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The effect of populism on the Brexit referendum

A comparative analysis of previous research and statistical data

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Abstract

This thesis examines how populism affected the Brexit referendum in 2016. By using a combination of comparative analysis and statistical data the thesis aims to answer the much-debated topic of the correlation between populism and Brexit. The thesis compares previous research to statistical data from the European Social Survey from the years 2010 and 2018 to better understand how populism affected the referendum. The result of the research demonstrates that there were levels of high anti-elitism in the public both towards the national political institutions and towards the European Parliament. However, there were interesting findings regarding the previous research and the statistical data when analyzing immigration. Because of this the hypothesis for the thesis was confirmed only partially. Because of this the thesis argues for further research regarding the levels of anti-immigration sentiments in the general public and its effect on the Brexit referendum.

Sammendrag

Denne bacheloren undersøker hvordan populisme har påvirket Brexit folkeavstemningen holdt i 2016. Ved å bruke en kombinasjon av komparative analyse og statistikk prøver denne bacheloren å svare på det mye omdiskuterte temaet om korrelasjonen mellom populisme og Brexit. Oppgaven sammenligner tidligere forskning med statistisk data fra European Social Survey fra årene 2010 og 2018 for å bedre forstå hvordan populisme påvirket folkeavstemningen. Resultatet av undersøkelsen viser høy grad av anti-elitisme i offentligheten både rettet mot de nasjonale politiske institusjonene og mot Det Europeiske Parlamentet. Derimot var det interessante funn i henhold til tidligere forskning og den statistiske dataen når det ble gjort analyse på immigrasjon. På grunn av dette ble hypotesen til oppgaven kun delvis bekreftet. På bakgrunn av dette argumenterer oppgaven for videre forskning på nivået av anti-immigrasjons holdninger in offentligheten og hvordan dette påvirket Brexit folkeavstemningen.

Content

Tables:

Abbreviations:

APSA	American Political Science Association
ESS	European Social Survey
EU	The European Union
LE	Leave.eu
LPV	Lijohart, Prezeworski Verba Dataset Award 2020
UK	The United Kingdom
UKIP	The United Kingdom Independence Party
VL	Vote Leave

1. Introduction

The result of the Brexit referendum in 2016 left many surprised. Many in the Western world expected based on predictions from the general media that the referendum would end differently (Tetlow & Giles, 2017; Financial Times, 2016). The United Kingdom (UK) joined the European Union (EU) in 1973 along with Denmark and Sweden. Since then, The UK has had a long-troubled relation with the EU, creating friction between the two many times thorough out their common history, which eventually accumulated into the final breaking point, Brexit (McKinney, 2020, pp. 22). After the results became clear many different theories were emerged to explain how this could happen. One being populism. The anti-elite sentiment, anti-immigration and the belief that it was time for The United Kingdom to start putting itself first were reasons for why populism became a favorable theoretical explanation for the result.

The research question for this thesis is, to what extent did populism affect the Brexit referendum? This question is interesting in terms of the various ways populism might have affected Brexit, whether it was anti-elitism and anti-immigration that caused the result? It is also interesting because of the many different opinions regarding the topic. With some scholars arguing for a strong correlation between the two, and other scholars stating that even though there are populistic sentiments that can be recognized, populism was not the main cause (Hobolt, 2016; Zimmerman, 2021; Baldini, Bressanelli & Gianfreda, 2020). On this background, the relevant sub-questions that are answered in this thesis are:
- where can one observe the populist sentiment in the British public?
- what were these sentiments?
- to what degree can populism be observed?

This topic is especially relevant because of how pertinent Brexit is regarding the EU´s current issues. Brexit was the first time a member country left the Union. It will be very interesting to see the long-term effects this might have on the EU, whether it will destabilize the union, or cause it to create a stronger united front. It is also important to look at populism and Brexit to better understand the degree of correlation, and its relevance to the possible rise of populism in the rest of the Western world.

The hypothesis for the research question is that populism affected the Brexit referendum to a high degree. The previous research indicates that many of the key characteristics of far-right populism can be seen in the leave-campaign. Moreover, the key issue for most voters was immigration and wanting a stricter immigration policy. It can therefore be assumed that populism had a strong effect on the referendum. The anti-elite sentiment brought forward in previous research also indicate a strong correlation between Brexit and populism, further strengthening the hypothesis.

The structure of the thesis is as follows. First there is a literature review, presenting previous research and what is missing from it. Next a section conceptualizing populism for this thesis, followed by a segment defining populism, using Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser´s book, Populism A very short introduction from 2019. This section is divided into three parts, describing the three most relevant terms regarding populism, derived from the definition. Subsequently there is a section about the method used in the thesis, including where the statistical data comes from and why they have been selected. This part also includes the reliability and the validity of the dissertation, and the statistical data used. The ensuing section constitutes a conceptual part, explaining the Brexit referendum

and how populism has been connected to the campaign. The undersections discuss the United Kingdom Independence Party, immigration, the political elite, and the rhetoric used during the campaign. The thesis then includes an analysis part, with the intention of answering the research question and confirm or deny the hypothesis. The thesis ends with a conclusion, summarizing the findings and looking at possible further research.

2. Literature Review

A great deal of research has been done on populism. There is an extensive amount of material trying to define populism, and other sources using populism as a theory to explain past and current events. Research has been conducted on populism and religion (Graff-Kallevåg, Kloster & Stålsett, 2021; Schwörer & Romero-Vidal, 2020), populism and the American election (Sahin, Johnson & Korkut, 2021; Conley & Cambridge University Press, 2020), and much more. A lot of research has also been done on the topic for this thesis, Brexit and populism. The theory has been used to explain the results, the rise of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) (McKinney, 2020; Stanyer, Archetti & Sorensen, 2017) and the rhetoric of the different campaigns (Mondon & Winter, 2019; Smith, Deacon & Downey, 2021).

It has become evident that there is a gap in the research available when it comes to more specific case studies analyzing the changes in populism over time. There are a few studies looking into the levels of populistic sentiment among the public during the election, by looking at the voter's main concerns (Goodwin & Milazzo, 2017). However, much of the research focus on one period. This thesis will try to fill some of this gap, by analyzing the situation for two different years, to better understand the changes in the opinion regarding populism in the general public over time. It is of course important to note that this is a bachelor thesis, and the limited time and resources available will not be enough to fill this gap in knowledge and insight alone.

2.1. Populism in this thesis

The focus of this thesis is immigration, and the changing attitudes towards the issue because of the strong ties between "the people" and negative attitudes towards others, in this case immigrants. This anti-immigration sentiment has become more evident in later years, with the emergence of the far-right populism that many western European countries have encountered (Reinemann, Aalberg, Esser, Strömbäck, de Vreese, 2017, p. 12-15). The idea of a true people of a nation, and the belief that immigrants cannot be part of this group, make it valid to look at the possible change in attitude towards immigration in the UK before and after the Brexit vote to better understand if Brexit was caused by populism. It will also be significant to look at the attitude towards the political establishment in the UK to analyze another side to populism, the anti-elite sentiment. By looking at how the attitude towards the political elite has changed before and after the vote it will help to understand a different side to populism than just immigration, and will therefore deepen the analysis, making the conclusion to the hypothesis more valid.

3. Conceptual framework

3.1. Definition of populism

Populism is a widely debated term. Some scholars believe it to be an ideology, some a political movement and some think of it as merely a political idea (Mudde & Kaltwesser, 2019, p. 23-26). For this thesis it is important to present a clear and understandable

definition of the term populism, to ensure the reader has a good understanding of how populism is defined in this context. Without this pre-understanding of populism misunderstanding of the term may occur because of the many different ideas revolving around the term in today's literature. This thesis bases its definition of populism on Cas Mudde´s previous works. Mudde defines populism 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 volont generale (general will) of the people"
> (Kaltwasser, Taggart, Espejo & Ostiguy, 2017, p. 29).

This understanding of populism is connected to three key terms, "the people", "the elite" and "the general will" (Mudde & Kaltwesser, 2019, p. 31). In his book Mudde argues that populism has some ideological aspects and can be considered as a thin ideology. However, it is often closely tied to other ideologies, such as nationalism, agrarianism and socialism. This definition is also used by other scholars, such as in the book Populist Political Communication in Europe by Toril Aalberg, Frank Esser, Carsten Reinemann, Jesper Strömbäck and Claes H. de Vreese, and the Oxford Handbook of Populism by Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Pierre Ostiguy, Paul Taggart and Paulina Ochoa Espejo. It is therefore safe to consider this as a renowned definition with much research backing it up.

3.2. The People

When populists refer to the people, they often refer to who they see as the common people, or who they believe to be the people left out by the elites in power. This group for most populist is the middle- and lower-class people often living in rural areas and working mainly with manual labor such as farming and in factories. Most populist believe the power should lie with the people, not with elitist politicians they perceive to be working for themselves and other elites. Because of this distrust of politicians apparently representing the elite, populism can be interpreted as anti-democratic (Mudde & Kaltwesser, 2019, p. 31-34). Not in the sense of not believing in the public opinion, but in distrusting a democratic system consisting of a group of elites making decisions on behalf of the people instead of the people having direct influence on the decisions being made. This is why many populists today would rather have direct votes on specific issues or have one strong leader working for the people because he or she is believed to understand what the general will of the people is. (Mudde & Kaltwesser, 2019, p. 31-34).

The term "the people" is often used regarding the nation, and who is believed to be the true people of that state or land. An example would be, that one has to be born in England and have English parents to truly be English. The belief that there are certain criteria to becoming part of "the people" is closely tied to the other ideologies populism is often related with, such as nationalism, xenophobia and patriotism (Mudde & Kaltwesser, 2019, p. 31-34). This definition of the people is the most relevant for this thesis because of its connection with anti-immigration sentiments. The idea that there is one true people, and that immigration is ruining this can possibly be tied to the rise of populism in later years.

3.3. The Elite

The elite is another important term in populism. It refers to who "the people" believe to be the corrupt one percent working for themselves and others like them. The elites are often politicians, businessmen and bankers. Many populists also despise the media and cultural

elite, which they believe are all working together to promote each other, alongside the political and economic elites (Mudde & Kaltwesser, 2019, p. 34-34). The idea is that the corrupt elite is no longer working for the true people, but for their own selfish gains. In later years the political leaders of the EU alongside the national leaders of many states have been accused of only thinking about what will be best for the union, instead of what would be best for their own state (Mudde & Kaltwesser, 2019, p. 34-38).

3.4. The General Will

The general will is another important term when it comes to populism according to Mudde. This term is closely related to both the people and the elite. It refers to how the people, as a whole, know what they want. They cannot be corrupt or led astray. The people will always know their own best (Mudde & Kaltwesser, 2019, p. 38-41). A good political leader needs to understand this general will to be able to stand in opposition to the corrupt elite. Populists criticize the elite for being unable or unwilling to understand the general will and act according to it. It is often said to be protecting the popular sovereignty, because of its so-called ability to ratify the will of the ones who feel left out from the political establishment (Mudde & Kaltwesser, 2019, p. 38-41).

4. Method

A combination of statistical analysis and comparative methods are employed to answer the research question for this thesis. There are several advantages for these methods. Statistics have been used frequently as a supplement to confirm or deny narratives. Furthermore, statistics are viewed as a respectable way of recording the public. Statistics can map everything from sex and age to more complex questions such as feelings and attitudes towards certain topics, making it an adequate method for creating large amounts of data (Moses & Knutsen, 2019, pp. 69). Also, the comparative method, which is the main method used in this thesis, has multiple advantages. It is a good method because of its ability to choose specific cases, where the variable being analyzed is present. By looking at a small number of cases and comparing them one can discover similarities or dissimilarities that can confirm or contradict a hypothesis (Collier, 1993, pp. 107).

The dissertation will look at a survey given to the British public in the year 2010 and 2018. By analyzing the answers and comparing them to each other it will help provide an answer to the research question. By using this method, it will be possible to get an understanding of the people's views and opinions regarding issues associated with populism and confirm or deny the hypothesis.

The year 2010 is selected for this analysis because of how the idea of an EU referendum had not yet hit the political agenda. For this reason, the 2010 survey can be used to measure the populist tendencies in the public before the media and actors such as UKIP began using populist sentiments to push forward their political agenda. The survey from the year 2018 is chosen because it was conducted after the referendum, and therefore displaying how the public's populist tendencies might have changed after Brexit. It would have been preferable to use a later survey to really be able to see the larger changes. However, because of covid-19 the European Social Survey has not been able to conduct face-to-face interviews, so the survey of 2018 provides the latest available data for this thesis. The survey conducted in 2016 could also be considered as interesting, however, after looking it over, the results support what can already be observed from the 2018 data, and it has therefore not been included in the analysis of this thesis.

5. The statistics

The statistical data used for this analysis is collected from European Social Survey (ESS). The answers are from the dataset of The United Kingdom from 2010 and 2018, ESS5GB and ESS9GB. The answers were analyzed in the program Stata and recoded to minimize the amount of data analyzed. The variables used for this thesis is trstprl, trstplt and trstprt which have been recoded to a reflexiv index scale to better analyze the political trust the respondents have to their political representatives and institutions. Furthermore, the variables imbgeco, imueclt and imwbcnt have been recoded to a reflexic index scale, to better analyze the generals public attitudes towards immigrants. This has been done with the same variables from both the ESS5BG and ESS9GB dataset. The thesis will also use the variables imdfetn and imsmetn, which have not been recoded from both datasets as well as the variable trstep.

5.1. The variables

The questions regarding political trust are elected because of how they can provide an understanding of the public's view on the political establishment in the UK. Trust can be a good indicator of how the respondents see their political institutions. Low trust can imply that there are contradictions between the public and the political institutions which can be used as fertile ground for populism due to the anti-elite sentiment shared by many populists. Populists believe their political establishment to be corrupt. This mistrust also applies to the question regarding the European parliament, because of how it correlates with the belief that European politicians work for the union and not in the interest of their own country.

The questions concerning immigration are selected because of the correlation that can be seen between populism and anti-immigration sentiment as discussed previously in this thesis. The questions can give an idea about the British people´s view on immigration and the effect it has had on their country. This again can be used as an indication of the level of populism in The UK to get a better understanding of populisms connection to Brexit. By combining different aspects of how the public experiences the consequences of immigration it is possible to analyze a wider part of the people's opinion on the immigration.

6. Reliability and validity

6.1. Reliability

As previously mentioned, the data collected is from the European Social Survey (ESS). The survey has been conducted every second year, by use of face-to-face interviews, since its establishment in 2001. The data is free for non-commercial use and can be downloaded after a short registration. Since its establishment ESS has won multiple awards for its work, such as the Descartes Prize for Research & Science Communication in 2005 and the Lijphart/Przeworski/Verba (LPV) Dataset Award 2020 by the Comparative Politics Section of the American Political Science Association (APSA). These awards along with the survey's long standing high regards in the academic society all speak to its high reliability. The survey has extensive experience of conducting this specific type of interviews, which contributes to the high reliability of the data. The reliability of this thesis can also be considered relatively high. Throughout the thesis will use clear and concise tables, where the data can be clearly observed. There are also two attachments at the end with the DO-files for the coding done in Stata, so that other researchers can recreate what has been done.

6.2. Validity

The external validity for this data is reasonably high. The ESS has long experience in collecting the data and have high validity in picking a representative selection of the population they want to examine. It is however important to note that the people answering such a survey might have a slight biased towards the EU. People who have a more positive outlook on the institutions in question, may be more inclined to answer questions regarding said topic, and the answers might therefore be slightly askew when it comes to the EU and topics regarding the Union.

The internal validity is harder to establish. The hypothesis for the thesis is a broad one, and it is difficult to control for all variables with the resources available. However, the data selected from the dataset should be able to give a fair understanding of what the thesis is trying to answer, with the perimeters set earlier in the dissertation. By focusing on specific parts of populism, it will strengthen the validity of the paper, regarding the statistical data that were available for the research.

7. The Brexit referendum

The Brexit referendum held in The United Kingdom on the 23rd of June 2016 left many surprised when the results came in. With 51,9 percent voting leave, the UK was officially leaving the European Union. After their large success in the 2015 election the United Kingdom Independence Party had a lot to say in regard to the UK´s membership in the EU and initiated the political agenda for the following years by bringing up the possibility of the UK leaving the EU. The populist party UKIP´s role both before and during the Brexit referendum is the one of the main reasons for the connection between populism and Brexit, but also the Leave Campaigns vocal issue with immigration and the European political elite which many associate with populism throughout the Western world.

7.1. UKIP

The United Kingdom Independence Party went from 3,1 percent votes in the general election of 2010 (BBC, 2010), to a skyrocketing 12,6 percent just five years later (BBC, 2015). UKIP states on their own website that they are the only true patriotic political party in the UK and their key principles are patriotism, national democracy, political democracy, economic democracy, liberalism and traditionalism. They further state that:

> "we are proud of our culture, we are always supportive of this country´s Service Personnel and Veterans, we are renowned for saying the politically unsayable, we believe in a small state, Freedom of Speech and will always fight against the evercreeping establishment, Cancel Culture and Wokeism, we are the party of the everyday hard working man and woman" (UKIP, 2022).

It is safe to state that UKIP is a right-wing populist party (Stanyer, Archetti & Sorensen, 2017, p. 165-166). It can therefore be argued that the ties between Brexit and populism are strong if they are based on the relationship between UKIP and Brexit. However, what is interesting regarding this thesis is how the support of UKIP drastically decreased after the 2015 general election. In the 2019 election the party only got 0,1 percent of the votes (BBC, 2019). Nevertheless, due to their huge election success in the 2015 election the party was able to set Brexit on the political agenda, and because of this rather small populist party, the entire UK would face 4 years of immense political turmoil. (Morillas, 2017).

7.2. The political elite

One characteristic, that many scholars in previous research about populism and Brexit have pointed out, is how a large part of the British public distrust the elites. Not only the European Union elites, but also many of their chosen political leaders. The distrust in the EU political and bureaucratic elite stems from their believed disconnect from their national country (Iakhnis, Rathbun, Reifler & Scotto, 2018, p. 2). The Union's political institutions are run by political leaders from every member country, and the British public thought it unfair and wrong that politicians from other far-away countries should be able to impose rules, laws, sanctions and more on a country that is not even their own (Hobolt, 2016, p. 1261-1264). This is closely connected to all three terms of Mudde´s definition of populism. The people being the ones who are left behind by the politics from a faraway place, the elites being the politicians imposing their politics on a country they do not belong to, and therefore should have no power over, and the common will being what the elites lack knowledge or interest in. (Mudde, 2017, p. 31-43).

Another elite that was used as an example of the connection between populism and Brexit was the national political elite. Leaders such as Theresa May and David Cameron received vast negative media attention, and especially the leaders of UKIP accused them of being too pro Europe and not pro United Kingdom (Morillas, 2017). This feeling of being left behind by their own national political leaders contributes to explain the rise in votes for UKIP from the election in 2010 to 2015 (Kaltwasser, Taggart, Espejo & Ostiguy, 2017, p. 29). Furthermore, many had the opinion that the political leaders were working for themselves and what they thought best for themselves, and not for the common good of the country. 73 percent of the people who voted leave answered that Britain had "gotten a lot worse" in the last 10 years, proving that they felt left behind by their leaders, who were supposed to work for the people, and not for their own selfish gain, or for the gain of the EU (Goodwin & Milazzo, 2017, p. 451).

7.3. Immigration

Another aspect of Brexit that has caused populism to be tightly associated with the referendum is immigration. Immigration was one of the main problems brought up by the leave side. They believed the EU's imposing rules on their member countries immigration politics, and the lack of freedom the countries had when it came to the policies, were forcing the UK to accept way too many immigrants. This anti-immigrant sentiment could be seen in much of the public rhetoric published by the leave-campaign. Posters picturing large crowds of immigrants with words such as "Breaking Point" and "The EU has failed us all", "EU policy at work" (Stewart & Mason, 2016) "British workers are hit hard by unlimited cheap labour" (4News, 2014) were widespread. By the time the 2016 referendum was held immigration was the most important issue according to the British citizens (Goodwin & Milazzo, 2017, p. 451; Iahknis, Rathbun, Reifler & Scotto, 2018, p. 2-5).

For many voters immigration was their main concern. Their wish to reduce or end immigration can be tied to Mudde´s definition of populism because of how "the people" see themselves as the ones with the rights to their country and land. Immigrants are seen as "the others", who have come to the country to ruin it for the people already living there. This was also one of the arguments used by UKIP and later the leave-campaign (Goodwin & Milazzo, 2017, p. 542-543), and also ties in with the feeling of losing one's identity. The fear of the UK losing its identity because of the nation being overrun by foreigners with a different culture and identity scared many, and can be tied to a populistic view, again

related to the term "the people" (Kaltwasser, et al., 2017, p. 29-31; Goodwin & Milazzo, 2017, p. 542-543; Browning, 2019, 224-228).

7.4. Populist rhetoric during the referendum

The two main leave campaigns were Vote Leave (VL) and Leave.eu (LE). During the campaign, it became evident that both groups relied on public rhetoric displaying many of the populist sentiments explained previously in the thesis. The two camps did however display different types of populism and disagreed on various reasons for why the UK should vote leave. Vote Leave focused on relaying the message of hope, and the possibility of economic prosperity after leaving the Union, while Leave.eu focused more on UKIP's fundamental politics such as immigration and nationalism (Smith, et al., 2021, pp. 27). During the campaign a shift in the focus of VL became evident, and their campaign aligned more with that of the LE. Both VL and LE portrayed high levels of anti-elitism and immigration during the last months before the referendum, increasing their populist rhetoric tendencies (Smith, et al., 2021, pp. 27-31).

8. Analysis

8.1. Political trust

The survey asked the respondents about political trust with the following question "Using this card, please tell me on a score of 0-10 how much you personally trust each of the institutions I read out. 0 means you do not trust an institution at all, and 10 means you have complete trust.", they then listed: "…Britain / the UK's parliament" "…Politicians?" and "…Political parties?"?", with a few questions about other institutions in between, that are not relevant for this analysis. The variable trstprl is about trust in the national parliament, trstplt is about trust in politicians and trstprt is about trust in the political parties. It is these tree variables that has been recoded as one to simplify the amount of data. After the three variables had been recoded, the answers would range from 0 to 30, with 0 being no trust and 30 being complete trust. These questions were the same for both years.

The variable political trust can give a good insight in how well the public of The United Kingdom trust their political institutions in 2010 and in 2018. When the questions regarding political trust were asked in 2010 the mean was 10,94, (See table 1) with 2304 respondents. This means that the trust in the national political institutions were rather low. With 0 being no trust at all and 30 meaning complete trust, an average of 10,94 is far below the median, making it safe to assume the overall trust was low. This shows how the anti-elite sentiment was quite high in the public of The UK in 2010.

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
politicaltrust	2,304	10.93837	6.450293	0	30

Table 1. ESS5GB.dta - Politicaltrust

In comparison, the level of trust has changed little in the eight years between the surveys. In 2018 the mean has just increased to 11,12 (see table 2) with 2158 respondents. This is an increase of only 0,18. This shows that not much has changed when it comes to the public´s trust in their political institutions, before and after the Brexit vote. It does show that the trust is quite low, with the respondents answering far belove the median, and

even further belove what can be considered high trust. Even though, there has been a slight increase in trust, it can be argued that the change is so small it can be considered insignificant.

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
politicaltrust	2,158	11.11956	6.47978	0	30

Table 2. ESS9GB.dta - Politicaltrust

8.2. Trust in the European Parliament

The variable trstep is asking about the participants trust in the European Parliament and was included in the same section of the survey as the variables used for political trust. This question was the same for both years.

Trust in the European Parliament from 2010 to 2018 has seen little shift. In 2010, 2046 respondent answered, and the mean came to 3,28 (see table 3) in 2010. With 10 being complete trust in the European Parliament it can be seen in these answers that the trust is generally quite low in the British public. There was 17,3 percent that answered 5, but there was 18,18 percent that answered 0, no trust at all. Only 0,43 percent answered 10. This shows that the overall trust in the European parliament is low.

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
trstep	2,046	3.274682	2,341883	0	10

Table 3. ESS5GB.dta - Trstep

Not much changed in the answers from 2010 and to 2018. There was a slight increase in trust, with the mean rising with 0.11 to 3,39 (see table 4). More people did answer 0, 20,89 percent. However, answer 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 also saw a slight increase which led to the small increase in trust. Nevertheless, the increase is so small it can be argued to be irrelevant. From this data it can be argued that the trust in the European Parliament has seen almost no change in the 8 years between the surveys and can be considered low.

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
trstep	2,101	3.389814	2,52339	0	10

Table 4. ESS9GB.dta - Trstep

8.3. Acceptance of immigration, same race/ethnicity?

For the part about immigration and how many the UK/Britain should accept of the same race/ethnicity, the survey asked: "Now, using this card, to what extent do you think [Britain / the UK12] should allow people of the same race or ethnic group as most of [Britain / the UK13]'s people to come and live here?". Where the respondent would answer a number between 1 and 4. 1 stating, allow many to come and live here, 2 stating, allow some, 3 stating, allow few and 4 stating, allow none. This question is for the variable imsmetn. This question was the same for both years.

This variable can be seen to have similar traits as in the variable regarding political trust. In 2010, 2334 people answered the question and the mean was 2,44 (see table 5), which

means that there was a slightly negative attitude towards letting more immigrants in to the country. With 2 being the absolute middle for the answers 2,44 means there is more people who do not want more immigrants coming to their country in 2010. However, it is not a very strong majority.

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
imsmetn	2,334	2.434876	.8474771	1	4

Table 5. ESS5GB.dta - Imsmetn

What becomes evident when comparing the answers from 2010 to 2018 is how there has been a shift in the public opinion. In 2018, 2156 respondents answered, and the mean was down to 2,06 (see table 6) which is a slight decrease, 0,38, in the negative attitude towards immigrants of the same race and ethnicity. In 2018, 56,86 percent answered 2 compared to 48,11 percent in 2010. The largest difference in the answers was for number 3. In 2010 28,28 percent answered number 3, allow few. However, in 2018 this answer was down to 17,63 percent. This shows that the anti-immigration sentiment has gone down, if only slightly in The United Kingdom from 2010 to 2018. More people are willing to accept more immigrants coming from the EU and other countries with similar ethnicity and race.

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
imsmetn	2,156	2.057514	.7514466	1	4

Table 6. ESS9GB.dta – Imsmetn

8.4. Acceptance of immigration, different race/ethnicity?
The question about how many immigrants the UK should accept of a different race/ethnicity asked, "How about people of a different race or ethnic group from most [British people/people in the UK14] people? Still use this card." With the same number system as in 8.3. with answer 1 being allow many, 2 allow some, 3 allow few and 4 allow none. This question is for the variable imdfetn and was the same for both years.

In 2010, 2352 respondents answered the question about allowing immigrants of a different race/ethnicity. The average answer was 2,69 (see table 7). This means that the average answer from the British public was on the negative side, with 41,07 percent answering 2 and 33,04 percent answering 3. This indicates that the sentiment towards immigration of a different race/ethnicity was negative, and many of the British public wanted to minimize the number of immigrants accepted into their country.

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
imdfetn	2,352	2.694593	.8701952	1	4

Table 7. ESS5GB.dta - Imdfetn

In 2018 there was a shift in the positive direction. 2169 respondents answered and the average went down to 2,17 (see table 8). This means there was a 0,52 change in the average answer. This is a slightly bigger positive change, than in the variable about same race/ethnicity, which is interesting. The largest changes happened in the answers 1 and 2.

19

In 2018 17,9 percent answered 1, compared to only 8,12 percent in 2010. Additionally, the number of participants answering 2 increased from 41.07 percent to 54,38 percent. Proving that there has been a significant change in attitude towards immigrants during the eight years between the surveys. The positive change is not very large, however, it does prove that there has been a positive change, which is interesting when comparing it to the previous articles explained in 7.3.

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
imdfetn	2,169	2.166974	.7967271	1	4

Table 8. ESS9GB.dta - Imdfetn

8.5. Attitude towards immigration

The questions about immigration asked, "Would you say it is generally bad or good for [Britain / the UK15]'s economy that people come to live here from other countries? Please use this card." Where the respondent would answer a number between 0 and 10, with 0 being bad for the economy and 10 being good for the economy. This is the question for the variable imbgeco. Next question was, "And, using this card, would you say that [Britain / the UK16]'s cultural life is generally undermined or enriched by people coming to live here from other countries?". With 0 being cultural life undermined and 10 being cultural life enriched. This is the variable imueclt. Last question about immigration was "Is [Britain / the UK17] made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries? Please use this card". With 0 being worse place to live and 10 being better place to live. This is the variable imwbcnt. These three questions have been recoded for the sake of minimizing the data for the analysis. After the recode, the answers would range from 0 to 30. With 0 being immigration is bad for the country and 30 being immigration is positive for the country. The same questions were asked both years.

The variable asking about the public's opinion towards immigrants and their influence on their nation shows that in 2010 the respondents had a relatively low attitude regarding immigrants. With the mean being 13,92 (see table 9) and 2285 respondents. With 15 being the answer with the highest answer percentage with 9,02 percent. However, there is a higher percentage of answers belove 15, decreasing the average to 13,92. This shows that the publics opinion of immigrants is relatively low.

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Attitudeimmigration	2,285	13.9221	6.620503	0	30

Table 9. ESS5GB.dta – Attitudeimmigration

This variable is the one that had the most drastic change between the two surveys. In eight years, the average answer went from 13,93 to 17,48 (see table 10). In 2018, 2139 responded to the question and there was an increase in attitude by 3,56. This means that in 8 years many respondents have changed their view on immigrants from something negative to something positive. Now the answer with the highest percentage was 21, with 6,64 percent. There has also been a clear shift towards higher answers overall in the question. This shows that the overall opinion of immigrants has seen a positive change before and after Brexit.

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
attituideimmigration	2,139	17.47966	6.966238	0	30

Table 10. ESS9GB.dta – Attitudeimmigration

9. Interpretation of the data

When looking at the above data there are many different observations that can be witnessed and compared to the previous research to try to confirm or deny the hypothesis constructed. The hypothesis constructed was that populism affected the Brexit referendum to a high degree. This hypothesis is based on the research question, to what extent did populism affect the Brexit referendum?

9.1. The political elite

The previous research argued that the British public had grown to resent both the national political institutions and politicians, and the European Union´s political institutions because of their elitism and lack of understanding of the general will of the British people. It was argued that there had been an increase in these negative sentiments, and that they were at an all-time high during the referendum (Hobolt, 2016; Goodwin & Milazzo, 2017). This argument about the negative attitude towards the political elite is half confirmed by the primary statistical data used in this thesis.

The data confirm that there is a larger negative attitude towards the political elite with the 2010 results having an average of 10,94 of 30. This result shows how the public does not have a positive view of their political elite and confirms the previous research such as (Hobolt, 2016; Goodwin & Milazzo, 2017) regarding the resentment for the political institutions. However, the statistical data does not confirm the arguments about the increase in the negative attitude towards the establishment. In the eight years between the surveys the results became more positive, if only small, the results increased with 0,18, with the average in the 2018 survey being 11,12. This indicates that there might not have been such an uproar over the last eight years from the public as UKIP and the Leave-campaign made it seem like. The data does not deny that anti-elitism did play a role in Brexit, it does however show that there was in fact not an increase in the sentiment as the previous research makes it out to be.

Much of the same can be observed in the variable enquiring about the European Parliament. The overall trust in the Parliament was low in 2010, and only saw an increase of 0,11 in the eight years confirming the previous research stating that the ani-elitism regarding the Unions political institutions was high (Hobolt, 2016, p. 1261-1264). However, because of the slight increase in trust, it does not confirm that the anti-elite sentiment reached a high before and during the referendum.

9.2. Immigration

The other populist aspect that was brought up in the previous research was immigration. Immigration was stated as the main concern by the majority of voters, and the anti-immigration sentiment has been used to confirm the correlation between populism and Brexit multiple times (Goodwin & Milazzo, 2017). When looking at the variable about the number of immigrants the UK should allow in, it confirms the previous research claims about the attitude towards immigration being negative, however the negative attitude is

not as high as one might have thought. In 2010 it was 2,44 and there were only a 0,38 decrease from 2010 to 2018. As stated in part 8.4 the answers ranged from 0 to 4, making 2,44 on the negative side but no more than 0,44 from the median, and in 2018 the answer was 2,06, only 0,06 away from the median.

Moreover, there are other similarities between the immigration variable and the political trust. In the eight years between the surveys there has been a positive change in attitude. It is not a very strong change, with the difference between the two years only being 0,38, but there is a change. This change is going in the direction towards letting more immigrants in, not the other way around as one might have thought based on the referendum result and the Leave-campaigns public rhetoric.

The same shift can be seen in the variable about letting in more immigrants of a different race/ethnicity. The average answer decreased from 2,69 in 2010 to 2,17 in 2018. This means that in the eight years between the surveys there was a positive change in attitude by 0,52. The change is not extensive, however it does show there is a positive change, not a negative one. More people are willing to increase the number of immigrants in 2018 than in 2010. This result, along with that of immigration of same race/ethnicity and political trust, demonstrate how the question of populism in the general public is not an easy question to answer.

The variable that challenges the hypothesis the most is the one dealing with the attitude towards immigrants and their influence on the UK. From the previous research the close ties between populism and a negative attitude towards immigrants would make it seem like the overall sentiment towards immigrants and immigration was highly negative and increased over time. The data collected from the ESS does not confirm this argument. It shows that the average attitude in 2010 was moderately low with 13,92 as the average answer, so this does confirm some of the arguments. However, in 2018 the answer increased with 3,56, making the mean in 2018, 17,48. This proves two things. First, that there has been a significant change in attitude, but not in the way one might believe based on the arguments presented previously. The perception the public has of immigrants has become more positive, not negative in the eight years. Second, it proves that not only has there been a positive change, but the change has been so significant that the overall attitude has changed from below the median to above it. As mentioned in 4. this change was already evident in the statistics from 2016, further proving that an anti-immigration sentiment was not as evident in the general public during the referendum as one might think.

10. Why does the data disagree?

10.1. The political elite

The variables regarding political trust can be argued to agree with, or at least not disagree with, the previous research. The answers did change in a slightly positive direction during the eight years, but they were still overall very low. This correlates with other articles on this subject (Browning, 2019, pp. 224-226). This anti-elitism can also be seen in the research done by Evgeniia Iakhnis, Brian Rathbun, Jason Reifler and Thomas J. Scotto in their article Populist referendum: Was 'Brexit' an expression of nativist and anti-elitist sentiment? They confirm that those with a high degree of anti-elitism were more likely to vote leave. It can therefore be concluded that anti-elitism did effect Brexit, and because resentment towards the elite is a key element in the definition of populism by Cas Mudde,

it can be concluded that this aspect of populism had a high degree of influence on the Brexit referendum.

10.2. Immigration

The difference between the survey data results for this thesis and the previous research is difficult to explain. However, after much research there are a few potential explanations as to why this difference might have occurred. The first one being the aspect of researcher effect and how face to face interviews might influence the answers of the respondent (Ringdal, 2013, pp.224). There has been research showing that when conducting face to face interviews respondents might be unconformable with giving their true answer if they feel it does not go along with what is considered as socially acceptable. When asking the questions about immigration the answers might have come out as more positive than what was the reality of the public opinion. One might suspect the respondents did not feel comfortable giving the most controversial answers because of the fear of being perceived as racists (Burnham, Lutz, Grant & Layton-henry, 2008, pp 123-124). This aspect can also be seen in previous research when asking people if they voted leave or stay. The leave side has often been presented as closeminded, stupid or even racist, which has left many hesitant to admit what they voted for in social gatherings. The fear of being labeled as something that society looks down upon can have had an impact in the respondents' answers of the survey, leading them to give a false picture of the attitudes regarding immigration (Browning, 2019, pp. 227-229).

Generally, the answers had changed in a positive direction for all three categories in the eight years between the surveys. The researcher effect can explain why the answers are slightly more positive than one would think regarding the previous research. However, it does not explain the positive attitude change that can be observed.

Another aspect that could contribute to explain this result is the elusiveness of the term sovereignty. This term was used by the leave campaign as one of their main concerns about the EU. However, for many sovereignty is an elusive and difficult term to understand, and it can be seen in the campaign that immigration and sovereignty often became two sides to the same case (Baldini, et al., 2020, pp.229-230). Meaning when the leave campaign was arguing for the loss of the UK´s sovereignty, immigration was used as their main example. This shows that the general public might have associated the loss of control, not with the elusive term of sovereignty, but with immigration. Because of this the attitude towards immigrants might have been more negative when connected to Brexit, than when asked about immigration in general, without bringing up the question of leaving or staying in the EU (Baldini, et al., 2020, pp. 228-231).

The study done by Robert Ford and Matthew J. Goodwin strengthens this argument by showing how voters are more likely to vote for populist parties or share the party's populist views if they are reading a right-wing tabloid newspaper such as the Sun, the Daily Mail or the Express (Stanyer, Archetti & Sorensen, 2017, pp. 173; Ford & Goodwin, 2010, p. 15). This further argues that due to the constant media coverage surrounding immigration, often in a negative view, voters would be more likely to associate themselves with this negativity in connection to Brexit. However, when asked about immigration two years after the election, without connecting the question to Brexit at all, the negative association might have dampened, leading the respondents to answer more positive (Stanyer, et al., 2017, pp. 168-173).

Furthermore, is the argument of second-order approach. This approach argues that the general public does not cast their vote during a referendum based of their opinion on the matter at hand, but rather based of their dissatisfaction with the status quo (Hobolt, 2016, pp. 1264). What this means regarding the Brexit referendum is that the public might have used the referendum to signalize their dissatisfaction with their political institutions, government and/or political elite in general, and that the public voted leave more as a display of frustrations, and not solemnly based of anti-immigration sentiment (Hobolt, 2016, pp. 1264-1266).

An important aspect to note is how this still proves that populism was connected to Brexit, just in a different sense. There could be observed high levels of populism in the media, with populistic rhetoric used heavily by the leave campaign (Smith, et al., 2021, pp. 27-31). And, with Ford and Goodwins study, proving that media coverage does affect the voters, one can assume that the extended levels of populism in the mainstream media did affect the votes to a certain degree. This populistic rhetoric was most used by UKIP both on posters, twitter and in the general media (Smith, et al., 2021, pp. 27-29). It can therefore be argued that even though immigration is a complicated aspect of populism for this thesis, the leave campaign´s use of populistic rhetoric might have had a large effect on the election and because of this populism did have a relatively high impact on the referendum (Smith, et al., 2021, pp. 27-29). e

11. UKIP as a catalyst for Brexit

As mentioned,
UKIP did play a vital role in the referendum. Because of their electoral success in the 2015 election, they were able to set the political agenda, and with it successfully accomplish Brexit. The party also had strong ties to the Leave.eu campaign, which relied heavily on populist rhetoric (Smith, et al., 2021, pp. 27-29). It is impossible to draw conclusions about the influence of the UKIP from the statistical data in this thesis. However, it is still an important factor to account for when examining the correlation between populism and Brexit. Because of the strong ties between Brexit, UKIP and populism this does strengthen the hypothesis, making it more believable that populism did affect the referendum to a high degree.

12. Conclusion

The research question for this thesis is a complex one, making it hard to answer. The research done for this thesis along with the analysis comparing the data with the previous research prove that the correlation between populism and Brexit can be diffuse and hard to pin down. The hypothesis established in the beginning of the thesis stated that populism affected the Brexit referendum to a high degree. According to the research done for this thesis it can be argued that the hypothesis was to some extent confirmed. There seemed to be a strong connection between some populistic sentiment and the result of the referendum. The anti-elite sentiment both towards the national government and towards that of the EU parliament confirms that this populistic aspect was strong in the general public, affecting the referendum.

However, when looking at the anti-immigration sentiment of populism, there does not seem to be a clean-cut answer. The previous research stated that immigration was the most important case during the Brexit campaign, and other statistics did show a relatively

high level of anti-immigration sentiment. These statements were not confirmed in the data collected in the thesis. The data from ESS showed a positive change in the overall attitude towards immigrants and their contribution to the UK. The respondents also had a small positive change regarding the questions about accepting more immigrants. There can be many different reasons for why the data differ from the previous research. Nevertheless, this disagreement makes it hard to confirm or deny the influence of the populistic sentiment of anti-immigration on the election.

The aspect of populist rhetoric and its possible effect on the public's populist sentiment does strengthen the confirmation of the hypothesis. It does provide one possible answer to why the negative attitude towards immigration did occur during the election because of its ties to Brexit created by UKIP and the Leave-campaign, but not during the 2018 survey. It is also important to note the fact that UKIP was the party that brought Brexit on the political agenda, and because of the party's populistic nature it can be argued that populism did indeed cause Brexit, confirming the hypothesis.

As mentioned, the research question is complex and challenging to answer. It can be argued that this thesis does not fully answer the question. Further research, time and resources might provide a clearer answer. It would be interesting to compare more statistical data to the data used in this thesis for further analysis, maybe then the conflicting data on immigration would be resolved.

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. tab attitudeimmigration

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*imdfetn*
. summarize imdfetn

*imsmetn*
. summarize imsmet
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Attachment 2. ESS9GB.dta

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*trstep*
. summarize trstep

*imdfetn*
. summarize imdfetn

*imsmetn*
. summarize imsmetn
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