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Taking back control? Brexit, sovereignty and populism in Westminster (2015–17)

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the claims for national sovereignty made in the British Conservative and Labour parties. In Britain, national sovereignty has been embedded within an entrenched tradition of Euroscepticism, whereas populist claims have periodically punctuated the discourse of both main parties, before emerging with more vocal tones during the discussion on Brexit. While most sovereigntist claims share some degree of populism, we reserve the populist label for what we identify as explicitly populist claims (as opposed to four other categories of sovereignty). After presenting a historical recall of the main dynamics of sovereigntist claims in British politics, we hypothesise that different types of sovereigntist discourses feature in the major British parties. While 'nationalist-populist' sovereignty should prevail in the Conservative party, we expect 'economic' sovereignty to be the form mainly used by the Labour party. Systematically analysing the debates in the House of Commons on all divisions on the EU from the 2015 General Election to the end of October 2017, we show that significant differences on the use of sovereigntist claims exist both within and across British parties. We find that national populist claims dominate among Tory MPs and civic sovereignty prevails over economic sovereignty among Labour members.

KEYWORDS

Brexit; Conservative party;
Labour Party; populism;
sovereignty; Westminster

1. Introduction

Brexit stands out as an exemplar case for the reclaiming of national sovereignty by a country, the United Kingdom – 'the awkward partner' in Europe (George, 1998) – that has never been entirely comfortable with its membership of European institutions. The June 2016 referendum on EU membership did not come out of the blue. In an attempt to preserve some aspects of political and economic sovereignty, Britain had for many years acquired opt-outs in key areas (e.g. in terms of Economic and Monetary Union, and the Schengen Agreement), becoming the least integrated country in the context of an increasingly 'differentiated Europe' (Leuffen, Rittberger, & Schimmelfennig, 2012).

The predominant British view on how Europe should work was expressed by Margaret Thatcher in her famous Bruges speech in 1988, under the expression of ‘willing cooperation between sovereign states’.

The idea that sovereignty should be retained by the member states was always particularly important for Britain, which had traditionally been governed by the principle of the ‘absolute sovereignty’ of the Westminster parliament. True, political sovereignty had been (at least partly) ceded by joining what was then the European Economic Community, in 1973. When Britain entered, Europe already had a new legal order (Bogdanor, 2016), as set in stone by key sentences of the European Court of Justice in the 1960s. But many politicians pretended to ignore that this was the case, and the people were barely interested in such ‘technical’ aspects (Saunders, 2018). Similarly, Britain held its first state-wide referendum ever on Europe in 1975, and this was on the confirmation of the terms of the membership, rather than on the idea of joining – as happened in 1972 in the other countries that were part of the first enlargement in 1973, namely Ireland and Denmark (Norway also voted, but decided to stay out). As would soon become apparent, Britain’s entry into Europe could not easily dispose of several historical, geographical and political peculiarities, which would be reinforced as integration proceeded (Gamble, 2003; Gifford, 2014; Grant, 2008).

Fast forward to 2016, and ‘taking back control’ was, together with the post-referendum idea of the ‘will of the people’, one of the key slogans of Brexit, which is in itself considered a key signing post for the emergence of a ‘populist moment’ in Western societies (Brubaker, 2017). To be sure, Britain has certainly seen the outburst of populist discourses in the past – especially with controversial politicians such as Enoch Powell (Sandbrook, 2018). Nevertheless, Brexit marks a shift in the importance of both populism and sovereignism, in a context in which the

hardening of the “zero-sum” perspective on sovereignty that has been the node of contemporary populist discourses across the world underlines the necessity of not just arresting the process of transfer of power away from the territorial state but of reversing the flow altogether. (Kallis, 2018, p. 294)

A rich literature has analysed important claims for sovereignty that emerged during the referendum campaign (Curtice, 2017; Hobolt, 2016; Jackson, Thorsen, & Wring, 2016), with the principal aim of regaining control of the borders and retaining economic resources for domestic use. Other studies have looked at the populist rhetoric of Nigel Farage, one of the ‘champions’ of Brexit (Crines & Heppell, 2017; Pareschi & Albertini, 2018). In analysing the 2010–15 legislature, it has been argued that ‘in championing popular sovereignty as expressed via a referendum, the Conservatives contributed to a populist critique that implicitly contrasted “cosmopolitan and political elites” with the “pure People”’ (Wellings & Vines, 2016, p. 318). Our focus, therefore, is on the extent to which sovereigntist claims can also be considered populist: how are populist arguments related to the idea of taking back control? Can we detect any important trends within and across parties when comparing the pre- and the post-referendum phase?

Recent works have analysed the transformation of the Conservative party after the Brexit referendum (Lynch & Whitaker, 2018) and Labour’s parliamentary patterns with regard to Corbyn’s leadership (Crines, Jeffery, & Heppell, 2018), but we are not aware of

any analysis that has considered the discourses of both parties in comparison. This is what we do in this article, by looking at how their sovereigntist and populist claims have unfolded during the Brexit process (2015–17).

In the rest of this article, we start (Section 2) from a definition of sovereignism and presenting a historical recall of the main dynamics of sovereigntist claims in British politics. Section 3 then formulates expectations on the importance of sovereignism and populism in the Conservative Party and the Labour Party. Section 4 introduces the analysis of the parliamentary speeches in the House of Commons (2015–17), while Section 5 develops the empirical analysis. Finally, the article reflects more broadly on sovereignism, the EU and British party politics.

2. Reclaiming sovereignty in the motherland of Euroscepticism

Sovereignism can generally be understood as a response to economic, political and cultural competition triggered by globalisation. There are three processes that are likely to originate sovereigntist claims: (a) increasing *economic competition* due to the internationalisation of trade and finance and the consequent growth of interdependence between national economies, (b) a (perceived) *cultural competition* brought about by the unprecedented mobility of different ethnic groups, largely favoured by technological developments and worldwide interconnectedness, and (c) a *political competition* between nation-states and supra- or international institutions and technocratic bodies for the control of the decision-making process of an increasing number of policy areas (Kriesi et al., 2012; Kriesi et al., 2008). In Britain, however, sovereignism strongly overlaps with Euroscepticism, with sovereigntist claims often made in opposition to EU membership. While all the sovereigntist claims share some populist traits in reclaiming power to the country, we prefer to reserve the populist label for claims that more directly and explicitly invoke power to the people as against the alleged usurpation of power from the political elites. Following the multidimensional conceptualisation of sovereignism proposed by Basile and Mazzoleni (2019), we conceptualise it as follows:

- (1) *Economic*: opposition towards the EU's economic governance, namely, the European Economic and Monetary Union.
- (2) *National*: opposition towards the process of political integration or EU-deepening, namely the transfer to European institutions of decision-making powers in an increasing number of policy areas.
- (3) *Populist*: opposition towards European elites and institutions, particularly their lack of legitimacy and accountability vis-à-vis the 'will of the people'.
- (4) *Civic*: opposition to the effects of European integration on the mechanisms of representative democracy, particularly on the centrality of national parliaments.
- (5) *Cultural*: opposition to the cultural effects of European integration on domestic society and culture, particularly on social cohesion and internal security.

Populism, according to a now classic definition (Mudde, 2007, p. 23), is a thin ideology that opposes 'the corrupt elites' (in our case, the EU 'technocrats' and 'bureaucrats') to 'the pure people'. While we share some of the criticisms raised by Heinisch and Mazzoleni (2017) on some limitations of the ideational approach as popularised by Mudde, we

consider the Manichean juxtaposition between people and elite as defined by Mudde a key reference point for our analysis of parliamentary speeches (as does most research on this topic: see Aslanidis, 2018). In this respect, populism clearly is an instance of sovereignism, by advocating ‘bringing back control’ as unresponsive supranational elites disregard the will of the (British) people. On the other hand, however, sovereignism can take different forms and its populist facet does not need to be dominant, nor even prevalent (cf. Basile & Mazzoleni, 2019, p. 5).

Tracing back in time the emergence of sovereignist discourses and opposition to the EU project, a rich body of literature has shown that the approval of the Maastricht treaty in 1992 was a turning point for the emergence of lukewarm or hostile sentiments, setting the stage for the shift from ‘permissive consensus’ to ‘constraining dissensus’ in many member states (Hooghe & Marks, 2012). However, Britain had been at odds with some aspects of the European project long before Maastricht. Indeed, Europe has been a divisive issue inside the Westminster parliament even before the country joined the then European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973 (Norton, 1980). The United Kingdom is not just the motherland of representative government (Judge, 2005), but also the country where hostility to Europe has divided both main parties, first bringing about the split of the Social Democratic Party from Labour in 1981, then being a decisive factor in the long journey back to power for the Conservatives (after 13 years of opposition between 1997 and 2010). But how was sovereignty related to the emergence of the hostility vis-à-vis Europe, which would ultimately lead to Brexit?

If the term Euroscepticism was first used by the newspaper *The Times* in 1985, the roots of British claims for sovereignty go much deeper than that (Menon & Salter, 2016). In Britain, furthermore, Euroscepticism has been also a mainstream phenomenon, as well as being (more recently) an anti-establishment element for challenger populist forces (as in all other West European countries). In Britain the term captured the hostility – framed by Margaret Thatcher in her Bruges speech of 1988 – to the further pooling of sovereignty and the birth of Economic and Monetary Union, two key elements in Europe in the decades that followed. Since then, albeit from different perspectives, both the Conservatives and the Labour Party (with the partial exceptions of the Blair and Brown premierships) have been in trouble in accepting the evolving architecture of the EU. At the same time, and again in a very peculiar way, the recent evolutions of the two parties mean that they cultivate very different conceptions of sovereignty, and therefore also very different forms of Euroscepticism (see further in Section 3).

Claims for national sovereignty have always been important in post-war British history, and we can find key examples of them in all the five dimensions that we then analyse in the rest of the paper. Back in 1962, the Labour leader Hugh Gaitskell spoke against the possible emergence of the United States of Europe, which would mean, ‘the end of Britain as an independent nation state [...] of a thousand years of history’. Although mild, this was clearly a national-sovereignist claim, of which the most radical example would come in 1968, with Enoch Powell’s famous ‘river of blood speech’, which had an anti-immigrant position of national sovereignty. Despite being condemned by the party, the speech was – according to some experts – an important factor in Edward Heath’s Conservative victory of 1970. In 1992, the traumatic exit from the Exchange Rate Mechanism and the opposition to Maastricht in the following years were key expressions of claims of

economic sovereignty. More recently, populist and national sovereignist claims have come together with the rise of migration as the most salient electoral issue (2010–15). In 2016, the supporters of ‘Leave’ in the EU referendum adopted ‘Take back control’ as their slogan, a paradigmatic case of a ‘claim for national sovereignty’. A further sovereigntist claim has a civic element and is linked to the importance of British values and institutions. As Vivien A. Schmidt puts it:

Sovereignty, rather than being associated solely with the executive as the embodiment of the state, as in France, was vested in the duality of the ‘Crown in Parliament’, constituting a sovereignty shared between the executive and the legislature. This ensured that any increase in the power of EU institutions would therefore be seen as a threat not just to executive autonomy but also to parliamentary sovereignty (2006, p. 28).

The intra-party divisiveness of sovereignism – intended here as opposition to EU integration – is evident by observing the voting behaviour of the two main parties in the House of Commons. From the 2015 General Election to the second reading of the EU Withdrawal Bill in October 2017, there have been 55 divisions on EU matters in the Commons: 19 in the 2015–16 session, 31 in the 2016–17 session, and 5 after the 2017 General Election and up to the end of October 2017. In the final year of David Cameron’s premiership, the most divisive bill – an amendment to the EU Referendum Bill – counted 37 Tory rebels. In the Labour Party, the most rebels (10 MPs) were found on a vote to extend the voting rights in the EU referendum to EU citizens. Under the leadership of Theresa May, the most rebellious vote on the EU was on an amendment to the EU (Notification of Withdrawal) Bill, when 7 MPs voted against the government. On the third reading of the same bill, 52 Labour MPs defied the party whip.

To put the above rebellions in context, it is useful to compare them with the rebellions faced by the Conservatives and the Labour Party in the votes on the ratification of Maastricht and the Lisbon Treaty (Table 1). Of course, the comparison is not made between homogenous units: while the votes on Maastricht and the Lisbon Treaty were on the ratification of the Treaties, the three most important Bills on the EU in the 2015–17 period were on the EU referendum, on the notification of withdrawal (i.e. the triggering of Article 50 to start the withdrawal process), and on the withdrawal from the EU (i.e. repealing EU legislation and transposing it into British law). With this caveat in mind, the divisions on the implementation of the Treaty of Lisbon featured at most 20 Tory and 28 Labour rebels. The rebellions in the tumultuous votes on the Treaty of Maastricht were significantly larger – with a peak of 41 MPs voting against the Tory whip and 71 against the Labour

Table 1. Largest revolts on the EU in the major British parties from Maastricht to Brexit.

	Conservative Party	Labour Party
Maastricht	41 (12.2 per cent)	71 (26.2 per cent)
EC Amendment Bill		
Lisbon	20 (10.1 per cent)	28 (7.9 per cent)
EU Amendment Bill		
‘Brexit’ Bills	37 (11.2 per cent)	52 (19.5 per cent)
EU Referendum Bill		
Notification of Withdrawal Bill		
EU Withdrawal Bill (2nd reading)		

Sources: Cowley & Norton, 1999; Cowley & Stuart, 2010; Hansard (various).

Notes: figures are the number and the share of rebel MPs.

leadership (the latter divided between 66 MPs opposing and 5 supporting the third reading of the Maastricht Bill).

In the aftermath of Brexit, the largest Tory rebellion so far occurred on the EU Referendum Bill, when 37 MPs voted with the Opposition and defeated Cameron's government. However, rebellions at the voting stage on other bills have been very limited, even in comparison with the ratification of the Treaty of Lisbon. For the Labour Party, on the other hand, the real troubles were to be found with regard to the Notification of Withdrawal Bill. In the 21 divisions on this bill, the Labour party split in all votes except one. Not only did 52 MPs vote against the whip at third reading, but 47 also voted against the bill at second reading, and 40 backed an amendment opposed by the leadership.

Interestingly, in the period after the referendum to October 2017 it is the Labour party that has suffered the most from its internal tensions on the EU. The Tories – both before and, for the time being, after the 2017 general elections – have been rather cohesive at least so far as their parliamentary votes are considered. It is clearly more important for the governing party to keep its unity, as splits inside the opposition parties are often inconsequential. Yet voting cohesion does not necessarily mean party unity. Significant differences within the Tory ranks clearly emerge when their parliamentary speeches, rather than their parliamentary votes, are analysed – and may at some point be reflected in voting behaviour (see Section 5).

3. Hardening sovereigntism at the core of the British party system

In Britain, the solidity of the party system has traditionally been embedded with the Westminster model, built on majoritarian institutions, the 'absolute sovereignty' of parliament, and especially on the enduring first-past-the-post electoral system, which – in normal times – fabricates a two-party system and cohesive single-party cabinets (cf. Baldini, Bresanelli, & Massetti, 2018). For a long time, this meant that the possible insurgence of fringe and anti-establishment parties was kept at bay, until the rise of Euroscepticism and the (late) adoption of a proportional system for the election of the European Parliament in 1999 allowed the emergence of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP).

In 1997, when Blair became Prime Minister, the salience of Europe among public opinion reached its peak and a brand-new party like the Referendum Party got three per cent of the vote in the 1997 General Election – a result which would look rather meagre for a Eurosceptic party today, but which was at the time far from irrelevant. Incidentally, UKIP went on to build its rise on this result, by gaining one position – from fourth to first place – at each and every European Parliament election from 1999 to 2014, quadrupling its score from 6.6–26.6 per cent.

In the mid-2000s, the salience of Europe among British voters was back to the irrelevance experienced during the 1980s, and it would remain at this level until 2015 (Grande & Schwarzbözl, 2017, p. 31). It is in the run-up to the 2015 General Election that immigration became the most relevant issue in public opinion. While the EU as such was still not so salient, the (lack of) control on immigration was mainly framed as a consequence of the EU's freedom of movement. All parties embraced more restrictive positions on immigration, and David Cameron pledged to reduce net migration to under 100,000 entries per year. In 2015, UKIP won its first (and, so far, only) seat at Westminster, having already won two by-elections in the previous year. The first-past-the-post electoral

system no longer appeared able to contain the success of challenger parties and the possibility of a referendum on the EU was looming larger and larger on British politics. With UKIP becoming a credible electoral threat, the Tories hardened their position on both immigration and European integration (Bale, 2018; Heppell, Crines, & Jeffery, 2017) with the pledge for a referendum on membership finally being made in the 2015 manifesto.

Although Cameron was still able to campaign for 'Remain' in the run-up to the referendum, and even if the Conservatives (or a section of the party) may still officially endorse a hyper-globalist position in economic terms (Baker, Gamble, & Seawright, 2002) – e.g. the 'global power' discourse articulated by Theresa May in several important speeches, such as, for instance, at Lancaster House ('I want us to be a truly Global Britain – the best friend and neighbour to our European partners, but a country that reaches beyond the borders of Europe too') – it is in the Conservative Party that nationalist and populist forms of sovereignism – what Freeden defined as 'national-populist' rhetoric (2017, pp. 7–8) – should now be mainly found, and particularly so after the referendum and the strengthening of the hard-Eurosceptic fringe of the parliamentary party.

However, sovereignist claims are not only the preserve of the Tory party. Under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, the Labour Party's flirting with anti-globalisation, 'Bennite' positions typical of the early 1980s appear to be in line with the protectionist policies endorsed by left-wing populist parties elsewhere in Europe.

Labour's studied ambiguity on Brexit (cf. Diamond, 2018) – with the leadership neither endorsing a 'Leave' position (in line with Corbyn's past position as backbencher), nor supporting 'Remain' or a soft version of Brexit in opposition to the government – probably paid off in the 2017 General Election, allowing Labour to keep seats in key 'Leave' marginals. Opposition to the EU in some parts of the Labour party has come in the form of a traditional socialist position, with the EU representing a system of deregulated capitalism and austerity. Based on these considerations, and in contrast to the Conservative party, we would expect the Labour party to mainly articulate an economic-sovereignist position in its discourse.

4. Research design

In order to investigate the presence of (different types of) sovereignism in the main British parties, we analyse in depth their political discourse. We focus on parliamentary speeches on EU matters delivered by Conservative and Labour representatives in the House of Commons in the 2015–16, 2016–17, and 2017–18 parliamentary sessions, covering the entire period from the 2015 General Election to the end of October 2017 (for details, see Table A in the online Appendix).

Debates were retrieved from Hansard, the online database of verbatim reports of debates in the House of Commons, based on selected keywords, such as 'Brexit', or 'European Union'. Debates were selected from their official title and then manually scanned: only those whose content explicitly referred to key issues and events related to the process of European integration were included in our sample. Then we used a Python script to automate the procedure of retrieval and extraction of parliamentary speeches from the Parliamentary Hansard and build a machine-readable collection of speeches (or *corpus*) already divided by political party and by Member of Parliament (MP). In total, we collected and coded a corpus of 4,008 speeches (1,586 delivered by Labour and 2,422 by Conservative MPs).

Table 2. Keywords associated with sovereignty.

Sovereignism	Keywords
Economic	market, trade, tariff, membership, austerity, fiscal, monetary, EMU, Eurozone, Euro
National	Brexit, European Union, control, sovereignty, borders, national interest, immigration, Euroscepticism, supranational, Schengen
Populist	people, elite, bureaucracy, technocrats, establishment, accountability, legitimacy, European Council, European Commission, Juncker
Civic	citizens, democracy, national parliament, representation, electoral system, government, public services, institutions, civic, reforms
Cultural	values, traditions, identity, diversity, culture, multicultural, multi-ethnic, British, law and order, security

The empirical investigation was based on the Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS) methodology that allows a fine-grained analysis of large text corpora by merging quantitative and qualitative methods in an iterative process (Partington, 2010). First, following a deductive approach to the discovery of themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p. 88), we identified some keywords pertaining to the semantic domain of each of the above-mentioned sub-dimensions of sovereignty (Table 2 below).¹ Then, we looked at the absolute frequency of each keyword in both Labour and Conservative speeches, to roughly compare the relevance of each dimension between them (for a similar approach, see Ryan & Weisner, 1996). Finally, we expanded the analysis to the larger stretches of text containing these keywords, to capture the position (positive or negative) and the arguments associated with them by MPs. Only those sentences containing a sovereignist/anti-sovereignist message were coded, according to some inductively defined categories (cf. Table B in the online Appendix). The tool used for this analysis is MaxQDA, a software programme for mixed-method text analysis.

5. Empirical analysis

5.1. Intra and inter-party comparison

This section aims to assess both the relevance and the attributes of sovereigntist claims in the political discourse of the two major British parties. Figure 1 below provides a first quantitative glimpse. As expected, it shows that national and populist dimensions of sovereignty prevail in Conservative MPs' speeches, while – more surprisingly – it is the civic type of sovereignty that prevails in the Labour Party. Indeed, most sovereigntist claims made by Conservative representatives fall into two categories: 'the will of the people must be respected' (137 occurrences) and 'taking back control' (149). By contrast, the vast bulk of sovereigntist claims voiced by Labour delegates fall into the 'parliamentary sovereignty' category (149). Interestingly, cultural sovereignty, intended as an envisaged threat posed by alien cultures to a supposedly homogeneous and cohesive society, is not salient in our sample. This is probably due to the nature of the analysed debates: MPs mainly refer to Schengen and the freedom of movement of EU citizens, rather than to immigration from extra-EU countries. Moreover, the governing party is internally divided over the costs and benefits of immigration. Some Conservative MPs advocate the end of 'uncontrolled immigration' (14) in order to put the interest of 'British citizens first' (17), while other Tory MPs acknowledge the benefits that EU immigrants bring to the British economy (19).

Figure 2 below shows how the use of different types of sovereigntist claims by Conservative and Labour MPs varies over time. In the case of Conservative representatives, the

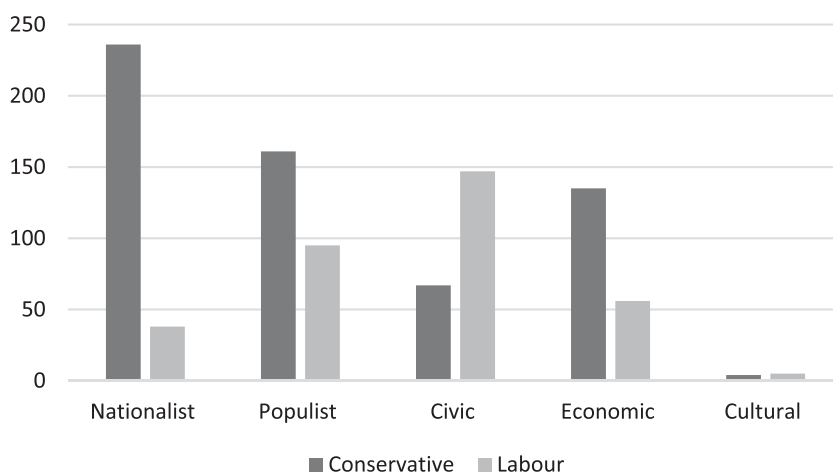


Figure 1 Sovereignist claims in Conservative and Labour MPs' speeches. Note: the y-axis reports the absolute number of claims

number of segments of text coded either as national or populist sovereignty increases considerably after the referendum, with national sovereignty remarkably outnumbering the other categories. In particular, the number of segments coded as 'national sovereignty' more than tripled (from 52 up to 184), while those coded as 'populist sovereignty' rose from 37 up to 124. In the case of Labour, the number of segments coded as 'economic sovereignty' prevails before the Brexit referendum (69 coded segments), while after the referendum, 'civic sovereignty' is the most populated category. The number of segments coded as populist sovereignty also increases after the referendum, albeit moderately. Conversely, the number of segments coded as national sovereignty decreases.

When looking at the keywords associated with each of the above-mentioned categories of sovereignty (Table 3 below), it is worth noting that the main issues identified by Conservative MPs are the 'people' (mentioned 1589 times), the 'European Union' (1078), 'British' (649), 'trade' (534), 'market' (350), and 'membership' (315). When exploring these statements in depth, a link emerges between national and populist sovereignty and support for Brexit. Indeed, Brexiteers endorse much of the Eurosceptic populist rhetoric to refer both to the EU power-grab vis-à-vis the UK and to the lack of democracy at the EU level. In addition, they invoke the 'will of the people', conceived as a homogeneous monolith, conveniently ignoring the 62.5 per cent of the electorate made up of 'remainers' and those who abstained from voting in the referendum (Freedon, 2017, p. 4). Such a type of sovereignty is well represented by the quote below:

Many of us feel that the EU as currently constituted is thoroughly undemocratic. It stifles and prevents the will of a once-sovereign people from being properly expressed. It means that a Government cannot be elected on a prospectus that they can implement in all respects, because the European Union will not let them do so. Above all, the European Union represents the past: it is holding us back. It is something from the last century. [...] Let us get rid of these myths [...] being out of the EU or in a better and new relationship with the EU is the future: it means [...] above all, restore the sovereignty of the British people ...

John Redwood MP, EU Referendum Bill, 09/06/2015



Figure 2 Types of sovereignist claims (2015–17).

When digging into economic sovereignty, it emerges how the Conservative parliamentary party is divided over the optimal post-Brexit relationship with the EU. On the one side, and in line with a historical ‘hyperglobalist’ Eurosceptical strand within British Conservatism, Brexiteers believe that the UK will be better off by leaving the single market (64 occurrences), as it will regain its place in the world as a global, trading nation, traditionally connected with the English-speaking world and the Commonwealth (33 occurrences). For instance:

I sincerely believe that this process [Brexit] is not a triumph of nationalism, or of us being apart from them. It is quite the opposite: part of a new internationalism and recognition of our common

Table 3. Sub-dimensions of sovereignty by political party with most frequent keywords.

		Conservative Party	Labour Party
1	National	European Union (1078)	Brexit (567)
		Brexit (290)	European Union (562)
		Control (179)	Immigration (156)
2	Populist	People (1589)	People (183)
		Establishment (21)	Accountability (39)
		Elite (2)	European Commission (25)
3	Civic	Citizens (311)	Government (1664)
		Democracy (123)	Citizens (225)
		Accountability (13)	Democracy (106)
4	Economic	Trade (535)	Market (302)
		Market (350)	Trade (294)
		Membership (315)	Membership (224)
5	Cultural	British (649)	British (356)
		Security (105)	Security (109)
		Culture (26)	Migrants (32)

Note: top three keywords by analytical category ranked by relative importance. Absolute frequency in parenthesis. Total words: 488.775 (CON), 342.938 (LAB).

citizenship of the whole world. We stand ready to break free of the protectionist barriers erected by the EU that have so damaged much of the third world, and rejoin the world at large.

Sir Edward Leigh MP, EU (Notification of Withdrawal) Bill, 31/01/2017

Conversely, Conservative ‘Remain’ MPs stress the economic benefits of EU membership (59 occurrences) and claim that any trade agreement negotiated as an external partner of the EU will be less favourable to the UK than the current membership of the single market (56 occurrences). This is shown by the excerpt below:

I think that the British benefited more from the single market than any other member state. It has contributed to our comparative economic success today.

Kenneth Clarke MP, EU (Notification of Withdrawal) Bill, 31/01/2017

Among Labour MPs, by contrast, the keywords associated with sovereignist claims are the ‘government’ (1664 occurrences), ‘Brexit’ (567), the ‘European Union’ (562), ‘British’ (356), ‘market’ (302), and ‘trade’ (294). The Labour Party’s main target of opposition is the Government, and civic-sovereignist arguments are used to defend the principles of British parliamentary democracy. The official position of the Labour party is to leave the EU, but several MPs stress the need to do so respecting the role of Parliament and opposing any power grab by the Government, such as, for example, in the debate on the so-called ‘Henry VIII’ clauses in the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, which enable ministers to convert EU laws into UK law by using secondary legislation, over which parliament has little say.² In the words of one Labour MP:

The Bill does the opposite of what people expected for parliamentary democracy and the enhancement of our courts [...]. The Prime Minister talks about British values and there are no more fundamental British values than parliamentary democracy and the rule of law.

Geraint Davies MP, EU (Withdrawal) Bill, 11/09/2017

It is worth noting that Labour members subvert the national-sovereignist arguments typically used by Brexiteers, particularly the ‘take back control’ claim, and use them to demand clarity and accountability through the Brexit negotiations to the government.

Those who wanted to leave talked about giving the British people control – taking back control. Why, then, are we producing a Bill that will, effectively, give that control to the Government of the day, to make decisions behind closed doors, and not to this Parliament, which represents the democratic will of the people?

David Lammy MP, EU (Withdrawal) Bill, 11/09/2017

Similarly, Labour MPs use terms pertaining to the populist lexicon, but to stress the principles of parliamentary democracy. They talk in the name of those British people that did not vote in favour of Brexit and that equally deserve to have a say on the post-Brexit arrangements. Some MPs, such as the Shadow Brexit Secretary, Keir Starmer, openly advocate for a second referendum and for extending Article 50 to delay Brexit. As another Labour MP argues:

I therefore put it to the House that people now feel that they have not had their reasonable expectations fulfilled, which is why, although I accept the vote to leave in principle, I believe there should be a vote – a final say – of the people on the exit package for Britain. Such a vote would allow the people to decide whether that package meets their reasonable expectations and whether it is better than currently being in the EU – if they do not agree, they can stay.

Geraint Davies MP, EU (Notification of Withdrawal) Bill, 31/01/2017

Yet, when looking at the themes that Labour MPs associate with economic sovereignty, contrary to what we expected, there is little evidence of traditional socialist positions. The overwhelming majority of Labour MPs stress the economic disadvantages of leaving the EU, as in the examples below:

Even on the optimistic assumption that we can sign trade agreements all over the world, this does not even come close to making up for the loss of the single market.

David Lammy MP, EU (Notification of Withdrawal) Bill, 31/01/2017

Our continued membership of the single market, along with our ability to stay in the European customs union, is the most important issue for our country. It is about jobs and trade, but it is also about tackling austerity and investing in our schools and hospitals.

Heidi Alexander MP, EU (Withdrawal) Bill, 11/09/2017

Moreover, most Labour MPs claim that the UK's membership to the EU has increased workers' rights (for example through the Workers' Agency Directive and the Parental Leave Directive) and they fear that Brexit is a project led by Conservative Brexiteers to foster neoliberal policies, such as cuts in taxes and public spending. In other words, the majority of Labour's anti-austerity discourses are addressed against the Conservative government:

The previous Labour Government signed up to the social chapter, ensuring that every worker won the right to four weeks' paid holiday [...]. Voting to leave the EU could put at risk hard-won rights, because we know that some of the biggest cheerleaders for Brexit see protections for ordinary British workers as red tape to be binned.

Caroline Flint MP, EU Membership: Economic Benefits, 15/06/2016

They [the Government] threaten to create a low-tax, low-public-service haven on the coast of Europe if we do not get a trade deal with the EU, but that is precisely the kind of UK that they

want, free from what they see as the constraints of employment rights and environmental protection.

Christian Matheson MP, EU (Notification of Withdrawal) Bill, 01/02/2017

Of course, the most Eurosceptic Labour MPs, such as Kate Hoey and Kelvin Hopkins, argue for the economic benefits of leaving the EU, in order to 'take back control' of a relevant share of British resources and transfer the decision-making power over national economic policies to a democratically elected Government, rather than to the Brussels-led technocratic institutions.

The CAP is nonsense. We ought to abolish it and repatriate agricultural policy to member states. We can decide in our own country which parts of agriculture should be subsidised and to what extent, and we can decide where and when we buy food.

Kelvin Hopkins MP, European Union (Finance) Bill, 23/06/2015

5.2. Classifying MPs

Looking further inside the parties, we have classified Conservative and Labour MPs according to their framing strategies. By counting how many times a given MP is associated with one of the codes expressing sovereignism claims, we have identified four groups of parliamentarians. A first cluster is composed of 'national-sovereignist' MPs, who advocate national sovereignty. They oppose the EU's power grab vis-à-vis Britain's sovereignty and support Brexit as a means to 'take back control' over national borders, the welfare system, and several policy areas, such as agriculture and manufacturing. Among Conservatives, David Davis (with 44 per cent of the coded segments associated with him expressing national sovereignism), Ian Duncan Smith (40 per cent), and John Redwood (36.3 per cent) are the most prominent members. Kelvin Hopkins (67 per cent) is the most representative Labour member of this group.

A second group is composed of 'economic-sovereignist' parliamentarians, namely those MPs that stress the economic advantages of leaving the EU or, alternatively, the economic costs of EU membership, without necessarily advocating for a repatriation of EU competencies. The most representative among them are David Gauke (60 per cent) and Sir Edward Leigh (46.1 per cent) in the Conservative Party, and Barbara Keeley (70 per cent) among Labour MPs. However, while the latter is particularly vocal before the referendum and argues for a significant review of the EU budget priorities, the former mainly articulate economic sovereignism in terms of the economic benefits of being outside the common market and being able to negotiate free-trade agreements with third countries once exiting the EU.

Civic sovereignism is mainly articulated in terms of respect for the Westminster model of democracy. Among Labour MPs, Yvette Cooper (80 per cent), the Brexit shadow minister, Keir Starmer (62 per cent), Chris Leslie (50 per cent), David Lammy (37.5 per cent) and Hilary Benn (36.4 per cent) most often use civic-sovereignist claims, while in the Conservative Party, Kenneth Clarke (44 per cent) and Anna Soubry (23.4 per cent) can be classified as civic sovereignists. It is worth noticing that their claims can be classified as 'sovereignist' when the emphasis is on the more appropriate procedure by which to leave the EU – for example, by emphasising the role of Parliament, or by allowing MPs to debate and amend government bills, etc. In this sense, several members of this group endorse 'soft' forms of Brexit.³

Finally, among Conservative MPs, Michael Gove (45.5 per cent) and George Freeman (31.5 per cent) are the ones that most frequently employ populist-sovereignist claims. On the opposing side, it is Kate Hoey (67 per cent) who best fits this category. They all criticise the democratic deficit of the EU – at times referred to as ‘authoritarian bureaucracy’ – and the need to respect the ‘will of the people’ as unequivocally expressed in the Brexit referendum.

6. Conclusions

This article has argued that sovereignism, expressed in the form of opposition to European integration, is by no means a new element in the British mainstream parties. National sovereignism has characterised (parts of) both parties since the UK considered its membership in the then European Economic Community. Economic and civic sovereignism were also part of their discourses and Eurosceptic positions. What is newer – and triggered both by the emergence of significant challenger parties (i.e. UKIP) and the use of an instrument of direct democracy such as the referendum – is the emergence of a form of populist sovereignism opposing the ‘will of the [British] people’ to the unresponsive Brussels bureaucracy. To be sure, elements of populist sovereignism have been present in the political debate since at least the early 1990s, with the Maastricht debate and the emergence of a Referendum Party. However, the context of Brexit has made the populist facet of sovereignism much more visible and significant.

The analysis of the parliamentary speeches on EU issues delivered by representatives of the Conservative and Labour parties in the House of Commons from 2015 to October 2017 has shown that different types of sovereignist claims co-exist in the British parliamentary parties. Populism has become an important theme of sovereignist claims in the Conservative Party. In particular, Brexiteers articulate a strong opposition to the European Union polity and present themselves as representatives of the ‘true’ popular voice, politically constructed as a homogeneous unity – the ‘will of the people’ – in favour of Brexit. The combination of national and populist claims characterises the Tories’ sovereignist discourses.

By contrast, civic sovereignism is predominant in the discourse of Labour MPs after the referendum. More specifically, Labour MPs play the role of watchdogs of parliamentary democracy, opposing all those measures put in place by the government to reduce the scrutiny power of parliament and strengthen the executive. If the end of EU membership is in principle accepted, it should not be an opportunity for a power grab by the government. Of course, some Labour MPs also go beyond civic sovereignism, questioning the very choice of Brexit (e.g. demanding a second referendum). Yet, this aspect goes beyond the focus (and the data) of this article.

Finally, it is worth emphasising that, contrary to what was initially hypothesised, there is little evidence of protectionist, anti-market positions among Labour MPs. Some tentative explanations can be suggested. First, the analysis focuses on the parliamentary Labour party, which is the least likely supporter of more radical economic policies – indeed, a mild supporter of the party leader *tout court*. Had the analysis focused on the ‘party on the ground’ – addressing speeches delivered in Northern constituencies, for example – results may have been different. Second, the party strategy may have changed in the period here analysed. If electoral considerations led to an emphasis on economic sovereignism – from a leftist perspective – in the run-up to the referendum, in the period

after the referendum the Labour Party concentrated on an 'orderly' delivery of Brexit, criticising the government for its (mis)-management of the process.

Needless to say, this article deals with the ongoing process of Brexit, and party positions – and here specifically the claims made by MPs – are not only formed endogenously, but also in relation to the progress (or lack thereof) of the negotiations with the EU. As these negotiations will outlast any official Brexit day, the strength of different types of sovereignist claims (and possibly anti-sovereignist claims) will continue to vary both within and across the parties.

Notes

1. For the sake of comparability, we have limited our semantic 'dictionaries' to ten key words for each sub-dimension of sovereignism.
2. Civic sovereignist claims often overlap with support for soft forms of Brexit.
3. In some cases, civic arguments are explicit endorsements of EU institutions and policies. Such 'remain' positions are, of course, not classified as 'sovereignist'.

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