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Getting Brexit done? The politics of issue-eclipsing pledges

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ABSTRACT



Leaders are rewarded for delivering on policy pledges. Yet mobilisation strategies often depend on keeping issues and unsolved problems ‘alive’ for electoral purposes. What happens when these incentives collide has been subject to little attention. Drawing on the example of Brexit in the United Kingdom, this article examines the politics of issue-eclipsing pledges – scenarios in which policy pledges directly undercut mobilisation strategies. Brexit offers a good example of these tensions because the referendum vote called the bluff of decades-long Conservative efforts to instrumentalise EU membership for electoral gain. We show how issue-eclipsing pledges produce cyclical and path-dependent dynamics that tend towards radicalisation, as pledges of incumbent elites to guarantee policy delivery are vulnerable to the efforts of non-incumbents to re-interpret pledges and re-mobilise bases of electoral support. We illustrate these dynamics by narrating the interplay of reform pledges and re-mobilisation strategies encountered by successive UK governments since the 2016 referendum.

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Introduction

How do political actors manage the task of delivering pledges crucial to their identity as a party? The ownership of particular issues by political movements and the unifying potential of these to unite diverse constituencies of opinion can make certain issues integral to the identity and functioning of political movements. Where these movements are electorally successful, incumbents can be left in a bind. On the one hand, leaders are rewarded for delivering on promises and face reputational costs when they deviate from their agenda.

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On the other hand, delivering these agendas can be costly in practice and can come at the expense of continued exploitation of the agenda for mobilisation. In these situations, incumbents must trade-off the incentives for delivering promised policies against the political costs of implementing radical policies and the loss of the mobilising potential in these issue areas. Such instances of what we term ‘issue-eclipsing pledges’ are thus defined by the paradoxical situation in which their realisation would simultaneously remove the principal source of mobilisation and unity for the party in question. Under these situations, we argue, a distinct politics emerges in which incumbents seek to deliver policy pledges in the most pragmatic way possible, while challengers seek to remobilise support around their own agenda by exploiting the resulting gap between rhetoric and reality that incumbents create.

In this article, we examine the politics of issue-eclipsing pledges through a focus on Brexit designs within the Conservative Party in the United Kingdom. We show how successive leaders couched the delivery of Brexit in more radical language than their policy commitments in order to signal fulfilment of the mandate to ‘take back control’ while precluding more significant damage to the UK economy. While incumbents sought to deliver Brexit, challengers within the party sought to exploit the gap between rhetoric and the reality, rejecting leaders’ assertions that their policy programme would deliver withdrawal in a meaningful way. Empirically, we show this by studying four successive Conservative leaders: Cameron, May, Johnson and Sunak.¹ David Cameron committed to returning sovereignty to the UK but tailored his renegotiation demands to easy wins and found himself outflanked by the Leave campaign. Theresa May committed in 2016 to delivering Brexit ‘come what may’ with ‘no ifs, no buts’, yet by late 2018 had compromised on her ‘red lines’ and was fending off an avalanche of criticism within her own party. Boris Johnson won the December 2019 general election on the campaign commitment to ‘Get Brexit Done’ and finalised the formal withdrawal process by 31 January 2020, yet by 2022 his challengers pledged more radical designs on Brexit through a ‘bonfire’ of existing regulation. Rishi Sunak ran in the internal leadership election on a platform to ‘Keep Brexit Safe’, yet once in office followed a more pragmatic line whilst talking up the ‘Brexit opportunities’ offered by the status quo.

Our findings have a number of implications. Empirically, they help us to explain the variation between governments in their messaging on Brexit, the hardening of designs on exit over time, and the reasons the issue was kept alive for so long after formal withdrawal. Theoretically, the unique politics of issue-eclipsing pledges contributes to our understanding of core conceptual dynamics, offering a distinct account of the sources of policy radicalism, suggesting a specific variant of frame contestation between political actors, and showing the specific mechanisms underpinning path-

dependent and temporal dynamics of policymaking. In terms of policy implications, our study highlights the risks of promising idealised futures that are difficult to operationalise in policy terms, since this can lead to the erosion of public trust in political elites. The findings also warn against the articulation of vague mandates and justifications for policies, since these are more liable to reinterpretation by challengers along more radical lines.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we establish the theoretical foundation of our work by introducing the concept of issue-eclipsing pledges and highlighting the inherent tensions that arise between policy delivery and maintenance of mobilisation potential. Next, we chronicle the key developments in the Brexit process during which the delivery of Brexit was successfully challenged by Conservative leaders, focusing on the tenures of four Prime Ministers: David Cameron, Theresa May, Boris Johnson and Rishi Sunak. Finally, we discuss the implications of our argument for the existing literature on Brexit and theories of public policy.

Issue-eclipsing pledges: policy delivery vs. mobilisation potential

Political actors mobilise supporters behind their agenda by framing issues and problems to the (s)electorate and emphasising their ability to solve them. Such problems and 'crises' do not exist independently, but are actively constructed or amplified for specific audiences by political actors. Over time, parties can nurture reputations for being particularly strong on specific areas (e.g., tough on crime) at which point mention of the underlying problem itself can become an electoral asset. Where parties can be said to 'own' a particular issue, the existence of highly salient problems in this area can signal to voters the need for particular policies on which the party in question has considerable credibility (Dahlberg & Martinsson, 2015; Lefevere *et al.*, 2015; Walgrave *et al.*, 2015). Issue-ownership of policy domains which lend themselves to mobilisation in this manner can bring about a repeated focus on specific issues by parties over time and significant emphasis on these issues at key moments where mobilisation is required. An emphasis on specific issues can also help maintain disparate political coalitions on the basis of a shared commitment to the issue in question or a suitably vague parsing of the issue so as to attract broad internal support (Béland & Cox, 2016; Bystydziński & Schacht, 2001). As a result, specific issues can be used by political movements not just to appeal to voters, but also to maintain internal unity.

Diagnoses of societal problems are accompanied by pledges designed to tackle the issue. But the task of crafting pledges embodies significant tensions. The grandest and most eye-catching pledges provide the greatest mobilising force, galvanising actors' electoral base and allowing them to stand out in a potentially crowded field. Yet these promises are also likely

to be the most difficult to implement in practice, either because they embody radical change or because the narrative has become divorced from the underlying issue. This is a problem for political actors because failure to deliver on their promises will undermine their credibility, yet pursuit of a radical agenda once in office will create damaging economic and societal problems and undermine the national interest. Thus, actors must weigh up the rewards of efficacious change against those accruing from stable management of the country. Moreover, the impetus to resolve issues embodied in radical claims – i.e., to sort them out once and for all – runs up against the incentive actors have to deploy the mobilising potential inherent in these issues. To the extent that political actors can claim to have solved an issue, their ability to (credibly) use it in future campaigns deteriorates. Here, actors must weigh up the benefits of grand pledges with the resulting limitation on their ability to blame developments in this area for society's ills.

We define broad political promises aimed principally at mobilisation as issue-eclipsing pledges. They are characterised, we argue, by a commitment to rid society of specific ills which are also the source of considerable electoral benefits for the actor in question. In this manner, the pledge itself aims in principle to alter society in a fundamental (and costly) manner and to remove the mobilising potential of the issue for the actors wielding it. Issue-eclipsing pledges are unlike 'normal' pledges in several respects. First, they are reductionist in their identification of problems and broad in their scope and ambition, (over-)emphasising the influence of one particular problem and making this the centrepiece of societal reform. Second, they are costly to implement in practice owing to the stylised nature of their diagnosis of political problems and their recommendation of radical proposals to remedy these. Third, these pledges are significant for mobilisation, holding out the prospect of continued mobilisation of significant constituencies whenever deployed and maintaining coalitions of political support. Examples of issue-eclipsing pledges might include, but are not limited to, the desire for an independent Scotland, preventing migration by 'pulling up the drawbridge', 'taking back control' from the EU, the idea of making the US 'great again', and other such policies. In each of these examples, highly salient problems – for which solutions are complex or elusive – are deployed by actors principally for the purposes of mobilisation, resulting in pledges to the electorate that are all-encompassing, such that practical implementation is highly costly and the prospects for future mobilisation diminished in principle.

To help them manage these tensions, leaders articulate issue-eclipsing pledges through carefully crafted communication strategies that emphasise the scope, ambition, and the distinctiveness of their approach compared to that of their predecessors. Adopting vague rhetoric allows actors to connote significant change whilst hueing to a line that does not depart all that significantly from the status quo. Framing specific policies and reforms

as ‘delivering’ on such pledges allows similarly for political actors to focus their attention on the least substantial reforms necessary. Ambiguous specificity – that is, in common parlance, ‘bullshit’ – can allow actors to convey issue-expertise whilst committing them to very little in practice (Meibauer, 2021). And actors can cite internal and external forces as reasons for the delivery of policies which fall short of initial promises (e.g., Putnam, 1988). Thus, strategic communication surrounding pledges often lacks specific benchmarks, allowing for a flexible interpretation that can be adapted as needed to maintain support and manage expectations. This ambiguity is a deliberate feature, enabling leaders to navigate the complexities of policy delivery while maintaining the perception of progress and competence.

The gap between rhetoric and reality can be used against incumbents strategically by challengers whose incentives are distinct from those of the current leader. Having reaped the benefits of mobilisation, the interest of incumbents lies in realising pledges made in the manner least disruptive to the status quo, since this allows them to signal competence in governing whilst ostensibly delivering on their pledges. Thus, incumbents strategically reject maximalist interpretations of the requirements of reform in a given area. Challengers, on the other hand, seek to amplify the perceived failures of the current administration, portray their handling of the issue as ineffective or harmful, and depict themselves as a more capable alternative. As such, they reject incumbent claims that policies represent fulfilment of broader pledges and assert more radical policies in their place, all the while emphasising the same rhetoric, which serves to rhetorically entrap incumbents who identify with these goals (e.g., Schimmelfennig, 2001). Incumbents respond to such challenges by emphasising the importance of realising pledges rather than challenging their efficacy, since they cannot adjust the substance of their promises without simultaneously losing face, incurring higher costs and reinforcing the message of their critics. Thus, incumbents can also seek to remobilise their support base, but this remobilisation takes place on the basis of preventing challenges to the implementation of policy, rather than the need to change the substance of policies.

The outcome of struggles between incumbents and challengers with respect to issue-eclipsing pledges is cyclical and brings about path-dependent dynamics. As challengers become incumbents, so their incentives shift to the identification of practical means of implementing those pledges on which they mobilised supporters; and as the gap between rhetoric and reality increases in the process, so do the opportunities for challengers to criticise the substance of reforms. Such outbidding dynamics, when repeated over several iterations, bring about the gradual radicalisation of the policy agenda, since each stage is accompanied by a step-change in the policies ‘needed’ to solve the identified problem. This makes life more difficult for political actors whose role comes later in the cycle, since the gap between policy

pledges and those policies that would be viable to undertake as a responsible leader become greater at later stages in the process.

The Brexit case

We illustrate the dynamics of issue-eclipsing pledges by examining the politics of delivering Brexit following the June 2016 referendum in the UK. Since the 1990s, Euroscepticism has become an increasingly important constituency of thought within the Conservative Party, exacerbated by the symbiotic relationship with the UK Independence Party (Bale, 2018) and its potent blend of populism and Euroscepticism (Tournier-Sol, 2015). Support for Brexit over the past decade or so has come to exhibit all the hallmarks of an issue-eclipsing pledge. The idea of Brexit not only offered a radical break with the status quo, but also a highly costly one, given the condition of asymmetric interdependence, with Britain far more reliant on access to the EU market than the other way around. Recognising this, successive iterations of Conservative politicians have sought to combine vague rhetoric concerning the need to 'take back control' with specific policy proposals aimed at minimising the impact of Brexit in practice, such that even with the current level of UK autonomy, the UK still attempts to mirror EU rules in many areas (McGowan, 2023).

Efforts to operationalise Brexit in a workable manner combined with the mobilising potential of Euroscepticism on the political right set the stage for a fraught process in which Conservative elites have jostled over the form Brexit should take, with constant in-fighting between incumbents and non-incumbents. Vague commitments have helped elites maintain a broad coalition within the fractious party and have occluded core compromises through the idea of a clean break with Europe, but have in turn sowed the seeds of challenges from non-incumbents that the Brexit project is being watered down. As efforts to deliver Brexit have come under threat, incumbent elites have responded by emphasising the threat to realising Brexit, while challengers have claimed delivery must lead to meaningful change. And as Brexit commitments have been gradually realised, incumbent elites have sought ways of keeping the issue alive through the cultivation of ongoing spats with Brussels and the shifting of emphasis to alternative sources of international authority.

In the empirical sections below, we show how the politics of issue-eclipsing pledges have played out over the terms of four successive Conservative leaders – Cameron, May, Johnson and Sunak – and highlight the patterns which emerge across the respective tenures.

David Cameron

Originally the party of Europe, many of the longstanding tensions within the Conservative Party towards the EU can be traced to the ideological shift that

occurred during the Thatcher era and in particular to the Bruges Speech (Thatcher, 1988) which marked a significant departure from the party's earlier pro-European stance and Thatcher's own support for EEC membership in the 1975 referendum (Hayton, 2018, p. 230). John Major's efforts to force through the Maastricht Treaty – heavily criticised by the Thatcherites – cemented Euroscepticism among this faction of the party (Cairney & Kippin, 2024; Fontana & Parsons, 2015). Euroscepticism grew in opposition under the respective party leaderships of William Hague, Iain Duncan Smith and Michael Howard after Labour came to power in 1997, and much of the intellectual groundwork that lay at the heart of the Brexit project was first articulated by the Conservatives in opposition during this period (Bale, 2018, p. 263; Glencross, 2023). Low levels of identification with Europe made it easy to blame Brussels for UK policy failures (Hansson, 2015), while the pro-European position of the Blair government afforded a party competition angle to this strategy. Euroscepticism thus became a core strategy of political mobilisation for the Conservatives, one that could be used to rally support among the party faithful. And as Eurosceptic positions became more entrenched and the Conservatives more readily associated with them, the party increasingly came to 'own' this issue area, further deepening the utility of keeping the Europe question salient.

The strength of Euroscepticism was such that when Cameron ran for the leadership in December 2005 as an ostensible moderate, he succeeded in part by portraying himself as a Eurosceptic, pledging to withdraw the Conservatives from their party grouping in the European Parliament, the European People's Party (Carswell, 2021). When Cameron came to power atop a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition in 2010, his European policy was one of moderation, aided by the presence of his pro-European coalition partners. Yet Eurosceptics within the party continued to pressure Cameron to address the perceived loss of British sovereignty over the decades, to the point at which the schism within the party began to spill-over into discussions on other issues. Cameron also faced an external threat presented by UKIP, headed by the charismatic Nigel Farage, which proved adept at swaying many Conservative voters with its powerful combination of Euroscepticism and populism which threatened to siphon away Tory support in marginal seats (Carswell, 2021; Tournier-Sol, 2015).

Heading a deeply divided party and fearing a slow drain of support to UKIP, in his January 2013 Bloomberg Speech, Cameron pledged an in/out referendum on Britain's membership of the EU if a single-party Conservative government were elected. Politically, Cameron's pledge aimed to stop Conservatives from 'banging on about Europe' and to arrest UKIP's rise, acting both as a tool of party management and a substantive offer to the British electorate (Cameron, 2019). To avoid any impression he was 'tilting the scales' and in order to maintain Leave as a credible option in the negotiations,

Cameron refused a number of proposed limitations on the referendum, including requirements for a super-majority or a two-stage referendum, and rejected calls to grant EU citizens or 16–17-year-olds a vote. Cameron's referendum pledge was designed to appeal to MPs who doubted his Eurosceptic credentials and to those elements of the electorate less enamoured with Europe. Playing the Europe card helped forestall the fractionalisation of the right and succeeded in mobilising support around Cameron and his agenda for the Conservative Party.

The election of a majority Conservative government in May 2015 had the effect of triggering the renegotiation/referendum pledge and forcing Cameron to make good on his promises. But renegotiating Britain's membership proved trickier than expected (Faull, 2020). European leaders were distracted by the fallout from the Eurozone crisis and Russia's annexation of Crimea, and were not happy to play games with the UK. Cameron hedged by keeping his demands close to his chest, so he could adjust them to what he felt European leaders might offer (Kroll & Leuffen, 2016). But vagueness acted as a double-edged sword and allowed his opponents the same privilege. Thus, the prime minister was able to demonstrate concessions in each of his four 'baskets' – economic governance, competitiveness, sovereignty, migration – but was unable to convince sceptics at home that these amounted to the stated goal of returning sovereignty to the UK. Furthermore, the act of leveraging Britain's willingness to walk away had the perverse effect of emboldening Cameron's critics, since it forced the prime minister to continue emphasising this possibility until he had his agreement in-hand (Cameron, 2019). Would-be Conservative challengers, along with the right-wing press, claimed that Cameron's deal did not allow the UK to take back control in a meaningful way and thus campaigned in favour of leaving the EU.

The referendum presented the perfect opportunity for challengers to mobilise support behind their own agendas. Leave supporters claimed the deal showed that the only meaningful way to take back control was to either withdraw from the EU (Hannan, 2016, p. 3) or to make it clear that Britain was willing to take this step in order to obtain a better outcome (Martill, 2022). Thus, the renegotiation – while successful on its own terms – motivated increasingly radical positions among Eurosceptics, many of whom were incentivised to come out against Cameron's deal. It being an open secret that Cameron would back 'Remain' – and with Leave not expected to win – it made sense for challengers (or potential future challengers) in the party to support Leave in order to bolster their position among the party faithful. Thus, a number of prominent figures including Boris Johnson and Michael Gove opted to support the Leave campaign. Theresa May sided with Remain, but kept quiet during the campaign and made it clear she was a Eurosceptic at heart by advocating UK withdrawal from the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). Support of prominent

individuals and Cabinet ministers boosted the credibility of the Leave campaign and contributed to the Brexit vote in the referendum (e.g., Curtice, 2017; Hobolt, 2016).

To summarise, Cameron sought to mobilise support around his vision of Conservatism – and his leadership of the party – by playing the Europe card, pledging to return sovereignty to the UK via a renegotiation/referendum combination which helped unite the right prior to the 2015 general election. Delivering on this pledge in a realistic manner forced Cameron to tightly circumscribe his asks, providing the opportunity for challengers to remobilise the Eurosceptic support base by reinterpreting what was required to bring control back to the UK. This entailed a process of radicalisation which culminated in the successful Leave vote in the referendum and substantially altered the reality on the ground, committing future governments to Brexit rather than to a policy of European reform.

Theresa May

While nominally an advocate of Remain, May was committed to delivering the referendum result ‘come what may’, made clear through her infamous tautology that ‘Brexit means Brexit’ (Brusenbauch Meislová, 2019). Fearing challenge from the right in particular, and seeking to channel Leave support towards the Conservatives, May embraced an uncompromising Eurosceptic rhetoric and pushed ahead with delivering Brexit, notably refusing to countenance proposals for a strategic pause or cross-party processes for deciding how Brexit should be delivered or what it might look like (Russell, 2021). As with her predecessor, however, May’s rhetoric was also strategically vague, claiming that ‘no deal is better than a bad deal’, but refusing to be drawn on the contents of the ‘better deal’ (Kettell & Kerr, 2020).

May’s enthusiastic pursuit of Brexit and her promise of a bespoke Brexit that would maintain economic relations while taking back control helped to unite the warring factions of the Conservative Party, which had morphed after the referendum into a battle between advocates of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ variants of Brexit (Hammond, 2019). Even the pro-Brexit coalition itself was a fractious one, combining divergent views on state intervention, immigration and international trade that were difficult to reconcile with one another (Glencross, 2016). May also succeeded in transposing UKIP support into the Conservative fold, since that party’s *raison d’être* was now synonymous with Tory policy. But her position of relative domestic authority would not last. The fateful decision to call a general election in June 2017 led to the loss of May’s governing majority and forced her into a confidence-and-supply arrangement with the pro-Brexit Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) (Cairney & Kippin, 2024). Moreover, since Tory electoral losses were interpreted by Remain supporters as a challenge to the Brexit mandate, the

Leave campaign sought to re-mobilise supporters following the election, becoming ever-more concerned about potential threats to the delivery of Brexit.

Negotiating the promised Brexit deal, however, proved impossible in practice. May's 'red lines' precluded all but the hardest of Brexit outcomes as the EU saw it, and Brussels' aversion to any agreement that might undermine the integrity of the Single Market meant the idea of select participation by the UK was a non-starter (Faull, 2020; Figueira & Martill, 2021; Jurado *et al.*, 2022; Laffan & Telle, 2023; Schuette, 2021). The Article 50 process, moreover, required the UK to settle withdrawal issues before negotiating the future relationship, making it impossible for May to clarify what the landing point would be or to leverage budgetary contributions in exchange for privileged access to the EU market. The need to solve the Northern Ireland border issue prior to the negotiations on the future relationship further complicated matters, leading both sides to negotiate 'backstop' arrangements which would prove especially problematic among Brexit supporters. May's position was also complicated by legal challenges, notably from the Scottish Government, which emphasised the complexities of the UK's multi-level governance and brought to light the contentious issue of the 'mandate' for Brexit (Russell, 2021).

While May was struggling to show evidence of her 'better deal' in the negotiations, challengers both within and outside the Conservative Party began actively reinterpreting what 'taking back control' required in order to mobilise Brexit supporters around their own political interests. As a result, backbench opinion began shifting to the right during the negotiations, such that May's deal became viewed increasingly as too 'soft' for the pro-Brexit right – described mockingly as 'Brexit In Name Only' (BRINO) – and support for a 'no deal' Brexit became the majority position among Leave supporters (Kettell & Kerr, 2020). Criticism of May's deal was driven by multiple challengers, including backbench Conservative MPs like Jacob Rees-Mogg, Cabinet ministers like Johnson, Gove and David Davis, and those outside the party, including Nigel Farage, who emerged as the leader of a new Brexit Party. These challengers all claimed, in one way or another, that May's agreement did not represent the deal they had been promised and that the prime minister had not succeeded in showing the EU that it was serious about walking away with no deal (Davis, 2022). Because the Brexit mandate was nebulous and compatible with any outcome, it was easy for political challengers on the right to claim any design did not represent a 'true' Brexit and thus seek to re-mobilise pro-Brexit support around an alternative outcome (Kettell & Kerr, 2020). This rightward shift intensified as more challengers competed for the support of Leavers, since this prompted efforts to outbid the other candidates (Heinkelmann-Wild *et al.*, 2020).

These simmering political tensions came to a head in July 2018 as May unveiled the Chequers Proposal for the future relationship, the aim of

which was to unite the Cabinet around a specific design on Brexit and to preclude the much-derided backstop from coming into play. The proposals exposed the disconnect between the government's rhetoric and the kind of Brexit it was negotiating, betraying May's preference for continuity over autonomy when the chips were down. The proposals received Cabinet assent but triggered the resignations of Johnson and Davis and marked the moment the party right openly broke with the May government (Russell, 2021; Schnapper, 2021; Schimmelfennig, 2024, p. 11). From this moment on, Brexit supporters sought to defeat May's agreement, figuring – correctly as it turned out – that the collapse of May's deal would bring about the opportunity for a more hard-line leader to take over. Meanwhile, an unlikely coalition of rebel Conservative, Labour and SNP legislators worked together to bring about a 'Meaningful Vote' on the agreement, reducing the government's ability to push MPs into supporting the deal (Martill, 2021). May responded by defending her deal as the best that could be negotiated under the circumstances and by pointing out that the pro-Brexit right risked 'no Brexit at all' if they did not fall into line.

May's difficulties were exacerbated by her unwillingness to co-opt opposition parties into her Brexit agenda and the resulting inability to deliver her deal without the support of the DUP or the pro-Brexit wing of her party. Despite a vote of confidence forced by Brexit purists, which May survived, she was unable to pass her agreement with both the opposition and the pro-Brexit wing of her own party voting against, and the first 'Meaningful Vote' on 15 January 2019 was a resounding defeat for the government. At this point, both sides in the Brexit debate sought to reject May's deal because they believed their favoured outcome was worth holding out for (Heinkelmann-Wild *et al.*, 2020). Lacking further substantive concessions, and with Brexiteers still opposed to the deal, subsequent votes on 12 and 29 March also saw the agreement defeated, albeit by a smaller margin. Accepting defeat, May announced her resignation in May 2019, triggering a leadership race in which Brexit was *the* most important issue and candidates competed over their readiness to undertake a 'no deal' Brexit if necessary. Johnson, who had emerged as the most prominent of May's critics and was already the front-runner in the campaign, secured a comfortable victory, becoming Prime Minister and leader of the Conservative Party on 24 July 2019.

In sum, May sought to unite the Conservative Party after the referendum vote and co-opt UKIP supporters by articulating a clear commitment to delivering Brexit accompanied by a rhetorical strategy emphasising the desirability of withdrawal and Britain's ability to go-it-alone. By offering autonomy to 'hard Brexiteers' and economic continuity to Remainers-come-soft-Brexiteers, May was able to hold together a disparate coalition within the party at the beginning of the negotiations. But Britain's poor relative power-position, its

ill-thought-out strategy and its unreasonable expectations became evident during the course of the negotiations, highlighting the trade-offs involved and forcing May into a series of compromises. Challengers during this period capitalised on May's inability to deliver a 'better deal', successfully re-mobilising Brexit supporters around criticism of May's deal and undermining the prime minister's political coalition. The rejection of May's agreement in early 2019 delegitimised efforts to negotiate a bespoke or 'softer' Brexit and ensured that future efforts to take back control would prize autonomy above economic continuity.

Boris Johnson

Having capitalised on criticism of May's deal and ascending to office on the back of his ability to obtain a better agreement with the EU, Johnson's initial months in office were spent attempting to convince the Commission to revisit elements of the Withdrawal Agreement. After little initial progress, a meeting between Johnson and Irish Taoiseach Leo Varadkar paved the way for agreement on the Northern Ireland Protocol as a replacement for the backstop, and the Johnson government took the opportunity to re-write sections of the corresponding Political Declaration (Cairney & Kippin, 2024). Johnson's new agreement for Northern Ireland was, in actual fact, a return to an idea previously dismissed by May in which the territory would remain *de facto* within the Single Market for goods but remain legally part of the UK internal market, with a regulatory border down the Irish Sea (De Rynck, 2021). Johnson's defence of the deal domestically emphasised its novelty and the fact of the backstop having been replaced. His insistence that no paperwork would be required to transport goods to Northern Ireland was noted by the Commission as a clear misrepresentation, but interpreted as a (cynical) ploy to head-off domestic opposition rather than an indication Johnson did not understand, or would not stand by, the agreement (Wille & Martill, 2023).

With the new agreement in hand, attention turned to ratification. Facing the same difficult parliamentary situation, Johnson focused his energies on efforts to convince MPs to back his deal, arguing that Brexit was threatened by opposition from domestic enemies, thereby cultivating a pervasive sense of crisis and injustice which allowed him to maintain the attention and support of pro-Brexit voters. On 5 September 2019 Johnson expelled 21 MPs from his parliamentary party because they had voted against the government in support of prolonging the Article 50 negotiation phase (Sauer, 2019). Johnson's failed effort to prorogue parliament in the Autumn of 2019 was blamed on parliamentarians seeking to thwart the delivery of Brexit (Russell, 2021; Ward & Ward, 2023). His strategy as an incumbent was to defend his deal by shifting the threat to internal forces ostensibly seeking

to thwart withdrawal. As with May, Johnson raised the prospect of Brexit not being achieved unless his deal was passed, which focused attention on threats to the project rather than the contents of his own agreement.

On 19 October 2019, Johnson's revised agreement received a majority in the Commons, but the subsequent rejection of his timeframe scuppered ratification and led Johnson to seek a general election instead. Johnson's electoral strategy focused on re-creating the successful electoral coalition that had delivered the Brexit vote. Promising to 'Get Brexit Done', Johnson blamed Remainers and a 'broken Parliament' for obstructing delivery of Brexit and thwarting the will of the British people (Conservative Party, 2019). His slogan was designed to appeal both to those who wanted to safeguard a harder Brexit and to those who were fed-up of post-referendum bickering. Ironically, the commitment promised to overcome barriers which Johnson himself had placed in the way of May's Withdrawal Agreement (Grey, 2021; Russell, 2022). Brexit advocates outside the Conservative Party – notably Farage – did seek to re-mobilise Brexiteers against Johnson's deal, but the prime minister co-opted this opposition prior to the general election, convincing the Brexit Party leader to stand down candidates in constituencies where they would threaten Conservative majorities. Consolidating the Leave vote, Johnson's electoral strategy proved politically expedient, handing the Conservatives a landslide majority of 80 seats, including many former Labour 'red wall' seats (Cooper & Cooper, 2020; Prosser, 2021).

Johnson's sizable majority made possible the passage of the revised Withdrawal Agreement and Political Declaration in January 2020. Brexit had formally been 'delivered', yet the UK's position in the Union's regulatory order would be maintained until the end of 2020, pending the negotiations on the future relationship. Having led much of the criticism of May's Chequers Proposal, Johnson's designs on the future relationship sought a more autonomous relationship with the EU, enshrined in a simple 'Canada-style' Free Trade Agreement (FTA). Johnson's re-mobilisation of Brexit supporters against May's deal, and his efforts to redefine what Brexit looked like, while initially driven by political calculations, at this point took real-world effect, since Johnson's designs on the future relationship presaged a harder break than May had sought.

Johnson's approach to the negotiations with the EU was characterised by a highly performative hard bargaining stance which emphasised his willingness to walk away from the table and portrayed the talks in highly conflictual terms (Wille & Martill, 2023). The EU did not regard the 'no deal' threat as credible and in any event were not willing to make significant concessions on matters of principle on the back of such a threat (Barnier, 2021; De Rynck, 2023). The resulting Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) – agreed on Christmas Eve 2020 and coming-into-force on 1 January 2021 – was a 'thin' agreement compared to previous designs (Usherwood, 2021).

In spite of the deal's obvious weaknesses, much was made in official government rhetoric of the benefits and opportunities provided by Brexit (Brusenbauch Meislová, 2023; Frost, 2022; Heron & Siles-Brügge, 2021). Johnson maintained the agreement was a 'cakeist' treaty, claiming he had proven false claims that free trade required alignment with EU rules (BBC News, 2020), while critics argued this was to conflate the FTA obtained with Single Market access.

The TCA's entry into force did not prevent Brexit issues from dominating the headlines, even though the future relationship was now settled and the UK out of the transition period. In spite of early rumours that Johnson did not want civil servants to mention Brexit after January 2020, on the basis it had been 'done', the EU issue was deliberately kept on the agenda during the TCA negotiations and beyond, with a 'daily drumbeat of EU-bashing by the Johnson government' (Shapiro & Witney, 2022). The UK was consistently portrayed as a victim of EU persecution, with Brussels unwilling to let Britain benefit from Brexit and insistent on meddling in the country's affairs. Johnson's mobilisation of Brexit proved politically expedient in maintaining the coalition of Leave supporters behind his agenda (Harrison, 2022; Politico, 2022) whilst providing a useful distraction from the government's disastrous handling of the Covid pandemic. The upshot of this combination of permanent campaigning and a desire to keep the threat from Europe alive for Leave supporters was that poor political relations with the EU became an end in itself. Thus, while Johnson's remobilisation of Brexit resulted in a harder Brexit, it would also poison the well in ways that would limit further cooperation outside the TCA.

One area where this was the case concerned the Northern Ireland Protocol, which was heavily criticised by the Johnson government. In March 2021, London unilaterally extended the grace period for checks in the Irish Sea, bringing the UK in breach of its obligations in the Protocol (Gallardo, 2021). In June 2022, the UK government introduced the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill in the House of Commons, which would override numerous sections of the Protocol (Sargeant, 2022; UK in a Changing Europe, 2022). The Protocol issue soured UK-EU relations throughout the remainder of Johnson's tenure (Gallardo & Pogatchnik, 2022), leading to the exclusion of the UK from EU programmes and limiting the ability of UK and EU diplomats to engage with one another (Menon & Stowers, 2022; Wille & Martill, 2023). Beyond the Protocol issue, the UK sought to perform a more autonomous role in foreign and security policy, effectively writing the EU out of policy statements and speeches and placing a premium on new agreements with non-European partners (Martill, 2023).

In sum, Johnson's effort to remobilise Leave supporters around criticism of May's Brexit deal placed him in prime position to capitalise on May's downfall in mid-2019 and set the stage for the 'harder' Brexit outcome manifest in the

revised Political Declaration and the TCA. His continued emphasis on the threat to Brexit helped Johnson mobilise a coalition of Leave supporters during the 2019 general election and co-opt potential challengers on the right. Johnson's style of 'permanent campaigning' applied throughout the TCA negotiations which were portrayed as a Sisyphean battle against the 'bullies' in Brussels, with the subsequent deal branded a success for hard bargaining. Rather than emphasising that Brexit had been 'done', Johnson presided over a continuing deterioration in the political relationship with EU and the member states. By criticising his own agreement, which he claimed had been negotiated under duress, Johnson was able to take on the role of potential critics on the right himself and fend off challengers by co-opting their own messaging.

Rishi Sunak

Johnson could continue to mobilise Leave supporters around his Brexit deal because he was the doyen of the pro-Brexit right and because of his strong position in Parliament, but once weakened politically his agenda would become subject to the renewed threat of remobilisation. Johnson's fall from grace – and subsequent resignation – in July 2022 provided an opportunity for challengers to establish their pro-Brexit credentials for the ensuing leadership campaign. Despite the UK having been outside the EU for over a year-and-a-half by the time the campaign got underway, harder stances on Brexit proved a helpful means of appealing to Conservative members who would select between the final two candidates, Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak. Both emphasised aspects of Johnson's Brexit arrangements that were incomplete in their eyes. Truss pledged to trigger Article 16 in the Protocol agreement, a radical move that threatened to lead to a trade-war with Brussels, and to scrap all remaining EU laws by the end of 2023 (Cash, 2022), while Sunak promised a similar 'bonfire' of EU regulations which had been transposed into UK law.

While Truss won the day and became Conservative leader and prime minister, her tenure was cut short after little over a month in office. The premature departure of Truss led to Sunak becoming prime minister on 25 October 2022. Like his predecessors, Sunak's campaign in the earlier leadership election had sought to keep Brexit alive as a campaigning issue. On the back of his slogan 'Keep Brexit Safe', his campaign video had pointed out the ongoing threats to Brexit, notably red tape and 'EU bureaucracy' (Nicholson, 2022). Sunak's campaign implied a less-than-subtle criticism of Johnson's ability to deliver a meaningful Brexit. While Johnson had delivered withdrawal, Sunak's claim ramped up the onus of Brexit delivery, identifying EU laws on the UK statute book as a threat to Britain's independence. Indeed, with the formal Brexit process complete, this was one of the few ways Brexit could still be deployed to rally pro-Leave supporters.

Once elected, Sunak's tenure became associated with pragmatism. His defence of cooperation with the EU followed the pattern set by his predecessors, Cameron and May, in returning to a more pragmatic line once the benefits of re-mobilising Brexit supporters had been attained. Seeking to cultivate a more positive relationship with the EU, in stark contrast to Johnson's confrontational stance, Sunak styled himself as 'the practical Prime Minister practising grown up policies aimed at getting things done' (Menon, 2023). Despite pledging the removal of EU regulations, concern from business and advocacy groups led the government to defer this pledge indefinitely in May 2023 (BBC News, 2023a). Sunak also oversaw a 'reset' of the foreign and security policy relationship with EU member states, with one significant outcome of this thaw in political relations being the unveiling of the Windsor Framework in February 2023 (Matthijs, 2023; Menon, 2023). Mention of Brexit was omitted from major speeches, including, notably, the announcement of the Windsor Framework itself (HM Government, 2023).

Sunak's moderation also reflected a change in political circumstances. Increasingly, UK citizens were beginning to view Brexit in negative terms (Hix *et al.*, 2023), with 55% supporting the removal of trading barriers, 41% the facilitation of free movement and 39% greater cooperation on geopolitical issues (BFPG, 2022). Meanwhile, the return of 'red wall' voters to Labour and the party's increase in the polls under Keir Starmer put a premium on retaining the support of moderate Conservatives on the centre-right (Menon, 2023). But this did not mean that the threat of re-mobilisation on the right was eclipsed. For one thing, there were clear limits to how much accommodation could be achieved by Sunak's renewed pragmatism. Rumours that Sunak was considering a return to a 'Swiss-style' relationship with the EU led to interventions by Nigel Farage and prominent Brexiteers within the Conservative Party, and no proposals were ever tabled (The Guardian, 2022). Cognisant of the continued need to appease the party right, Sunak continued to emphasise Brexit opportunities the government was delivering (BBC News, 2022). Meanwhile, the party right shifted its narrative on the 'small boats' issue towards criticism of the ECHR, with a significant number of voices calling for the UK to exit the Treaty, and the government's own language seeking to co-opt this support whilst maintaining a more cautious position (Bale, 2023, pp. 296–297; BBC News, 2023b).

More than any sustained shift to the political centre, Sunak's pragmatism reflected the absence of ready incentives for re-mobilisation on the right, given the new prime minister's relatively secure position. This changed with the onset of the July 2024 general election. Reform UK, the latest political vehicle for Nigel Farage's ambitions, sought to outflank the Conservatives on the right, just as UKIP had done under Cameron prior to the 2015 general election. Reform leader Richard Tice promised to take the UK out of the ECHR, a move supported by many right-wing Conservatives. Farage's

announcement that he would stand directly in the election prompted Sunak to adopt a more strident tone on the ECHR and claim he was considering withdrawing the UK from the Convention. When the Conservative Party launched its manifesto, several backbench Tories proposed a ‘rebel manifesto’ on the grounds Sunak’s language on the ECHR did not go far enough to deflect the challenge from Reform UK (The Guardian, 2024). Efforts on the right to remobilise Euroscepticism as an issue and highlight the failings of the Sunak government therefore helped shift Brexit sensibilities in a more radical direction, seeking withdrawal from a parallel institution in place of Brexit.

To summarise, the Sunak era shows the continued effects of efforts to remobilise Brexit support as a challenge to political incumbents. Both Truss and Sunak sought to reinterpret Johnson’s record on Brexit when appealing to Conservative members, pledging to scrap EU regulations left on the statute book. In the process they shifted the demands of Brexit from the negotiation of a framework allowing for regulatory autonomy to the actuality of divergence itself. Moderation under Sunak provided for a repairing of the political relationship but did not allow for any rolling-back of the Brexit process, which was forestalled by the immediate threat of re-mobilisation on the right. When the general election forced a renewed conflict between the Conservatives and Reform UK for the support of Eurosceptics, Farage successfully outflanked Sunak on the right, leading to a drain in Conservative support and a partial shift in the government’s position on the ECHR.

Conclusion

This article has explored the politics of ‘issue-eclipsing’ pledges, drawing on the example of the Brexit case. We showed how the Eurosceptic Conservatives have successfully scapegoated the EU for many of Britain’s failings, using the Europe issue to mobilise supporters, such that the prospect of delivering Brexit makes it difficult to mobilise citizens around Eurosceptic positions without more radical proposals. The result, we argue, has been a cyclical pattern of mobilisation, policy delivery and re-mobilisation in which incumbents gain power by mobilising Eurosceptic dissent, commit to delivering the corresponding policies in office, and find themselves the subject of re-mobilising efforts which brand their own policies as a threat to Brexit. Empirically, our argument helps us explain key dynamics of Brexit. This includes the gradual move towards more hard-line positions and a more distant relationship with the EU (e.g., Dunlop *et al.*, 2020; Heinkelmann-Wild *et al.*, 2020; Quinn *et al.*, 2024; Richardson & Rittberger, 2020); the reluctance of leaders to acknowledge the completion of Brexit despite the culmination of the formal process; and the micro-foundations of the ‘revolutionary moment’ that accompanied the Brexit process.

Theoretically, our findings make a number of contributions to the public policy literature. First, we contribute to literature on framing (e.g., Boscarino, 2016; Cormac & Daddow, 2018) by highlighting the specific variant of frame contestation which emerges out of incumbent efforts to frame specific policies as fulfilling broader pledges and the subsequent rejection by political challengers of this move. Second, we contribute to the literature on policy radicalism, which has shown how radical positions can emerge out of spillover dynamics (Hay & Farrall, 2011), the rise of insurgent parties (Ezrow, 2008; Sayers & Denmark, 2014) and a competitive consensus (Carter & Jacobs, 2014). We show that in the Brexit case, radicalism emerged in a mainstream party from the cyclical pattern of policy delivery and remobilisation borne out of the gap between the Brexit pledge and successive efforts to deliver on this mandate. Third, we contribute to the literature on the temporal dynamics of policymaking, which has highlighted the path-dependent effects of policy implementation (Pierson, 2000) and feedback processes (Jennings *et al.*, 2017; Mettler & Soss, 2004). We show how remobilisation at key moments in the policy- and electoral-cycles contributes to path-dependent outcomes which can persist across multiple administrations.

Our argument has significant implications for policymakers too. One is to emphasise the damage that can result from efforts to keep issues alive while delivering on the proposed policies. A state of perpetual unfulfillment, as seen in the case of Brexit (e.g., Browning, 2019), can create prolonged periods of uncertainty. Moreover, the constant promise of an idealised future that never quite materialises can lead to a profound erosion of public trust in political leaders and their credibility. If these promised fantasies are perpetually delayed or are perceived as being manipulated for political gains, the public may become increasingly disillusioned, which can harm the functioning of democracy itself. A further implication is the risk of seeking or adopting a loose mandate, since this can be reinterpreted by political actors in ways that not only make implementation more costly but which can also shift outcomes a long way from the original mandate and the initial public discussion.

Breaking the cycle and Brexit's normalisation might potentially occur through several pathways and will be influenced by many interrelated factors, as domestic and international pressures gradually force a re-evaluation of the Conservative Party's stance towards the EU. Voters' priorities will be a critical factor: If public opinion shows a sustained shift towards pragmatic relations with the EU, the Conservative Party may find less utility in mobilising around hardline Brexit positions. Normalisation could also be influenced by the evolving nature of UK-EU relations themselves. Ongoing negotiations on security, academic mobility and other matters may lead to new agreements that stabilise the relationship. What is more, new ideological battlegrounds (potentially on migration or climate change) might shift the focus away from Brexit, altering its centrality to Tory identity.

For the time being, however, Brexit is here to stay as an issue, over ten years since Cameron's Bloomberg Speech raised the prospect of UK exit, and more than three years after formal UK withdrawal. Euroscepticism has become an integral part of the Conservative party's identity and the mobilisation of the Europe issue an instinctual go-to strategy for decades. The UK's inability to fully break its economic ties with the EU leaves continual scope for re-mobilising around support for a purer Brexit while the ready availability of non-EU modes of European cooperation provides a perpetual outlet for UK Euroscepticism. Sunak's efforts to normalise relations with the EU allowed the pro-Brexit right to siphon off Conservative support prior to the July 2024 general election, leading to a spell in opposition for the Tories. While the most likely outcome for the UK will be a normalisation of UK-EU relations under Labour, initial indications of the Conservatives in opposition are that a renewed focus on their core (Eurosceptic) supporters is likely, such that Euroscepticism will continue to shape political discussion in Britain for the foreseeable future.

Note

1. Due to her administration's brief tenure, we omit detailed discussion of the premiership of Liz Truss, while mentioning in passing relevant aspects of this period.

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