts to define the elite in relation to British politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, first understanding right-wing populism as a demonization of 'immigrants, unemployed people [and] benefits claimants', while constructing the stereotypical establishment figure as no longer simply 'a white male follow[ing] an effortless path from private school to Oxbridge into a lucrative and influential job'. To Jones, the establishment is 'bound by common economic interests and a shared set

of mentalities'. Jones' formulation of the establishment is similar to that of Henry Fairlie's (1955), who saw it as the 'matrix of official and social relations within which power is exercised', being the first definition of those individuals with high social and political capital. The Oxbridge educated Jones attempts to deal with potential criticism of him being a member of this establishment by calling himself a 'participant adviser' that challenges the powerful. While this may fit with his own narrative, it contributes to this paper's thesis that those who consider themselves on the side of the people will often times share attributes with the same individuals they would classify as being part of the elite. Mudde (2004) states that the concept of 'the elite takes its identity from its opposite, its nemesis [the people]', again alluding to the difficulty of defining the group, as it is represented only in opposition to already 'fuzzy' categorisation.

My research will concern only British politicians, as finding a high enough sample size of non-British populists to return an adequate number of results would prove difficult. Furthermore, while some traits of the elite will be applicable across various nations and cultures, some will be more specific to the political makeup of individual nations. Research into the makeup of the House of Commons has contributed to my expectations of what interviewees will consider part of being a member of the elite. A report by Dan Holden and Paul Hunter (2015) for The Smith Institute into the representativeness of 2015 House of Commons provides an interesting look at the backgrounds of Members of Parliaments in contrast to the country at whole and provides us with a basis with which to build a hypothesis. The report finds that the 'average' MP in the 2015 intake was male, 51 years old, state school and university (but not Oxbridge) educated. Regarding education, the report shows that 33% of MPs attended private schools, compared to a national average of 7%. From this, it's clear that privately educated individuals have a disproportionate chance of becoming MPs in relation to their state educated peers. A university education from Oxford or Cambridge is also an expected response, as the report reveals that 23% of MPs have said education, compared to less than 1% of the population as a whole according to a report by the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (SMCPC) (2014), which leads me to make a value judgement: an Oxbridge education does have a positive effect on the likelihood of an individual entering politics. The same report examines how overrepresented private school and Oxbridge educated individuals are in various offices of social and political importance, such as judges, Lords, senior armed forces officers, BBC executives, media personalities and Select Committee members to name but a few. The Smith Institute report shows that 'metropolitan' occupations such as the ones the SMCPC listed as being saturated by the privately and Oxbridge educated. This paper's hypothesis will be informed by these professions, namely finance, business, public affairs, politics, media, and the law.

David Combs and Peggy Keller's work on trustworthiness provides an illuminating perspective on what engenders trust in politicians from voters (Combs & Keller, 2010). The main finding of this article is that a politician that is considered to be acting against their best interests is not only more likely to engender trust, but also increase the likelihood of individuals voting for said candidate. This would give credence to the idea that a politician can overcome their eliteness and be on the side of the people. The idea of a politician going against their best interests, and being more trusted, provides insight into why interviewees believe them to be on their side. For example, Nigel Farage, a former banker, can be seen by a populist voter to be going against his best individual interests, if said voter's perception of the EU is that of a body promoting neoliberal values like austerity and privatisation in servitude of the business class (FitzGibbon, et al., 2016), which would include Farage. Similarly, Corbyn has been described by his biographer Rosa Prince as having a thoroughly upper-middle class scruffy country upbringing, though his policy platform is more sympathetic to those of a lower social class than himself. Therefore, it could be posited that whether consciously or subconsciously, populist voters support the elite politicians described by Young because of their elitehood, not in spite of it. This is further evidenced by Benjamin Moffitt's (2016) book on populism, which states that populist leaders must straddle

the line between 'the ordinary and extraordinary', to appeal as 'both of "the people", as well as above "the people"'. Moffitt also asserts that the 'bad manners' of populist politicians, their rejection of the typical presentational norms of politicians, is a means by which they distance themselves from the political establishment. This is exemplified by Farage's drinking and smoking in front of the cameras, and Corbyn's refusal at the start of his leadership to wear a suit and tie, the typical male politician's uniform. I would even posit that Rees-Mogg's refusal to present himself as anything other than an anachronism, 'The Honourable Member For The 18<sup>th</sup> Century', can be seen as a rejection of the typical politician's attempts to appear similar to their constituents (Lusher, 2017). In doing this, Rees-Mogg removes any barrier between himself and the voting public, by unashamedly presenting himself completely as is; a breath of fresh air for many voters dissatisfied with politicians who try and play down their eliteness.

Gordon Pennycook and David Rand's (2019) research into cognitive reflection and voter intentions in the 2016 US presidential election, another vote dominated by populist ideas, contributes to my modelling of interviewee responses. Their research finds that while Trump voters were less reflective than Clinton or third-party voters, the voter group driving this difference was self-identifying Democrats voting for Trump. As Republicans who voted for third parties instead of Trump were seen to have high scores in cognitive reflection, Pennycook and Rand's explanation for this result is that Trump's policy platform attracted individuals who rely more on intuitive thinking than analytical thinking. They equate this attraction to Trump's rhetoric being more informal and narrative driven, as opposed to a more formal and logical rhetoric attracting more analytical thinkers. This has multiple consequences for this paper, most importantly being the rhetoric utilised by British populist politicians, that makes emotional appeals to voters, is important in winning over said voters, and how said voters may be more predisposed to voting for populists. Furthermore, this article has influenced my model, as I posit that Brexit voters will be less likely to engage in the analytical thinking required to accurately assess the eliteness of their leadership, due to the Brexit campaign being driven by emotional rhetoric, rather than economic or strategic considerations (Inkster, 2016). I also conclude that left-wing Brexiteers will be most unlikely to engage in analytical thinking to identify their own leadership, as the case for 'Lexit', namely that the EU prevents the UK from engaging in a left wing programme of renationalisation has been thoroughly debunked by various experts on the EU (Inman, 2017).

Robert Huber and Saskia Ruth's (2017) work on populism's effect on representation sheds light on how the selected politicians can be seen by interviewees as being representative of the people. They conclude that right-wing populist groups have a positive impact on equality of participation across both income and education groupings, and left-wing populists have a similarly positive effect on ideological congruence, i.e. bringing a party's ideology closer to that of the people. This suggests that right populist groups are more effective than other right-leaning groups in enhancing voter participation for those in disaffected income and education groups. The same can be said for left-leaning groups being able to appeal to left leaning voters who are disaffected by movements to the centre by parties that historically were of a more socialist bent. However, Huber and Ruth add that right populist groups are more able to mobilise lower classes by criticising traditional elites, this does not improve ideological congruence between the citizenry and their representatives in parliament. This indicates that this criticism of elites can lead to a self-perpetuating cycle, with populists criticising the political elite, causing pushback from said elites, providing more ammunition for populists with which to criticise the elites. Therefore, in terms of maintaining and growing a support base, it is in the best interests of populist politicians that parliament doesn't represent their followers, potentially achieved by more partisan and combative rhetoric and performances in the legislature.

## Model

As discussed previously, populist movements have quickly become a mainstay of our current political reality. As shown by the work of Laclau, Mudde and Akkerman, the people/elite dichotomy is an important part of both the ideological framework of populism, as well as the rhetoric utilised by populist politicians. As seen in the literature, especially Zuckerman's piece, attempts to define the elite have proved inconclusive. This paper's aims are threefold: firstly, to find whether populist interviewees consider the selected populist politicians to be members of the elite, using some centrist politicians as a control group; secondly, to find the traits that these populists consider to be emblematic of a member of the elite; finally, to see if populists believe that eliteness can be overcome, that members of the elite can represent the people, breaching the assumed dichotomy of populism.

A tripartite research question requires a tripartite hypothesis. For the first aspect of this paper, I believe that, respective to right and left populist interviewees, the selected politicians least likely to be labelled as elite are Nigel Farage and Jeremy Corbyn. This is influenced by Moffitt's (2016) writing on the 'bad manners' of populist politicians, which separates them from the typical political establishment. Corbyn's scruffiness is a far cry from the polished nature of the New Labour era, which certainly contributes to his appeal among those who thought Labour strayed from its roots during this time. Farage's penchant for cigarettes and alcohol in front of the cameras is a way of humanising himself to voters, ingratiating himself with those who share similar vices. This is not to say that I expect all interviewees to not identify their leaders as members of the elite, but that the likelihood is higher for these two politicians. I also expect that when asked about their ideologically opposed politicians, interviewees will have a higher likelihood of identifying them as members of the elite. I expect my control non-populist politicians, Tony Blair and David Cameron, to be most labelled as members of the elite, as both encapsulate the political establishment.

This paper's hypothesis for what is perceived to make a politician a member of the elite is a white man with high level of family wealth, private schooling, Oxbridge education, and a 'metropolitan career' prior to entering politics. This has been heavily informed by Holden & Hunter's (2015) report on the representativeness of the House of Commons, in which the average MP in the 2015 intake was male, 51 years old, state schooled, and university educated. While a correlation could be found between age and an individual having had more time to amass socio-economic capital, which would be seen across the general public as well, I do not think that age presents an adequate causality to eliteness when examined in a vacuum, away from education, occupation etc. As mentioned previously, the Elitist Britain report (2014) shows the over saturation of Oxbridge graduates in politics as well as other metropolitan careers, 23% of MPs being Oxbridge grads compared to less than 1% of the population, hence its inclusion in this paper's hypothesis. Furthermore, while expected to be overlooked by male interviewees, I expect that female interviewees will be more likely to raise this as what makes someone part of the elite, though as a necessary but not sufficient condition. The same can be said for white interviewees not perceiving whiteness as a factor, while non-white interviewees will be more likely to.

Finally, my hypothesis for whether interviewees believe the selected politicians are on the side of the people is that there is a higher likelihood for leftists to believe Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell are on the side of the people, and for rightists to believe Nigel Farage and Jacob Rees-Mogg are on the side of the people. As shown by Combs & Keller (2010), a politician is more likely to be trusted if they are perceived to be going against their best interests. However, this will be viewed through an ideological lens, as to whether personal preference and ideological preference align i.e. interviewees will place politicians' personal motives differently, based on their own relative ideological slant relative. Therefore, I believe that few interviewees will classify the politicians ideologically opposed to themselves as on the side of the people.

## Methodology

This paper's main source of data collection will be semi-structured qualitative interviews. Qualitative interviews are defined as 'conversations in which a researcher gently guides a conversational partner in an extended discussion' (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). I decided to use qualitative interviews as a means to understand a socio-political concept, in line with Rubin and Rubin (2005), that interviews are an 'especially good' means of doing so. They also state that through qualitative interviews, one can understand experiences and processes that one did not play a part in, allowing the interviewer to 'extend their intellectual and emotional reach' across various personal boundaries. As an individual who wouldn't categorise themselves as being a populist, as well as a privately educated male, meeting 2 of my own criteria for eliteness, interviews allow me to glean a more personal understanding of populists' perceptions of the elite. A semi-structured interview also allows for the flexibility to get this personal understanding from my interviewees, instead of forcing my own academically influenced rubric for elitehood on them. This style also gave me more opportunity to press my interviewees for elaboration on their responses that I thought required more depth to fully understand.

I conducted 16 interviews, ranging from 5 to longest 23 minutes, most lasting around 8-13 minutes. Shorter interviews occurred with individuals who were, often self-described, less politically engaged and therefore had not formed as in-depth opinions about the discussed concepts and politicians, and longer interviews came from those who were more politically engaged, and therefore had more pre-established opinions to offer. Apart from the recurrent theme of several interviewees not knowing who John McDonnell was, every interviewee had opinions to share, often presenting aspects of eliteness that I hadn't thought about a priori. My interviews were reflective, in that I often utilised ideas from previous interviews in consequent ones, to respond to and challenge interviewee responses, and to see if they agreed with previous respondents. One respondent raised the example of a deputy headmaster at a private school, compared to the self-made multimillionaire founder of Pimlico Plumbers, stating that he believed the former represented the elite more. I used this example in response to interviewees who focussed on the wealth aspect of the elite to see if it tempered their views or led to further discussion. I was careful to leave these questions to the end of their statements on individual themes, as to not influence their answers.

The individuals selected for said interviews were those who self-identified as supporting either Brexit, the Corbynite Labour party, or both. I interviewed 8 Corbynites, 9 Brexiteers and one Corbynite Brexiteer. My intention was to have an equal split between left and right populists, but I don't believe this slight difference impinges on this paper's representational value, and it did allow me to test my thesis on Lexiteers discussed in the literature review, though not to a statistically significant end. I did attempt to have an equal gender balance among my interviewees, but my Corbynite interviewees skewed female and, vice versa, Brexiteers male. In total, I interviewed 6 women and 10 men. I interviewed 2 BAME individuals, one a Corbynite, one a Brexiteer, as I sought to make my sample representative of the country as a whole. Due to being a student in London, most of the individuals I interviewed were students, both undergraduate and postgraduate, aside from two friends' relatives, and a friend of my brother, who had graduated university 5 years prior. As a reflective researcher, I recognise this does limit the representativeness of my sample in terms of age and education, causal inferences will, therefore, be limited by self-selection. My case selection was also hampered by location, while Corbynites are relatively straightforward to find in London, there is a dearth of Brexiteers. I did take advantage of a social trip to Cornwall to interview a friend's uncle, as well as interviewing another friend's father over FaceTime to try and limit location bias. I coded each interview with an interview number, their home location away from London, their age, interview length, and self-identified type of populist (see Appendix 2).

My interviews covered three themes. Two focussed on the interviewees' perceptions of 6 selected politicians as being on the side of the people, then members of the elite (see appendix 1 for base interview structure). The other revolved around their perceptions of what makes an individual a member of the elite. The first 6 questions were my means of gauging the interviewees' ideological stance, more subtly than simply outright asking them to self-define their stance. I asked for opinions on the selected politicians first, to test whether there was a correlation between positive opinions and seeing the politician as on the side of the people, as well as the inverse. If an interviewee gave only a one-word answer to 'is X a member of the elite' or 'one the side of the people', I was quick to ask them to elaborate, to ensure a deeper answer. The order of my questions was deliberately designed to see if interviewees would give a certain rubric to elitehood, then not attribute the selected politicians who fit that rubric with elitehood. The selected politicians were chosen to try and ensure name recognition, as well as to fit my own rubric for elitehood. They were all privately educated at one point in their life, with none attending state comprehensives. All have had long careers in politics, making them fulfil my hypothesis of having 'metropolitan careers'. I included the non-populist politicians Tony Blair and David Cameron to understand how populists perceived their elitehood, as well as seeing whether interviewees would consider them to be on the side of the people in spite of not being populist leaders themselves. The selected politicians were all male, in order to see whether a gender aspect would arise. As stated previously, a common problem that arose was lack of name recognition for John McDonnell. I did foresee this, understanding Corbyn to be the main face of the current Labour Party, so I selected McDonnell, making a value judgement that he had the greatest name recognition and most clear support for the Corbyn project of the Labour front bench. I did still get responses regarding McDonnell, with typically those who self-identified as less politically engaged not knowing who he was.

## **Analysis and Discussion**

All of the 16 people interviewed offered opinions on what made an individual part of the elite, and whether the selected politicians were on the side of the people and/or members of the elite. Recurrent themes were as I expected, namely wealth, educational background, and career, but as I had hoped, interpretations of these factors were diverse, and interviewees often raised ideas I had not countenanced before embarking on this paper's research component. Most interviewees named their own leadership as elite, and also stated said leadership were on the side of the people, with the exceptions being CRB1 CRB6, and CRB8, who didn't see their leadership as being elite. BRX3 strayed from the pack by stating their opposing leadership were on the side of the people. In this section I will discuss the interviewees' offerings, breaking it down into the three aspects of my research question, using quotes from the interview to demonstrate thematic similarities and differences.

### **Elite Markers:**

#### **Wealth**

Wealth was common across all interviewees as being an elite marker. Common refrains from interviewees, regardless of ideology, when asked what made someone elite were 'rich' (CRB7), 'high wealth' (BRX1), 'wealthy' (BRX4). Interviewees referred to a 'six-figure' salary (CRB6, CRB7, BRX6). BRX3 thought the threshold for elite levels of wealth was lower, stating that for them, being 'well above the median income, about 40-50k' was what they would consider elite wealth. References to 'poshness' abounded often used to describe the selected rightist politicians, Jacob Rees-Mogg being memorably described by CRB8 as a 'posh cunt', Tony Blair also receiving this description from Brexiteer interviewees (BRX1,

BRX4, BRX7, BRX8). I inferred this to be a perception of distance from politicians they disagreed with, utilised as a term of contempt for some interviewees, creating a separation between 'them' and 'us', a common refrain in populist rhetoric. References to property were also common, especially from the interviewees still at university. For a generation where homeownership seems perpetually out of reach, it again implies a distance between the interviewees and their perceived notions of the elite. For some, wealth represented a lack of equity in opportunity, with CRB4 saying it represented 'a leg up I didn't have'. One of the most enlightening statements on wealth was from CRB5, who drew a distinction between money and wealth, discussing 'globalised wealth'. CRB5 also discussed the 'stereotype that poorer households have bigger TVs and Sky, the elite don't need that, they don't need to prove themselves materially'. CRB5's most incisive commentary came when they discussed the idea of autonomy from the state; 'whoever's elected to government, it doesn't matter to them, it won't affect their lives', again showing distance from the common man and the elite. However, BRX5 raised the idea of wealth not being enough on its own to join the elite. They raised the example of Charlie Mullins, the founder of Pimlico Plumbers, a self-made millionaire, and the deputy headmaster of a private school, believing the latter's occupation in spite of a lower wealth was more indicative of eliteness, as it came with more social capital. When I raised this point with later interviewees, there were split opinions. CRB5 stated that Mullins' wealth had allowed him to enter politics as a Conservative donor, while CRB1 compared it to Alan Sugar, again a self-made millionaire, who leveraged his position to become a Lord. They believed that money allowed access to politics that those of lesser means didn't have. CRB7 discussed the idea of the elite versus the establishment; similar to the Great Gatsby, one can be economically elite, but not part of the political establishment. CRB7 raised Donald Trump and Nigel Farage as two politicians who were certainly economically elite, but on the fringes of the political establishment, positing that this outsider status benefitted them among their supporters.

## Education

Similar to wealth, education was a recurrent theme across all interviewees, as expected, with every interviewee making some reference to private schooling 'definitely' (CRB6) being a major marker. BRX2 provided some nuance, believing that simply going to private school by itself did not indicate eliteness, discussing scholarships and similar programmes, but did concede that private schooling is a common feature of elite individuals. BRX1 discussed elites having 'money poured on [their education]', and that this upbringing was how these individuals were 'groomed for it', in reference to their political careers. Oxbridge was not mentioned as often as I expected, with only 7 candidates mentioning it specifically. More commonly there were references to a 'fancy' or 'top' university (BRX1, BRX2). Corbynites were most likely to talk about Oxbridge, while Brexiteers tended towards a more philosophical bent. BRX3 provided an interesting perspective, discussing why university education was associated with elites. BRX3 perceived elites as having 'a tertiary education provided lens', and their proclivity towards the 'categorisation of people's behaviours' and the 'compartmentalisation of real lives', equating it to a 'god complex'. BRX6 agreed, discussing the elite's tendency to 'treat us like numbers'. BRX4 discussed the 'detachment from common sense' that they considered emblematic of the elite, again returning to this distance felt by my interviewees in relation to the elite.

## Occupation

Occupations like law and banking were mentioned infrequently; more frequent was the idea that simply being part of the political machine made an individual elite, which corresponded with the discussion of elite versus establishment. BRX4 discussed 'careerist politicians' as their main conception of the elite. As there are only a finite number of MPs, reaching said

position feels out of reach for most individuals, especially those who feel disenfranchised by mainstream politics, as populists are. As mentioned above, a combination of the perceived elite's wealth and education led BRX1 to feel as if elites are 'groomed for [their roles]', again contributing to this idea of politics being out of reach for the common individual.

## **Gender**

Gender was explicitly mentioned by only 1 interviewee, CRB1, who was female. As expected, no men raised the issue. CRB1 stated that women can be part of the elite but that it 'depends on what she looks like [and] what she sounds like', indicating her belief that there are higher barriers for women to become members of the elite. CRB1 also stated that even women who reach the elite, examples given being Theresa May and Margaret Thatcher, are still 'looking into the smoke-filled room' rather than residing in it. This implies that even when at the height of political office, CRB1 believed that women do not achieve the same levels of elitehood due to the prejudices of the current elite. Interestingly, while not outright mentioning gender, the language used by BRX1 in reference to Tony Blair, such as 'pushover', 'walkover', and his not having 'balls', was based around masculinity, or Blair's perceived lack thereof. BRX1 also discussed Farage as someone who 'could be a bloke in my local', implying a greater amount of masculinity compared to Blair. While I put this down to his distaste for Blair and his approval of Farage, from this gendered approach we can infer that masculinity is an important factor of representation to BRX1 and raises again the distancing from politicians engaged in by my interviewees.

## **Race**

Again, only CRB1 mentioned race, discussing Diane Abbot's status as a black female politician. CRB1 described her as 'facing institutional barriers', again saying that she wouldn't be included in the elite because of the current elite's prejudices. The lack of interviewee reflection on race is most likely due to 14 of 16 interviewees being white and having a lack of understanding for issues facing ethnic minorities in politics. However, 1 of the BAME interviewees also didn't mention race, suggesting that they didn't feel it was a barrier to being elite, or that they didn't consider it as important as other factors discussed in the interview.

## **Part of the Elite?**

Most interviewees described all of the selected politicians as elites, owing to their wealth, education, or status as a politician. When asked to categorise what an elite looks like, CRB1's initial answer was simply 'Jacob Rees-Mogg', not a surprising revelation, but telling, nonetheless. The exceptions were CRB1, CRB6 and CRB8 not naming Corbyn or McDonnell as elite, in line with my hypothesis that Corbynites would be less likely to call their own leadership elites due to it being less in line with their ideology of equality. The distancing language described previously was completely absent in these interviewees' testimonials about Corbyn or McDonnell, with CRB1 saying he was 'more down to earth' than the typical politician. BRX1 was another outlier in not describing Farage as being a member of the elite. I again noted the absence of distancing language regarding Farage in this interview, him being described as like 'a bloke in my local'. BRX3 offered an explanation for this: 'Politicians like to be seen at the pub having a drink, but for Cameron, [Boris] Johnson and [Zac] Goldsmith it looks unnatural, they'd much rather have a glass of red. Farage looks natural, it's not forced by his media team'. This testimony is concurrent with my proposal that Jacob Rees-Mogg's appeal can be in part put down to his lack of facade. Voters are aware that most politicians aren't like them, and when politicians attempt to pander towards voters by engaging in activities they perceive as normalising, voters pick up

on this, and the differences between voters and politicians becomes more evident, further raising barriers between the two groups.

### **With The People?**

As expected, all interviewees stated that the politicians of their ideological ilk were on the side of the people, with most saying the opposite for the politicians they disagreed with. All interviewees agreed that an elite can represent the interests of the people, the common prerequisite for this representation being 'empathy' (CRB1), or similarly 'putting us first' (BRX1). Again unsurprisingly, Cameron and Blair were least likely to be considered on the side of the people, even by those on the right and left respectively. Common reasons given for this opinion were Cameron's leaving office after the Brexit result, and Blair's entering the Iraq War, with CRB5 also raising his privatisation of public services and post-office record, stating 'I don't believe someone on the left should be earning, piggybacking off a war he created', again raising the concept of ideological purity within the left. An interesting opinion from CRB8, being both from Wales and the only interviewee not from England, was that Farage was 'too English' to represent him. BRX3 was the only interviewee to say that politicians on their opposing side were on the side of the people, believing that Corbyn and McDonnell both had the people's interest at heart, referring to them as having a 'patrician-like quality', and that both politicians work for what they believe is good for the people. This conciliatory approach is in stark contrast to the combative language used by CRB2, describing Farage as a 'fucking prick', CRB8 calling him a 'master manipulator', BRX2's statement that Corbyn 'has a hidden agenda', or his labelling by BRX5 as a 'communist'. This language reveals the polarising effect of populism on our politics. These politicians present almost a marmite quality, being held up on a pedestal by those of their ideological bent, abhorred by those on the opposing side of the spectrum. I believe this makes populism a self-perpetuating cycle. As our politics becomes more tribal, emotions begin to drive citizens interpretations and responses to both individuals and events. The 'us versus them' dichotomy is reinforced, and with less opportunity for cross-party support on any issue, people invested in those issues become more frustrated with politicians who oppose them, continuing the cycle. Division begets division, and as citizens feel less and less connected to politics, barriers will continue to be erected between the people and the elite. BRX1 put it simply, stating 'Westminster politics is something that happens on the news, I don't see how it's changing things for us'.

### **Conclusion**

Every interviewee had a view on what makes an individual elite, with wealth and education being the most common conditions, in line with my hypothesis. The vast majority of interviewees identified all of the selected politicians as members of the elite, though in line with my hypothesis, Farage and Corbyn were least likely to be labelled elite. Also in line with my predictions was the near unanimous animosity held by interviewees for those who didn't hold their ideology, barring BRX3. As expected, ideology was the major determinant factor in whether an interviewee believed a politician was on the side of the people or not. Aside from BRX3, no interviewee believed an ideologically opposing politician was on the side of the people. This returns to the 'us versus them' mentality that defines populism. Consensus is near impossible in democratic states, and as visions of Britain's future become more diverse, the frustration of individual citizens is only going to grow. The combative and divisive language used by politicians, mirrored by my interviewees, is emblematic of populism being the politics of division. Interviewees consistently used language that erected barriers between themselves and the politicians in question, a reflection of the disconnect between politics and individual lives. Interviewees were unanimous in believing that elites can represent the people, as long as they represent *their* particular perception of what the

people constitute. As most interviewees consider all politicians elites, perhaps this is a necessary aspect of populist politics.

This paper has attempted to develop an understanding of how populist voters perceive the elite, trying to pin down what makes an individual a member of this elusive grouping. The use of interviews allowed for more personal insights into the elite phenomenon, and also allowed me to develop my interviews with new ideas gained from interviewees. I believe further research is necessary, expanding case selection to include individuals of different educational backgrounds, ages, and areas of residence, to gain a greater understanding of why individuals feel so underserved by non-populist politicians.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Semi Structured Interview Structure

- How did you vote in the referendum/ how would you have voted(if not old enough to vote at time)?
- Why did you vote the way you did?
- Have you changed your mind?
- Who would you vote for if there was a general election tomorrow
- Who are some politicians you support?
- Why do you support them?
- I'm going to list 6 politicians, can you tell me first your opinions on them, then whether you think they're on the side of the people
  - Jeremy Corbyn
  - John McDonnell
  - Tony Blair
  - Nigel Farage
  - Jacob Rees-Mogg
  - David Cameron
- What would you say makes someone a member of the elite?
- Going back through that list of politicians, which of them would you say are members of the elite?

### Appendix 2: Interviewee Table

Interview Number	Age	Sex	Location	Interview Length
BRX1	54	M	Cornwall	9:49
BRX2	23	M	London	10:08
BRX3	22	M	Exeter	23:02
BRX4	21	F	Hereford	8:41
BRX5	27	M	Oxfordshire	13:19
BRX6	24	F	Surrey	9:51
BRX7	25	M	Birmingham	12:57
BRX8	19	F	Cheshire	5:49
CRB1	19	F	Gloucester	9:47
CRB2	20	F	Newcastle	5:24
CRB3	21	F1	Manchester	11:33
CRB4	22	F	Salisbury	10:35
CRB5	21	M	Bath	16:03
CRB6	20	M	London	8:45
CRB7	22	M	Yorkshire	17:10
CRB8	57	M	Wales	6:17

### **Appendix 3: Sample Interview with CRB2**

**Okay, can you tell me your age and where you're from?**

I'm 20, from Newcastle

**Okay, how did you vote in the referendum, or how would you have voted?**

I would have voted remain

**Why is that?**

I value the openness of the EU, and I want the UK to be a part of that

**Have you changed your mind?**

No

**Okay, who would you vote for if there was a general election tomorrow?**

Labour

**Right, why?**

I don't necessarily support Labour as a party, if the UK political system wasn't dominated by the Conservatives I'd vote Green

**Okay**

But because of the circumstances and because I want to get the Tories out I'd vote Labour to do that

**Who are some politicians that you support?**

I support Jeremy Corbyn, I don't know who else really

**That's fine, why do you support Jeremy Corbyn?**

I believe that... I trust him, I think he's a man of his word. I don't believe in how the media portray him... yeah.

**Okay, I'm gonna give you a list of politicians, can you first tell me your opinions on them and then whether you think they're on the side of the people or not. Starting with Jeremy Corbyn, should be an easy one**

Yes I believe he's on the side of the people

**Opinion on him?**

Yes a positive opinion overall

**John McDonnell?**

I don't know who that is

**That's absolutely fine, Tony Blair?**

I think he was progressive in the time, but his war crimes are unforgivable. I don't think he's on the side of the people any more

**Nigel Farage?**

Definitely not on the side of the people. He's a fucking prick who hates foreigners

**Okay, Jacob Rees Mogg?**

Definitely not on the side of the people, a terrible, terrible human being

**Okay, David Cameron?**

Not on the side of the people, but not as bad as Nigel Farage or Jacob-Rees Mogg

**Okay, so, what would you say makes someone a member of the elite?**

I think I would say class, status.

**So break that down, what do you mean by class and status?**

Erm, how they were brought up.

**In what way?**

Whether they were brought up in a wealthy background, private schooled, that type of thing

**Okay, erm, so, we're gonna go back through that list of politicians, which of them would you say are members of the elite. Jeremy Corbyn, would you say that he's a member of the elite?**

Yes

**Right, John McDonnell you didn't know so we'll skip him. Tony Blair, member of the elite?**

Yes

**Nigel Farage?**

Yes

**Jacob Rees-Mogg?**

Yes

**David Cameron?**

Yes

**Okay, so you said that Jeremy Corbyn was on the side of the people, and you also said he's a member of the elite**

Yeah

**So first question for you, do you think that being a long term politician makes you a part of the elite, would you say that's accurate?**

Yeah

**Okay, erm, and you said he was a member of the elite**

But also his background as well, he's from a wealth family

**Do you think that a member of the elite can overcome, in air quotes, their eliteness and be on the side of the people? How do you think that's achieved?**

Yeah I think that they can overcome that. I don't think its about being able to relate, I think it's more about empathy and sympathy as a politician. I don't think they have to have necessarily been through kind of what everyone has. I think it's just about listening to people, listening to everyone in society and going from there. I don't think you personally need to have experienced, kind of, that.

**Okay, cool, thank you for your time.**

