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The Unpolitics of Brexit

Paul Taggart 🔵

Department of Politics, University of Sussex, UK

Correspondence: Paul Taggart (p.a.taggart@sussex.ac.uk)

Abstract

This article is an attempt to present, develop, and deploy the use of the concept of "unpolitics" in relation to Brexit. The article starts with an outline of the concept of unpolitics and then turns to its application to Brexit. The argument is that in the politics of Brexit, specifically in the appeal of part of the "leave" campaign and in the behaviour and appeal of Johnson, we can identify unpolitics as playing a significant role. For the "Vote Leave," we can identify unpolitical tropes as explicit elements of the campaign. Also, during Johnson's premiership and his campaign in the 2019 general election, the appeal and behaviour exhibited elements of unpolitics. Johnson's political demise was not due to Brexit, Covid-19, or Putin but represented the playing out of his unpolitics.

Keywords

Boris Johnson; Brexit; British politics; populism; unpolitics

1. Introduction

The occurrence of Brexit was seen by many to be part of a wider populist wave that was sweeping the world (e.g., Norris & Inglehart, 2019). The timing, alongside the election of the populist Trump as president of the US in the same year, and the tenor of anti-establishment ideas and rhetoric in much of the Brexiter camp, means that it is easy to see why populism and Brexit might appear to be equated. This article is an attempt to simultaneously detach Brexit from populism and to assert that something else more fundamental can be seen in Brexit. In Brexit, we can see the power of unpolitics and how it is also driving populism. This may explain the false equation of Brexit with populism.

The use of unpolitics is a phenomenon that explains the appeal and the behaviour of many contemporary anti-establishment forces in politics (Robinson, 2023; Taggart, 2018, 2022; Zaun & Ripoll Servent, 2023).

Unpolitics is not a rejection of politics—it is not the same as anti-politics where there is a self-conscious attempt to reject politics and to operate outside of "normal" political channels. It is also not the same as being apolitical or apathetic, where there is an effort to not engage in politics or to opt out of political life. It is also not depoliticisation, as this is an active process involving agency. Unpolitics is rather a disposition that is fundamentally disengaged from and disinterested and uninterested in politics. It is not a position that is reasoned or chosen but is rather an unconscious disposition. As such, it can be a powerful force in politics. But for those of us inherently interested in or engaged in politics, it is something of a blind spot as we look for politics and not its opposite.

In this article, I start with a discussion and definition of unpolitics before focusing on a discussion of Brexit and its aftermath. The politics of Brexit is here taken to be more than the referendum and the parliamentary battles that led to the final exit in 2020 but also include the Johnson term of office. The argument is that parts of the "Vote Leave" campaign and the premiership of Johnson pulled on the appeal of unpolitics.

2. Defining "Unpolitics"

We are using unpolitics here to characterise the forms and the appeal of certain actors in contemporary politics. I am here developing an idea that was originally sketched out in Taggart (2018, 2022). Unpolitics is a property of all politics and political systems, but we are concerned here with its mobilisation of contemporary democratic politics. I define unpolitics as a reservoir of normally latent sentiment and disposition that is intrinsically alien to thinking about, observing, or practising politics. It usually remains latent, unexpressed, and unmobilised but it can be activated by political actors at times for a short period and has transformational power when it is used. It is not the same as political apathy because where apathy implies a conscious disregard for politics, unpolitics represents something where politics is not regarded in the first place. When unpolitics is mobilised, it can undermine, transform, disrupt, and unsettle established modes of democratic politics. Unpolitics is, however, not a deliberate reasoned position (that would make it anti-politics) but is rather something that is unreasoned and unconscious. It can take the form of behaviour and it can take the form of an appeal.

Unpolitics can be recognised in transgressive behaviours and appeals. "Normal" politics is defined here as being characterised by settlements. These settlements can exist in relation to a policy area (e.g., immigration policy), a political institution (e.g., an election campaign, the functioning of a legislature, or the role of the judiciary) or politics in general (e.g., in terms of the norms of language, debate, and discourse). Unpolitics then has the effect of unsettling norms. It is therefore transgressive and will be seen in either the behaviour of political actors or in the appeal of political actors in unsettling ways.

The relationship between populism and unpolitics is clearly a close one. Populism is taken here as an ideology and not as a style or a strategy (Hawkins et al., 2019; Mudde, 2004; Rovira Kaltwasser et al., 2017; Taggart, 2000), meaning we are examining its ideas. Much populist politics, in practice, trades on transgression as a way of embodying a break from "the establishment" and accepted ways of doing politics. The use of unpolitics is a natural representation of the anti-institutionalism of populism. However, not all populist politics trade on unpolitics, and it is useful to begin to differentiate between those who do and those who do not. Some populists in power, for example, will seek to play down transgression and play up the politics of delivery by managing to shore up constituency support through the provision of goods.

For example, Law and Justice, when in office in Poland, between 2015 and 2023, did not employ unpolitics and rather focused on economic redistribution to those with children as part of its approach. In Turkey, Erdogan's hold on power has not been maintained by unsettling politics but by the politics of delivery. In India, Narendra Modi's approach as leader of the BJP, between 2014 and the present, has always been very much linked to the provision of infrastructure and economic growth as it has to Hindutva (Leidig & Mudde, 2023). On the other hand, the presidency of Trump, between 2017 and 2021, in the US (Jacobson, 2021) and that of Bolsonaro in Brazil, between 2019 and 2023, both embodied unsettlement, transgression, and unpolitics as a modus operandi leading in both cases to periods of turbulence. We need to be careful to not only focus on the spectacular and striking elements of populists that can lead us to overgeneralise. Some populists draw on unpolitics while others do not. In the case under examination here, we can also see unpolitics used in the service of non-populist politics. The reason, therefore, to use unpolitics is to identify a phenomenon that both transcends populism and helps to differentiate between different types of populists.

The concept of unpolitics has been used by Zaun and Ripoll Servent (2023) to describe the form of politics used by nativist Eurosceptic populist governments in how they dealt with refugee distribution. In this, they suggested that there are three ways in which unpolitics can be seen in political behaviour. The first is the rejection of shared formal and informal norms. The second is the rejection of compromise with advocacy of maximum positions which reflects their self-understanding as representatives of the will of the "pure people" as opposed to the corrupt elite, and the third is the use of non-decisions to mobilise against the EU and show how weak and unproductive the EU is (Ripoll Servent & Zaun, 2024). These three aspects are ways in which we can observe unpolitics.

The use made by Zaun and Ripoll Servent (2023) and Ripoll Servent and Zaun (2024) is essentially an attempt to nail down the measurement of a difficult concept to some clearly identifiable phenomena. All three of the measures embody this transgressive nature of unpolitics as they all have the effect of working against the grain of the functioning of EU policy-making. The rejection of norms is an explicitly transgressive form of behaviour. The advocacy of maximum positions is a repudiation of the need to compromise and build coalitions. It is perhaps the use of war-like metaphors as applied to politics (Taggart, 2018) as it equates political success with military victory. The use of non-decisions is a form of rejecting the functioning of politics with the effect of reinforcing the ineffectiveness of politics.

We can apply these measures to the politics of Brexit but we need to clarify two ways in which the case study differs from others that are focused on EU policy-making. The first difference is that we can see unpolitics during Brexit not only concerning the EU but also concerning the domestic politics of Brexit. To put this in simple terms, unpolitics was used between and within the UK parties and between the parties and the public as much as it was between the UK and the EU. In fact, we can see more clearly the use of unpolitics here than we can in the negotiations between the UK government and the EU, and so this is what the article primarily focuses on.

The second way that the case study differs from others is that it is not a case of a populist government. I make the argument below that Brexit is not a populist phenomenon and I also suggest that Boris Johnson was not a populist (c.f. Alexandre-Collier, 2022; Flinders, 2020). This is important not only as a matter of detail for this case study but also because it has a wider significance for the concept of unpolitics. Although unpolitics was originally outlined as a feature of populism (Taggart, 2018), the argument is made here that it is not only

something which applies to populists, and further, that it does not apply to all populists. Some populists do not draw significantly on unpolitics. Their actions and their appeal are not based on unpolitics but on more conventional "normal" politics. Populists such as Erdogan in Turkey, Law and Justice in Poland, and Chavez in Venezuela base their appeal on stabilising politics and creating new settlements, whereas populists such as Trump in the US and Bolsonaro in Brazil are fundamentally unpolitics in their behaviour and appeal and thrive on unsettling, polarising, and provoking as much as on creating new politics. Vote Leave and Boris Johnson similarly demonstrated elements of unpolitics and yet they cannot be classed as populist (Rooduijn et al., 2023; Taggart & Pirro, 2021).

The concept of unpolitics has also been used by Robinson (2023) to characterise Conservative politics in the UK. In this article, I am building on Taggart (2018, 2022) as well as Robinson (2023) and Zaun and Ripoll Servent (2023), extending the discussion by considering one other aspect of the concept and offering a new definition. The purpose of the contribution here is to try to use the case of Brexit and Johnson to further develop the concept of unpolitics and to try to use the Brexit case indicatively.

3. Brexit, Populism, and Unpolitics

The referendum on EU membership and its result in June 2016 marked a decisive shift in politics in the UK. The decision to Brexit from the European Union was however not without some very deep roots. The growth of Euroscepticism within and outside the Conservative Party and the allure of politics based on baiting Brussels has a long lineage in the UK (Baker et al., 2008; Gifford & Tournier-Sol, 2015; Spiering, 2004). 2016 brought about a momentous decision based on a highly divisive campaign that essentially polarised politics in a way that cut across left and right to embed a new abiding division between "leave" and "remain" identities (Sobolewska & Ford, 2020) that persists into contemporary UK politics.

The timing of the Brexit decision coming in the same year as the election of Trump as US president, and hard on the heels of the electoral success of several right-wing anti-establishment populist parties across Europe such as Orban's FIDESZ in Hungary and Law and Justice in Poland, led many to portray Brexit as an instance of populism. However, the nature of Euroscepticism in the Conservative Party is not predominantly populist. Certainly, there were populist elements to those pushing for Brexit, and in UKIP, there was a populist radical right party with parallels to others across Europe (and beyond) but it was also, unlike many of these parties, the only one founded with the principle of a hard Euroscepticism as its *raison d'etre* and enduring as its core focus. Populism has a place within the Brexit story but was by no means synonymous with Brexit as a whole.

Among those who had long argued for the UK's exit from the EU were some diverse positions. On the right, there has long been a free-trade attack on European integration with the idea that the EU constrains the market, once freed from the EU, "global Britain" would do much better economically with an orientation towards markets further afield than Europe and unfettered by an overly bureaucratic and regulatory EU regime. On the left, a less prominent but no less deeply rooted critique of European integration has, since the early 1970s, portrayed the EU as in hock to corporate interests and as providing a constraint on the possibility of pursuing a state-centred and planned economic model favouring national industry and workers (Shaw, 2021). The faces from the Labour Party that played a role in fronting Vote Leave therefore represented that "Lexit" tradition and were emblematic of the fact that there was real diversity in the reasons for advocating Brexit on the "leave" side of the argument.

On the "remain" side, there was also some diversity. There was a coalition of Conservatives and Labour in terms of the key actors. Although the leader of the Labour Party, Corbyn, appeared, at best, tepid in his advocacy of the "remain" position (Shipman, 2017), the party behind him at the national level overwhelmingly "remain" but well aware that its electoral constituency was divided with traditional supporters often strongly in favour of Brexit. The 2019 general election victory of Johnson was testimony to this as the "Red Wall" was snatched by the Conservatives to build an impregnable parliamentary majority (Ford et al., 2021). However, the "remain" coalition and the leadership of the official Remain campaign, "Britain Stronger In," represented an uneasy partnership bringing together Cameron and Osbourne from the front of the Conservative government with an ambivalent left Labour leader unwilling to work with No.10, and the vast bulk of Labour, Conservative, SNP, and Liberal Democratic parliamentary and sub-national leaders. The campaign strategy of emphasising the economic risk of Brexit, a diverse range of reasons for supporting EU membership which spanned pro-business and pro-workers' rights drew heavily on the referendum on Scottish Independence, which had rejected the proposition but given Cameron and Osbourne the confidence that they knew how to win (Clarke et al., 2017, p. 32).

The result of the referendum represented the coming together of some diverse positions and the coming apart of the two major parties in Westminster along some significant lines of conflict. Both Conservatives and Labour saw the Brexit issue divide the parties in parliament and, perhaps more importantly, their electorates. The reality of Brexit was that it was a plural phenomenon: two sides of an argument with real differences within them as well as between them.

Brexit was a plural complex phenomenon. Although arguments on both sides portrayed it as binary and dichotomous, we should be careful not to confuse political strategies for a description of what transpired (Baines et al., 2020). Referendums necessarily simplify and binarise complex issues, but they are also mechanisms to resolve complex conflicts and we should not confuse their function with an analysis of how they function. Remaining in the EU includes a multitude of options and choices on how to stay. Leaving the EU was famously a simple proposition about separation but was by no means either a unified or, many would contend, a thought-through choice. The turbulence of the post-referendum period was largely a consequence of that uncertainty and disagreement about *how* to Brexit.

The other pressure to see Brexit as a unified phenomenon is the casual assertion that Brexit was somehow a populist moment. Placing Brexit among a panoply of other instances of populist successes during the same period reverses the causal logic and makes Brexit part of a wider populist wave. Brexit is derivative of wider processes under this perspective rather than populism being genuinely a manifestation of different (if similarly populist) processes. In practice, a moment in UK politics where deeply embedded and long-standing political contestation over the nature of European integration came to create a temporary electoral majority from a diverse range of appeals, constituencies, and strategies, some of which were populist, does not make Brexit a moment of populism. Populism was one aspect of one side of the argument.

An objection to this position might be to argue that the success of the Vote Leave campaign was down to a populist strategy. Dominic Cummings, as director of the Vote Leave campaign, the official "leave" organisation, had an approach which was to embed Brexit within a large framework of discontent, to tie Brexit to an appeal to kick against the establishment with an implicit message of the need to recapture something lost (Fox, 2021). By combining a shrewd strategic perspective with a clear knack for producing

effective messaging that encapsulated this messaging (e.g., "Take back control"), as well as with a combative style and the prudent and timely use of limited resources, Cummings harnessed his experience of previous referendum campaigns to pull off what was for many an improbable victory against the establishment and the established view of the UK's place in the EU. By his own account, Cummings (2017) attributes his victory to fortune and the mistakes of the opposition and describes the victory as fragile and tenuous.

There were other ways in which unpolitics played a role in the referendum. Russell and James (2023) observe how the ill-defined position of referendums in the UK means that the decision to exit the EU was not put to the electorate in a way that had either been preceded by a process to deliberate how the decision should be put or with a clear prospectus as to how the non-status quo position could be implemented in practice. For Dudley and Gamble (2023) the "casual way" the referendum was set up resulted in a policy omnishambles, a phrase echoed by Richardson and Rittberger (2021).

The fallout from the referendum result certainly provoked a chaotic and unplanned response by the winning side. The result then meant that Cameron removed himself as prime minister (despite his prior commitment to stay on and carry out the result of the referendum) and party leader. The referendum also precipitated a massive vote of no confidence from the parliamentary party of the opposition as Labour MPs voted, on 28 June 2016, with 172 votes to 40, declaring no confidence in Jeremy Corbyn. Unlike the Conservative leadership, Corbyn declared the vote unconstitutional and continued to lead the Labour Party based on a mandate from the membership of the party (Crines et al., 2018).

The Vote Leave campaign displayed two of Zaun and Ripoll Servent's (2023) unpolitics characteristics. The pursuit of Brexit was a maximum position. This may be a function of the politics of referendums which are, by definition, binary and therefore given to maximum positions. The subsequent debate about what *sort* of Brexit to enact illustrates that, during the referendum, the ultimate end was and could only be Brexit—of whatever kind. The second way in which unpolitics could be seen is in the rejection of membership as a norm of politics.

4. The Impact of Unpolitics in the Aftermath of the Election (2016–2019)

Unpolitics was evident not only during the Brexit campaign but also in its aftermath. The period between the referendum and the final exit of the UK in January 2021 was also turbulent as the difficulties of implementing the decision of the referendum wreaked havoc on the norms of politics in the UK. During this period, the leadership of the Conservative Party, and hence the government, changed three times. Cameron, as already noted, walked away from implementing Brexit almost immediately after the referendum. He did so and walked from the podium back into No.10 humming a "merry" tune (Mason, 2016).

Theresa May, a quiet "remainer" (Shipman, 2017, p. 132) took on the leadership of the party and the role of prime minister and almost immediately pivoted to a hard-core Brexit posture that neither convinced Brexiters of her credulity nor assured "remainers" that she would moderate the worst excesses of an extremist Brexit vision. The period of Theresa May's leadership marked the apotheosis of Brexit's difficulties and divisiveness. Her leadership did not embody or appeal to unpolitics but her government was hamstrung over the impact of the unpolitics appeal in the referendum and her government was, in Tim Bale's words "a bad hand badly played" (Bale, 2023, Chapter 4).

May's challenge was to initiate Article 50 to start the clock ticking towards the eventual exit. Her preference was clearly to move towards a final agreement about departure without a parliamentary vote. She was frustrated in the court case brought by Gina Miller in November 2016, which ruled that there needed to be a meaningful vote of parliament on the final terms of Brexit between the UK and the EU (Russell & James, 2023, pp. 76–77). This then set up a period of parliamentary turmoil when May, or indeed anyone else, was unable to muster enough parliamentary support to constitute a majority behind any of the numerous options.

Between December 2018 and May 2019, May's efforts to secure a meaningful vote from parliament saw multiple votes where her government was defeated, insurgent votes to rule out a no-deal option, a ruling by the speaker of the house that the government was not able to repeat a vote that it wished to put again to the house, and ending with a parliamentary takeover of the agenda, with a series of "indicative votes" with even these options failing to muster a majority (Heinkelmann-Wild et al., 2020). May resigned in May, effectively admitting defeat.

With May's resignation in May 2019, Tim Bale describes the Conservative Party as "on the edge of a nervous breakdown" (Bale, 2023, p. 86). Looking in detail at the preceding events, this comes as no surprise given May's incapacity to move Brexit forward. But from a larger perspective, the situation is more puzzling. Granted, the Conservative Party was not a wholly (hard) Eurosceptic party, but it is difficult not to look back over the preceding 30 years and see a party, in Westminster, in the membership and its voters, moving inexorably further and further into harder and harder Euroscepticism.

May's period in office did not see her displaying behaviour that drew on unpolitics. It might be tempting to see her claim made in September 2018 that "no deal is better than a bad deal" as an example of maximum position-taking. But this reflects a strategic position taken in a context where unpolitics had empowered the hard Brexiters. May's government was not one of unpolitics but was hamstrung by the maximalist positioning of hard Eurosceptics in the Conservative Party.

5. Johnson and Unpolitics (2019–2022)

Boris Johnson took over as leader of the Conservative Party in July 2019 and immediately faced the deadlock that had driven May from office. In the end, after attempting to prorogue parliament but being overruled by the Supreme Court, expelling 21 of his own MPs for supporting a motion that would have ruled out no deal, and eventually pulling his own government legislation in the face of opposition from the Commons, Johnson called a general election for December 2019 as the only possible means to break the impasse (Ford et al., 2021). It is clear that the systematic transgression by breaking with norms of politics (e.g., suspending parliament and in party management by wholesale expulsion of MPs from the party) represents the continuation of acting in a way that was a form of unpolitics.

Johnson is frequently referred to as a populist (e.g., Bale, 2022; Beck, 2023). This description is frequently used in a thin and almost vernacular manner, meaning that he incorporates rhetorical tropes that might be interpreted as being for common sense, even invoking "the people," and that he often appears to operate in an unconventional and almost comical manner. But how he speaks, appears, and acts is not necessarily a guide to his ideology.

Johnson is admittedly ideologically difficult to pin down. For those who wish to throw him in with right-wing radical populists, he makes a difficult bed-fellow. Honeyman (2023) shows that, although he is associated with ethnocentrism by others (mainly newspapers), in his own discourse he does not use this language. Crines (2019) also suggests that although supporters of Johnson may well be populists, his position does not fit this description. Evans et al. (2023) make the argument that the Conservative victory in 2019 was due to the "charismatic populism" of Johnson. However, their focus is on voters and they make no effort to define or measure Johnson's populism (or charisma) and seem to infer this from his advocacy of radical right policy positions on immigration, law and order, and Euroscepticism. These do not definitively define an ideological perspective. They overlook the thin-centred nature of populism and mistakenly equate the radical right with populism itself (Mudde, 2004).

Johnson cannot be categorised as a populist. While his advocacy of Brexit may be confused with evidence of his anti-institutionalism, we should not generalise from his specific (but somewhat fluid) views on the EU. Johnson did not embody a fundamental anti-establishment or anti-institutional element to his ideology. As a former member of the Bullingdon Club, his career typified an establishment route through Oxford, The Daily Telegraph, and into the House of Commons, and while how he narrated his route may have been unconventional, nowhere did he display a fundamental antipathy towards institutions or "the establishment" (Seldon & Newell, 2023). In many ways, Johnson's ideology can be satisfactorily described as conservative, with an emphasis on Tory pragmatism, without veering into the need to reach for the populist label.

It can be no exaggeration to describe the period of parliamentary politics which Johnson inherited as chaotic. Norms were broken, new mechanisms were tried, powers were extended by the speaker, and yet legislative development was not forthcoming (Russell & James, 2023). The chaos of this period is at least partially due to the implementation of an agenda that can be seen as unpolitics in action. The decision to leave the EU was clear in the referendum result but not how.

The 2019 election was for the Conservatives a chance to avoid the disaster of the 2017 election campaign (Cutts et al., 2020). With Johnson front and centre and with the mantra of "Get Brexit Done" being repeated ad nauseam by the prime minister, the scene was set for a re-run of the referendum campaign success. With Cummings in No.10, many have assumed that he ran the campaign when, in reality, it was Isaac Levido and Michael Brooks, with Cummings not being involved in the day-to-day running of the campaign, but inputting from the side (Ford et al., 2021, pp. 97–98). However, the tone of the Conservative campaign was about delivering Brexit and punchy three-word slogans. The slogan "Get Brexit Done," which was drawn from focus groups and built on frustration at the parliamentary impasse Brexit (Ford et al., 2021, pp. 195–196), and Johnson's description of the "oven-ready deal" on the Withdrawal Agreement were, in effect, not political visions but an implicit promised to get past the politics of Brexit to allow the country to move on. This is a version of what Zaun and Ripoll Servent (2023) describe as a maximalist position with the rejection of any compromise.

The totality of the Conservative 2019 election campaign was for the most part politics as usual—extolling the virtues of the Conservatives and fiercely attacking their opponents as we would expect in any party campaign. However, the context of a fundamentally divided nation and an impotent and intemperate parliament combined with the very nature and appeal of Johnson as Conservative leader meant that we could observe an element of unpolitics in the campaign. The message and the messenger's appeal, in part,

drew on the claim that there was something unusual at this moment that necessitated supporting a move beyond and around politics and delivering a result that would allow the resumption of some sense of normality and, implicit in this, the opportunity for those who felt that way to resume an unpolitical existence.

There were several explanations for this turbulence. For most "remainers," this was the result of a profoundly divisive decision that should not have been made. For many, there was a sense that the result was occasioned by illegitimate means. For others, the turbulence was caused by the Brexiter/Leave camp's failure to have a clear strategy for implementing Brexit and, even more significantly, to set any real goals for what Brexit was to achieve. On the other hand, for many "leavers," the turbulence was a vindication of an establishment smarting from being overturned by a truly popular decision. The embeddedness of the UK in the EU was surprisingly, for both sides, a vindication of their advocacy of remaining/leaving.

The outcome of the 2019 election was a substantial victory for Johnson and the Conservative Party. It gave Johnson a massive parliamentary majority enabling him to deliver on his promise to get Brexit done. Below the surface, it also delivered a parliamentary party that was much more unequivocally pro-Brexit than the party had previously been (Lynch & Whitaker, 2018) and it did so at the expense of the Labour Party, which lost a substantial number of traditional Labour northern seats in the "Red Wall" (Cooper & Cooper, 2020; Ford et al., 2021).

6. Unpolitics After Brexit

The UK exited from the EU in January 2020. But the period after this was anything but a period of consolidation for the Conservative Party. The economic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost of living crisis caused as a consequence of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, played havoc with the fortunes of the Conservative Party. However, the demise of Johnson as Conservative prime minister in 2022 had as much to do with the unpolitics of Johnson as with Covid-19 and Putin. Johnson's issues with rule breaking in Downing Street during the pandemic and with his somewhat lax attitude to ethical standards of veracity and transparency eventually meant that the Conservative Party forced him out as it read the substantial public mood against Johnson's transgressions.

The appeal of Johnson is at least, in part, a consequence of unpolitics. Ideologically, Johnson was and remains hard to pin down (Gimson, 2022). Johnson is pro-immigration but associated with the anti-immigration agenda that lay behind support for Brexit. He fits neither in the free-market Thatcherite tradition of the Conservative Party nor the Cameroonian reinvention of the party as socially liberal and green. However, his type of unpolitics is much easier to identify. Johnson's chaotic identity and administration are very strong.

Unpolitics was not enough to save Johnson as he left No. 10 in ignominy in July 2022 (Seldon & Newell, 2023), but it was enough to secure him continued real support in parts of the parliamentary party, in the party membership and even among sections of the voting public. What the power of unpolitics points to is that Johnson retained support not despite his chaotic and norm-breaking behaviour but precisely because of it.

Johnson's departure from parliament came in June 2023. He had been investigated by the Parliamentary Privileges Committee concerning the charge that he had lied to the House of Commons over the issue of

whether, under his government, No.10 had stuck to the rules over Covid-19 restrictions. Johnson was given sight of a draft of the Committee's findings two weeks before they were due to be made public. If the Committee recommended that Johnson be suspended from the House of Commons for over 10 days, this would trigger a recall election and the possibility of Johnson having to face a contest to maintain his constituency seat of Uxbridge. Before the report was published, but after he had sight of the draft report, and at the same time as his list of honours and House of Lords appointees was made public, Johnson unexpectedly resigned as an MP.

Johnson's resignation letter was angry and accusatory (see here: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-65863336). It contained elements of conspiracism as he accused the committee (which had a Conservative majority and prominent "leavers" in its membership) of conducting a "witch hunt" against him "to take revenge for Brexit and ultimately to reverse the 2016 referendum result." Further, the committee was described as a "kangaroo court." He attacked the direction of the Conservative government and he asserted that he had been "forced out, anti-democratically." In his hostility towards Parliament, the Privileges Committee, and the Conservative government of Rishi Sunak, his conspiracism—an appeal to unpolitics—is apparent. Even in the form of the letter, which was somewhat chaotic, moving between subjects and then back to earlier subjects, in contrast to his carefully constructed previous statements that bore his hallmark as an effective journalist, Johnson was (perhaps) unconsciously playing out his unpolitical appeal.

Writing of Johnson's tenure as prime minister, Sanders notes that:

> He regarded himself as an innovative political disruptor. If a rule or convention (even one that his own government had instituted in the form of Covid restrictions on private gatherings) got in his way, then his habitual practice was simply to ignore it. He was Prime Minister and he was above the petty, restrictive constitutional practices of his predecessors and contemporaries. (Sanders, 2023, p. 171)

Sanders outlines his transgressions against the constitution, parliament, and the truth, and yet, looking at polling data, Sanders shows "around half of current Conservative supporters (roughly 15 percent of the electorate), even though they recognise Johnson as an inveterate liar and breaker of constitutional rules, still take a broadly sympathetic view of his claims, character and actions" (Sanders, 2023, p. 174). The effectiveness of a way of operating that not only goes against the norms but revels in breaking them is, once again, a source of surprise and confusion to an observer.

Johnson's tenure as prime minister was brought down in the short term by the three P's (Payne, 2022); the attempt to save Owen Paterson, the "partygate" affair, and the Pincher incident. Each of these individually exemplifies unpolitics and together contributes to the chaotic appeal of unpolitics. In the Owen Paterson affair, Paterson was in breach of parliamentary rules on paid advocacy, but Johnson attempted to change the rules by way of an amendment to prevent the invocation of the penalty of parliamentary suspension (Bale, 2023, p. 215). The plan faced opposition not only from the opposition party but also from Conservative MPs who sensed the revival of sleaze as a charge that would stick to the party. Under pressure, Johnson was forced to cave in and Paterson resigned as an MP.

"Partygate" was the series of revelations that Johnson had not only allowed but participated in parties in No.10 during the pandemic lockdown, and further, that he had lied to the House of Commons in his assurances

that no parties had taken place and that all rules on lockdown had been followed in No.10. Penalties for Johnson included the police penalty for rule-breaking, the political damage to his government, and his own appearance before the Standards Committee being charged with misleading the House. The Pincher affair finally unravelled the government when a deputy chief whip wrote to Johnson resigning, admitting that he had drunk too much the night before and had embarrassed himself. He had groped two men at the Carlton Club. Johnson treated this as the end of the matter but it became clear that Johnson had appointed him to the position knowing his previous transgressions. Johnson claimed he never knew this but Lord MacDonald, the former permanent under-secretary, phoned into the Today Radio show to correct the record that he knew that Johnson had known about Pincher. By the end of the day, the health secretary Sajid Javid and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rishi Sunak, resigned. Two days later, after attempting to hold on, Johnson gave in to the inevitable and resigned.

Johnson's persona, appeal and presentation are based fundamentally on the rejection of established norms as identified by Zaun and Ripoll Servent (2023). This applies as much to his period in office when dealing with Brexit as it does to his time dealing with Covid-19. In his Brexit period, he was presented as transgressive and acting in a way that pushed against norms of politics in attempting to prorogue parliament. His final push on Brexit was definitively maximalist in Zaun and Ripoll Servent's terms, as he committed to getting Brexit done by committing to not compromising on a border down the Irish Sea while signing a deal that established exactly that (Grey, 2021, p. 270). In his period dealing with Covid-19, it was clear and has become even more apparent that he was chaotic and transgressive in terms of norms. It was those transgressions of norms that dealt his premiership the final blow in the form of ethical failures concerning Pincher and "partygate." Interestingly, his unpolitics was both the source of his downfall but also an important ingredient in his support while in or seeking office.

The succession of Liz Truss to become leader of the Conservatives and the prime minister in 2022 was facilitated by the experience of the Johnson premiership and its demise (Bale, 2023). The process of appointing Truss was one where it effectively became a two-horse race between Rishi Sunak and Truss. Both contenders were part of the Johnson government with Sunak as chancellor, at least until his resignation on the 5th of July 2022, which was seen, with the resignation of Sajid Javid as health secretary, as one of the triggers of the Johnson demise. Truss served as international trade and then as foreign secretary under Johnson. The contest was decided by the membership of the Conservative Party rather than by the MPs. The month-long series of debates and hustings were ostensibly about persuading the membership to choose between the chancellor, who had guided the country through the Covid-19 pandemic by shoring up spending and increasing taxes, and Truss, who ran as a radical pro-growth Conservative.

Truss won the contest to be leader and prime minister but lost the support of the markets and eventually her own party after introducing a radical mini-budget with disastrous consequences and becoming the second shortest-serving British prime minister, staying in office only 49 days. There was nothing in Truss that represented the appeal of unpolitics, but the chaos and turbulence of the Truss episode may point to the playing out of unpolitics and the associated chaotic administration of Johnson.

7. Conclusion

The role of unpolitics has played out through and beyond the politics of Brexit, since 2016, and continues up until today in British politics. Unpolitics was a component of the Vote Leave campaign. For Vote Leave, we can

identify unpolitical tropes as explicit elements of the campaign. The advocacy for Brexit without specifying its form represents the maximum position identified by Zaun and Ripoll Servent (2023). In part, the nature of the wider campaign can be seen as the result of strategic and tactical choices made by Cummings but, in part, it was present in Johnson's appeal, which was so central to the Vote Leave victory. After the referendum, unpolitics played a significant role in the political chaos that embroiled Parliament as it attempted to implement the referendum decision. It provides a clear illustration of how unpolitics can generate support in the short term but also how it leaves a legacy of turmoil.

The 2019 general election victory was driven by unpolitics and put Johnson's unpolitics into office with a massive Conservative majority. His government embodied unpolitics as an expression of Johnson's persona. His claims to an "oven-ready" deal and his approach to Brexit were also maximalist. Clearly, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic remains central to an understanding of the 2019 Johnson government but the pandemic provided the issue and the questions. The response of the government to Covid-19 embodies unpolitics. Also, the composition of the government, in terms of personnel, drew a clear and direct link back to the Vote Leave campaign. Johnson's eviction from office appears perhaps as the combined effects of the Brexit issue and legacy, the challenge of Covid-19 and the challenges of the cost of living crisis engendered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Johnson's political demise was however not due to Brexit, Covid-19, or Putin but represented the playing out of his unpolitics.

In the politics of Brexit, specifically in the appeal of part of the Vote Leave campaign and in the behaviour and appeal of Johnson, we can identify unpolitics as playing a significant role. The subsequent ascent of Johnson to prime minister was a consequence of Brexit (and getting it "done"). Furthermore, during Johnson's premiership and his campaign in the 2019 general election, his appeal and behaviour exhibited elements of unpolitics. Johnson was succeeded by one of the shortest and most ignominious of premierships in that of Liz Truss. Truss's appeal and behaviour do not themselves embody unpolitics, but the cumulative legacy of Leave's and Johnson's unpolitics can be seen as responsible for the party choosing Truss and therefore for the fate of her government and so we may have seen the effects of unpolitics playing out.

Unpolitics may be a feature of politics way beyond Brexit and Johnson. Other contributions to this thematic issue aptly show examples of the use of unpolitics by populists in Europe. But it is not confined to either Europe or to populists. Contemporary politics in other parts of the world, including the USA (e.g., Trump) and Latin America (e.g., Bolsonaro and Milei) give us examples of disruptive transgressive political actors achieving power and contributing to turmoil and driving churn in politics. What we can observe from the UK example is that the appeal of politics feeds off the turbulent character of contemporary politics which fosters a sense that politics is problematic. But we can also see that one of the consequences of the use of unpolitics by actors may be a legacy of chaos and disorder which might further feed back into the appeal and the use of unpolitics.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of Interests

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About the Author

Paul Taggart is a professor of politics at the University of Sussex.