

**BRITAIN-OUT AND TRUMP-IN: A DISCURSIVE INSTITUTIONALIST ANALYSIS OF THE  
BRITISH REFERENDUM ON THE EU AND THE US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION**

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**Abstract:**

Adding discursive institutionalism to the political science toolkit is key to understanding the victory of the forces pushing the UK to exit from the EU and for Trump's election in the US. The contextualized analysis of the substantive content of agents' ideas enables us to explore the ideational root causes of discontent, including economic neo-liberalism, social liberalism, and political mistrust. The examination of the discursive dynamics of policy coordination and political communication calls attention to agents' rhetorical strategies, the circulation of ideas in discursive communities, and the role of ideational leaders along with that of the public and the media in a post-truth era. Discursive institutionalism also lends insight into questions of power, including how ideational agents have been able to use their persuasive power *through* ideas to channel people's anger while challenging experts' power *over* ideas as they upended the long-standing power *in* ideas of the liberal order.

**Keywords:** Brexit, Trump, populism, discursive institutionalism, ideas, discourse, rhetorical strategies

What do the British referendum vote to leave the EU and Donald Trump's winning of the US Presidential election have in common? In a world in which citizens have become increasingly dissatisfied with economics, politics, and society, populist politicians have been able to find the words to channel their anger. Using rhetorical strategies and 'uncivil' language in a 'post-truth' environment that rejects experts and the mainstream media, they have reshaped the political landscape by framing the debates in new ways while using new and old media to their advantage as they upend conventional politics. Their victory raises a number of questions: First, how could this happen in Britain and the US of all places, the world's two oldest democracies? Why were mainstream politicians unable to stop the upsurge of populist anger, or to channel it in productive ways? And why were political scientists caught unaware, their predictive models and polling methods unable to capture what was happening. Up to and beyond the very last minute, everyone—or at least pollsters and elites—failed to anticipate that the British electorate would vote for the country to get out of the European Union (Britain-out) while the

American electorate would vote to put Trump in the White House (Trump-in).

To be fair, political scientists had already identified a number of the potential causes of the malaise that led to Britain-out and Trump-in. These include the increase of inequality and of those ‘left behind’, the growth of a socio-cultural politics of identity uncomfortable with the changing ‘faces’ of the nation, and the hollowing out of mainstream political institutions and party politics. But although these analyses help explain the sources of citizens’ underlying anger, they do not address the central puzzles: Why now, in this way, with this kind of populism? Part of the problem lies with political scientists’ own frameworks for analysis, with their focus on political actors whose choices are limited by incentive structures, bound by culture and identity, or constrained by institutional path-dependencies. Such neo-institutionalist frameworks ensure that although political scientists are very good at capturing continuities over the long term, they have difficulty explaining the dynamics of change at critical junctures as well as over time. This is not just because their analytic tools are more focused on institutional stability but also because they tend not to take political agents’ ideas seriously enough, let alone to pay attention to their discourse, their powers of persuasion, and how they interact with the ‘people.’

In this essay, I argue that in order to understand the electoral results along with the potential tsunami of change related to Britain-out and Trump-in, in addition to the economic, social, and political factors, we need to engage in a contextualized analysis of the substantive content of agents’ ideas and their interactive processes of discourse. Such an approach is what I call ‘discursive institutionalism’ (Schmidt 2002, 2008, 2010), which adds to the methodological toolkit another neo-institutionalism (alongside rational choice, historical, and sociological institutionalism). In what follows, I begin with a brief definitional overview of discursive institutionalism and then show how it helps us better to explain Britain-out and Trump-in. To analyze the substantive content of the ideas and discourse, I consider first the ideational sources of these recent events, including economic neo-liberalism, social liberalism, and political mistrust, and how they play out in the discourse, including in the slogans, narratives, stories, and frames on different sides of the campaign debates in both countries. For the discursive interactions, I then examine the discursive dynamics through which political agents have used their ideas and discourse in policy coordination and political communication, from agents’ rhetorical strategies to the circulation of ideas in discursive communities, their articulation by ideational leaders, along with public and media responses (new as well as old) in a post-truth era. In this short essay, I don’t attempt to offer a complete explanation of what happened or why in the British and US cases. Rather, I suggest avenues of investigation by pointing to some of the many different ways scholars may analyze the contextualized ideas and discursive interactions to help explain what happened and why.

### ***Discursive Institutionalism***

Discursive institutionalism serves as an umbrella concept for the wide range of approaches in the social sciences, going from the ‘ideational turn’ in comparative politics and political economy (Blyth 1997; Béland and Cox 2010) and the ‘agenda-setting’ of policy analysis (Baumgartner and Jones 1993) to the constructivist turn in international relations (Wendt 1999; Finnemore 1996) and the discourse analysis of post-modernism (Foucault 2000; Bourdieu 1990; Howarth et al., 2000). In discursive institutionalism, ideas and discourse may appear in different forms, be articulated through different kinds of arguments, come at different levels of generality, and change at different rates. Moreover, such ideas and discourse may be generated, articulated, and contested by ‘sentient’ (thinking, speaking and acting) agents through interactive processes of policy coordination and political communication in different institutional contexts (Schmidt 2008, 2011, 2012).

Ideas and discourse may take a variety of forms, including frames that provide guideposts for action (Rein and Schön 1994), narratives that shape understandings of events (e.g., Roe 1994), storytelling to clarify practical rationality (Forester 1993), ‘frames of reference’ that orient entire policy sectors (Jobert 1989; Muller 2015); and discursive “practices” or fields of ideas that define the range of imaginable action (Bourdieu 1994; Howarth et al. 2000). They may also be supported by different types of arguments: cognitive arguments that justify in terms of expert knowledge and logics of causation (Jobert 1989; Hall 1993) and normative arguments that legitimate through appeal to societal values and logics of appropriateness (March and Olsen 1996; Finnemore 1996).

Ideas and discourse may also come at different levels of generality, including policies, programs, and philosophies, which change at different rates, whether slowly and incrementally or very rapidly through revolutionary shifts (Schmidt 2008, 2011). Policy ideas are most likely to change frequently, in particular when ‘windows of opportunity’ open in the face of events, and as old policies no longer solve the problems or fit the politics for which they were designed (Kingdon 1984). Programmatic ideas, which generally combine ideas about policies with ideas about methods, instruments, goals, and objectives into a cohesive program, often take longer to change, whether via gradual transformations over time (Berman 1998) or abruptly, at moments of ‘great transformation’ in periods of uncertainty (Blyth 2002), of economic crisis (Matthijs 2011) or of revolutionary shifts in ‘paradigm’ (Hall 1993). Philosophical ideas which frame the policies and programs through appeal to a deeper core of organizing ideas and principles are the slowest to change, whether they are defined as ‘public philosophies’ (Campbell 1998), worldviews, ideologies (Berman 1998), or discourse (Foucault 2000)— although they too, at moments of major crisis, can appear to be overturned very quickly.

Discursive interactions involve policy actors engaged in a ‘coordinative’ discourse of policy construction and political actors engaged with the public in a ‘communicative’ discourse of deliberation, contestation, and legitimization. (Schmidt 2000, 2002, 2006, 2008). In the coordinative discourse, the agents of change may be individuals acting as policy ‘entrepreneurs’ (Kingdon 1984) or ‘norm entrepreneurs’ (Keck and Sikkink 1998) and/or groups of individuals in discursive communities, whether in loosely connected ‘epistemic communities’ that share cognitive and normative ideas about a common policy enterprise (Haas 1992); closely connected ‘advocacy coalitions’ that share ideas and access to policymaking (Sabatier 1993); ‘discourse coalitions’ that share ideas over extended periods of time (Lehmbruch 2001; Hajer 2003); and expert networks of actors who share ideas and technical expertise (Seabrooke 2014).

In the communicative discourse, political agents generally translate the ideas developed in the coordinative discourse into language accessible to the general public. Such agents may be political leaders, elected officials, party members, policymakers, spin-doctors, and the like who act as ‘political entrepreneurs’ as they attempt to form mass public opinion (Zaller 1992) or engage the public in debates about the policies they favor (Mutz et al. 1996). Such agents also include the media, interest groups acting in the specialized ‘policy forums’ of organized interests (e.g., Rein and Schön 1994), public intellectuals, opinion makers, social movements, and even ordinary people through their ‘everyday talk’ (Mansbridge 1999). The directional arrows of these discursive interactions may be top to top among political and/or technical elites, top down through the influence of elites, or bottom up via civil society, social movement activists, or ordinary people (Schmidt 2000, 2002, 2006, 2014).

Discursive institutionalism is constructivist in outlook, but it can nevertheless be seen as complementary to other neo-institutionalist frameworks of analysis. This is because discursive institutionalism defines institutional context in two ways. First, institutional context embodies the structures and constructs of meaning internal to agents whose “background ideational abilities” enable them to create (and maintain) institutions (following Searle, Bourdieu, Foucault, and others) while their “foreground discursive abilities” enable them to communicate critically about them so as to change (or maintain) them (following Habermas, Gramsci, and others). Second, institutional context can also represent the formal and informal institutions external to actors that may be seen to constrain (or empower) them via the neo-institutionalist logics of rationalist incentive structures, historically established path dependent rules, or the frames of culturally imposed practices and identity (Schmidt 2008, 2010, 2012). With its dual definition of institutions, discursive institutionalism can be seen as complementary to other neo-institutionalist analyses, whether it uses them as unproblematic background information for insights into the material (and not so material) realities affecting agents’ ideas,

discourse, and actions, or critiques them, by treating their conclusions as issues to be investigated via ideational and discursive institutionalist analysis (e.g., about the bases of preference formation, the (re)shaping of institutional rules, and the (re)framing of cultural practices).

Discursive institutionalism can also help lend insight into the power of ideas and discourse. Instead of either ignoring ideas or subsuming them under the classic understandings of power as coercive, structural, institutional, and productive (e.g., Barnett and Duvall 2005: 43, 49; Dahl 1958), discursive institutionalism separates out ideational and discursive power in order to highlight its distinctive attributes. This power is conceptualized in three ways: persuasive power *through* ideas and discourse, coercive power *over* ideas and discourse, and structural/institutional power *in* ideas and discourse (Carstensen and Schmidt 2016). Most common in discursive institutionalism is power *through* ideas, which occurs when actors have the capacity to persuade other actors of the cognitive validity and/or normative value of their worldview through the use of ideational elements via their discourse. Power *over* ideas is the capacity of actors to control and dominate the meaning of ideas through discourse. This may occur directly, say, by elite actors' coercive power to impose their ideas by monopolizing public discourse and action (often as an addition to their material resources for coercion), or indirectly, by actors shaming opponents into conformity (e.g., when social movements push elites to adopt their ideas and discourse) or by resisting alternative interpretations (e.g., when neo-liberal economists shut out neo-Keynesian alternatives). Finally, power *in* ideas is found where certain discourses serve to structure thought (as in analyses following Foucault, Bourdieu, or Gramsci) or where particular ideas are institutionalized at the expense of others by being embedded in the rules or frames (as in historical or sociological institutionalist approaches to ideas) (Carstensen and Schmidt 2016).

To illustrate the advantages of analysis focusing on ideas and discursive interaction, we now turn to the cases of the Britain-out and Trump-in. We first compare ideas and discourse about economics, culture and identity, and politics, followed by the discursive dynamics of change of in terms of agents' rhetorical strategies as well as their coordinative and communicative interactions.

### ***Ideas and Discourse as Forces for Change***

To explain why the British voted to get out of the EU and the Americans voted Trump into the Presidency, we first need to consider the ideational root causes. These include the neo-liberal economic ideas based in a philosophy that promoted the policy ideas and programs that have led to today's socio-economic problems of inequality and insecurity; the liberal socio-political ideas that promoted the cosmopolitan and multicultural political

and social values that have led to cultural backlash; and the rise in political distrust that may also be a by-product of neo-liberal ideas and their consequences.

### **Ideas and Discourse on Economics**

As a philosophy, neo-liberalism can be defined in many ways (Schmidt 2016a). It is seen as an ideology (Freeden 2003), a worldview, or a ‘discourse’ (Foucault 2004). It is delineated as a set of free-market oriented economic principles and political economic practices promoted by a loose agglomeration of ‘true believers’ (Mirowski and Plehwe 2009; Gamble 2009). And it is described as having at its core a particular idea about governance, in which neo-liberal principles and practices are deployed to liberalize, privatize, deregulate, and rationalize existing markets (Steger and Roy 2010; Peck 2010).

For both the US and the UK, this neo-liberal philosophy has been resilient since the 1980s. This can not only be explained as due to the force of institutions in the embedding of neo-liberal ideas (power *in* ideas) or of interests in the strategic use of such ideas for their own material gain (power *over* ideas), important as these were. It can equally be attributed to the substantive content of the ideas themselves, in particular the flexibility and mutability of neo-liberalism’s core principles (power *through* ideas). These went from the conservative rollback of the state to free up the markets in the 1980s to the social-democratic rollout of the state to enhance the markets in the 1990s, and then on to the ramp up of the state in the economic crisis beginning in 2008. An added factor has been the gap between neo-liberal rhetoric and reality – as neo-liberal agents promised what they couldn’t deliver, such as to radically reduce the welfare state or cut taxes – which then served the next generation of neo-liberal politicians as a rallying cry. The final factor has been the strength of neo-liberal discourse in debates (or the weakness of alternatives) in which neo-liberalism may win in the political battle of ideas despite proving economically disastrous—as in its role in the run-up to the financial crisis or in the on-going eurozone crisis (Schmidt and Thatcher 2013; Carstensen and Schmidt 2016).

These resilient neo-liberal ideas, which began with policy programs focused on global free trade and market liberalization in the 1980s and ended with the triumph of financial capitalism and ‘hyper-globalization’, are responsible for the deep socio-economic problems at the roots of contemporary discontent (Stiglitz 2002, 2016; Rodrik 2011; Mirowski 2013). The economic crisis that began in 2007/2008, far from changing direction, also demonstrates the resilience of such neo-liberal ideas (Blyth 2013; Schmidt/Thatcher 2013). Notably, the EU’s ‘ordo-liberal’ ideas that promoted austerity policies have had particularly deleterious consequences in Eurozone countries, including low growth, high unemployment (in particular in Southern Europe), and rising poverty and inequality (Scharpf 2014; Matthijs and Blyth 2015). The more pragmatic policies of the US and the UK, which had a mix of neo-liberal and neo-Keynesian ideas, allowed

these countries to benefit from a more robust recovery with lower unemployment and better job growth. But neither the US nor the UK have done much to alter their ideas about the benefits of a finance-driven ‘Anglo-liberal growth model’ of capitalism (Hay and Smith 2013), regressive taxation systems, or cost-cutting social policies, all of which have contributed to rising poverty and inequality (Hacker 2006; Hemerijck 2013). Moreover, neo-liberal ideas promoting the opening of borders to trade through globalization have led to uneven development and significant economic disruptions, in particular the shift of manufacturing from advanced to developing countries that have left more and more people being and/or feeling ‘left behind’ (Gilpin 2000; Eberstadt 2016). These problems have arguably hit the US and the UK harder than continental Europe, since the former introduced more radical neo-liberal reforms earlier and have long had less generous welfare states (Scharpf and Schmidt 2000), with fewer and less effective labor market activation programs (Martin and Swank 2012).

Given these neo-liberal ideas and their effects, most interesting is the fact that the discourse of the UK referendum campaign on Britain out of the EU had very little discussion of neo-liberal economic ideas, in great contrast to the US presidential campaign. In the UK, neo-liberalism, as a major contributor to the anger that lent support to the Brexit camp, was remarkable for its absence (Schmidt 2016b). The anger of working and middle class people against the worsening of their life chances due to stagnant wages, growing inequality, and the increasing difficulty for the young to get a foot on the real estate ladder, or a steady well-paying job, much as the revolt against the political parties, the rejection of the experts, and the distrust of the elites more generally—all of this has to do with neo-liberalism. And yet the real cause of these concerns was never addressed in campaign discourse. Instead, the EU and immigration were blamed for all of Britain’s ills. Neo-liberalism has been so resilient in the UK that it receives barely a mention in the mainstream press or in public debates. It is so pervasive that it is hardly recognized as a major source of the disenchantment that lends support to the Leave campaign. Better to blame the outsiders (i.e., immigrants and Eurocrats) than to recognize that the problem comes from the inside, from the policies of British governments. Although neo-liberalism was not in focus, economics was. It was at the core of the Remain camp’s campaign strategy, which centered almost exclusively on the negative economic impact of leaving the EU. In response, the Leave campaign insisted that no one knew what that economic impact could be, and accused the Remain campaign of engaging in scare tactics and buying into the establishment views of EU-funded international organizations (*Guardian* May 28, 2016). The Remain argument was strengthened following a poll commissioned by the *Observer* and carried out by IPSOS MORI that found that 88% of economists said that exit from the EU and the single

market would most likely damage Britain's real GDP growth over the next five years.<sup>1</sup> The Leave camp's response, by Conservative Leave campaign co-leader Michael Gove in a question and answer session on Sky News, was: 'people in this country have had enough of experts' (*Financial Times*, June 3, 2016).

In the US presidential campaign, by contrast with the UK referendum, neo-liberal ideas were explicitly under attack by Donald Trump, with his discourse questioning how well the US had actually done, and whether globalization was good for the economy. While Hillary Clinton emphasized the country's job-related recovery under President Obama, Trump kept repeating that the US had not done well economically for the workers, whose manufacturing jobs were being shipped overseas, and that he was going to remedy this by bringing jobs back home, even if it meant imposing higher taxes and tariffs on US firms. To quote Trump at a rally in Pennsylvania: 'We are going to bring back the jobs and the wealth that have been stolen from us. The economic policies of Bill and Hillary Clinton have bled Pennsylvania dry' (Danner 2016, p.8). Trump also exploited concerns about the dangers of finance for the real economy (and hard-working Americans), by conjuring up conspiracy theories about his opponent, stating at a rally in West Palm Beach, Florida that: 'Hillary meets in secret with international banks to plot the destruction of US sovereignty in order to enrich these global financial powers, her special interest friends, and her donors... (Danner 2016, p. 12). Trump's frontal attacks on trade deals, moreover, were clearly designed to oppose the neo-liberal dogma that sees free trade as always beneficial. He scored points against Hillary by pointing out her reversal of position on the TPP (Trans-Pacific Partnership), and promised that he would cancel the deal if elected (which he did, in one of his first pronouncements after the election). Note that on the Democratic side in the primaries, Bernie Sanders was the only candidate who also attacked neo-liberalism, with a more left-leaning discourse that also spoke directly to working people, opposing globalization and attacking rising inequality.

### **Ideas and Discourse on Culture and Identity**

The social sources of dissatisfaction do not only come from reactions to the consequences of neo-liberal economic ideas, however. They derive equally from ideas linked to culture and identity, with the populist backlash fueled by another aspect of neo-liberal globalization: cross-border mobility and the increases in immigration. Although there is nothing new about anti-immigrant sentiment, it has arguably not reached such a fevered pitch since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nostalgia for a lost past together with fear of the 'other' have increased massively, along with the targeting of immigrant groups (Hochschild and Mollenkott 2009). Fear of terrorism naturally also plays a role, but it does not explain why this has led to such hysteria.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3739/Economists-Views-on-Brexit.aspx>



Immigration was central to the debate in the UK. The Leave campaign was relentless in its narratives about the problems of immigration in Britain, in particular by UKIP, where opposition took on racist overtones as party leaders claimed foreigners were taking jobs and overburdening the social services (despite evidence to the contrary). Most notorious was UKIP's poster depicting long lines of Syrian refugees, falsely labeled as 'immigrants' trying to get into the UK. UKIP leader Nigel Farage time and again made statements suggesting that immigration was out of control in the UK, that the EU was to blame for it, and that the UK would additionally be overwhelmed by refugees and vulnerable to terrorists (ignoring the fact that Britain had opted out of the second stage of the Dublin agreement, and had in fact taken in very few refugees). More subtle was the message from the leader of the Conservative party's Leave campaigners, Boris Johnson, who claimed to be open to immigration, in particular from the Commonwealth (thus appealing to British of Asian origin), and who focused on the encroachments of the EU on 'the most basic power of the state—to decide who has the right to live and work in your country'.<sup>2</sup> Immigration played into concerns not only about jobs and state control but also about English national identity. For decades after World War II, the English remained 'proud to be British' and tended not to minimize that identity by embracing 'Englishness.' But with the 1990s devolution of powers to the UK's three other nations (Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland), Britishness versus Englishness became an issue. The referendum results demonstrated that the more electors identified as English, the more in favour they were of Leave, as well as the reverse, the more electors identified as British, the more they voted Remain (Kenny 2016).

The US Presidential campaign was also focused on immigration as a problem for identity, in addition to threats to jobs and to security. Trump's most extreme statements, that came to be mantras repeated at every campaign stop and were often picked up as a chant by the crowd listening, were to build a 'beautiful and impenetrable wall' to stop Mexican migrants because many were 'bad *hombres*', to ban Muslims from entering the country on the assumption that they were all potential terrorists, as well as to create a registry of Muslims. Trump repeatedly broke every rule of political correctness in his speeches—on race, ethnicity, and gender—while his message was a clear rejection of multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism. His speeches went much farther to the extreme right than UKIP with its pronounced hatred of the 'Other' along with the anti-immigrant racism that depicted illegal immigrants as rapists and murderers 'pouring over our borders', and Mexicans and Chinese as stealing American workers' jobs (Danner 2016, p. 12). The implicit racism was also evident in his appeal to African Americans, urging them to vote for him because 'you have nothing more to lose.' Social discontent has not only been

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.conservativehome.com/parliament/2016/05/boris-johnsons-speech-on-the-eu-referendum-full-text.html>

related to immigration, however. Social liberalism has also been of concern. Socially liberal ideas are represented by the rise of cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism, which have generated a cultural backlash by people angry that ‘others’—immigrants, non-whites, women—are ‘cutting in the line’, as the perceived beneficiaries of affirmative action and social welfare programs (Hochschild 2016). The ideas that explain the populist backlash, then, are as much about social liberal ideas as about neo-liberal economic ideas. Put another way, the controversy is not only about the consequences of the economic philosophies of Hayek or Friedman but also about Rawls’ theory of social justice.<sup>3</sup> The supporters of the Trump campaign in the US were not only the economic left-behinds affected by neo-liberal economic ideas, they were also those unhappy with social-liberal political ideas. These are people who may be well off financially, but subscribe to socially conservative philosophies and/or oppose the socially liberal policy programs (Inglehart and Norris 2016).

### **Ideas and Discourse on Politics**

Political ideas also played an important role in the discontent. Citizens generally have developed a growing distrust of governing elites and a loss of faith in their national democracies as well as in the EU (Pew and Eurobarometer polls, 2008-2016). The votes in the UK and the US attest to strong desires to register protest against the sitting parties, the elites, and the establishment. The votes were also a protest against citizens’ growing sense of loss of control as a result of the removal of more and more decisions from the national to supranational level, whether to international institutions because of increasing globalization in the case of the US, or to the EU because of increasing Europeanization in the case of the UK. As I have written elsewhere, in the EU, the problem for member-state democracy is that it has increasingly become the domain of ‘politics without policy’, as more and more policies are removed to the EU level for decision. In contrast, ‘policy without politics’ predominates at the EU level (however political the policies are in reality), with debates that are highly technocratic and therefore not recognizable and/or acceptable to the citizens, who expect more normative arguments based on the left/right divide (Schmidt 2006). As a result, no wonder that the slogan ‘Take back control’ resonated so much in the UK, and ‘Make America Great Again’ in the US. Both slogans could be and were interpreted in a number of different ways, making them highly successful as ‘empty signifiers’, to use the term of post-structuralist critical discourse analysis (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Howarth et al. 2000).

In the UK, the Leave campaign’s slogan of ‘Take Back Control’ meant different things to different people. Some British citizens rallying to the Leave campaign’s cry to ‘Take back control’ may very well have been racists or nationalists, nostalgic for ‘Little

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<sup>3</sup> Comment by Paul Tucker at the Center for European Studies, Harvard University conference on the future of Europe, November 14, 2016

England'. But others voted for Brexit in protest at a freedom of movement that they believed overtaxes the welfare state, undermines labor standards, or limits the number of non-EU immigrants from Commonwealth countries. Yet others complained of a remote EU that regulates at a distance, without paying sufficient attention to national preferences. And many more decried an un-elected EU that seems to impose policies that elected national politicians cannot (or do not) challenge. Political ideas, and not just ideas about economics or culture and identity, were central to the Leave campaign's appeal, in particular for those who viscerally rejected UKIP's anti-immigrant, implicitly racist discourse. Rescuing British democracy was the main focus of Boris Johnson, whose narrative described a EU that was 'becoming ever more centralizing, interfering and anti-democratic'. He put the choice as between 'a dynamic liberal cosmopolitan open global free-trading prosperous Britain, or a Britain where we remain subject to a undemocratic system devised in the 1950s that is now actively responsible for low growth and in some cases economic despair'.<sup>4</sup> The Remain side's cognitive arguments were not nearly as eloquent, nor as broadly defined. And it lacked an effective 'empty signifier' for a slogan. As Peter Mandelson (2016) explained, 'Taking back control' is a simple statement suggesting the empowerment of people whereas putting the benefits of the Single Market at the core of the Remain argument bypassed the majority of voters, in particular because 'the majority of voters did not know what it was.' This helps explain why the 'Stronger In' campaign of Cameron therefore decided to focus 'on the fiscal dangers Brexit posed to the National Health Service and public services, alongside stories about the threat to pensions, mortgages and house prices.' But this, Mandelson admitted, backfired, since while the Leave campaign focused on a single number of £350m a week that they (falsely) claimed would go to the NHS if the UK left the EU, 'we presented voters with a succession of different figures which bounced off them and did not cohere into a single, overarching economic narrative.'

In the US, Trump's slogan, 'Make American Great Again', was an equally successful empty signifier because it, too, could mean so many different things to so many people. In addition to the clear statement that America was no longer great and required economic rebuilding, the slogan contained a tacit message to whites that this meant opposing multiculturalism along with immigration because the US was a white Christian country. Contrast this versatility with Hillary's 'Stronger Together', which according to hacked emails from campaign chair John Podesta's account became the campaign slogan only after 84 other potential slogans were rejected (*CNN* Oct 19, 2016).<sup>5</sup> Trump's repeated attacks not only on 'crooked Hillary's' integrity but also his indictment of US elites of both parties and his promises to 'drain the swamp', also tapped into Americans'

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.conservativehome.com/parliament/2016/05/boris-johnsons-speech-on-the-eu-referendum-full-text.html>

<sup>5</sup> [www.cnn.com/2016/10/19/.../wikileaks-hillary-clinton-campaign-slogans-ranked/](http://www.cnn.com/2016/10/19/.../wikileaks-hillary-clinton-campaign-slogans-ranked/)

increasing distrust of the political establishment and concerns that US institutions were not serving ‘the people’.

### ***Discursive Dynamics of Change***

Although the focus on ideas and discourse—mainstream and critical—is essential to understanding the sources of ideational change (and continuity) as well as their effects, we still have difficulty explaining the dynamics of change (or continuity). We still can’t explain why now, and in this way, without also considering the discourse of ideational leaders and their supporters, including the spin-doctors in the campaign, populist coalitions, and social movements, that helped convince the electorate to move farther and farther away from centrist ideas focused on politics as usual. For the dynamics, discursive institutionalism investigates the processes of ideational adoption, dissemination, or adaptation; the agents who may engage in processes of persuasion via discussion, deliberation, or contestation; and the processes of persuasion themselves, whether via a coordinative discourse of policy construction and/or a communicative discourse of political legitimation. For communication itself, moreover, language, rhetorical strategies, and other communicative devices, such as emotion or empathy, also need to be considered, as do the changing mechanisms of the media of communication.

### **Rhetorical Strategies in the Dynamics of Persuasion**

In myriad ways, the earlier discussion of the economic, social, and political discourse of political leaders in the UK referendum and the US presidential contest has already highlighted issues related to the changing language of politics. The content of the discourse has blurred the lines between fact and fiction, truth and falsehood, while blatantly violating the rules of political correctness through intolerant language, in particular in the United States. All of this points to the rise of a new ‘uncivil’ language of politics connected to new rhetorical strategies that challenge traditional mainstream political discourse and use language in ways that can play on the unconscious and the emotions in ways that serve to reframe the debate. Such rhetorical strategies can take us all the way back to Aristotle, whose *Rhetoric* has served to provide clues to the many different ways in which orators seek to influence their audience not only through the force of their reasoning (*dialectic*) and the persuasive power of their argument (*logos*) but also their presence as orators (*ethos*) and their appeals to emotion (*pathos*) (Thompson 2016, pp. 24-25). They can be investigated through the many different contemporary approaches to critical discourse analysis (e.g., Wodak 2009; Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Howarth et al., 2000). But we can equally learn from the work of psychologists who focus on the ways in which framing and *heuristics* can affect peoples’ perceptions (Kahneman 2011).

The UK Leave and the US Trump campaigns in particular violated the tenets of mainstream political discourse when they used slander, lying, and verbal bullying to make their case. For the Leave campaign in the UK, lying was used not only to get a persuasive (but false) idea across to the citizens, it also served to push the opposition off (their) topic. A prominent member of the Leave campaign, Paul Stephenson (2016), explained that ‘Of course, our campaign claim of the now infamous £350 million a week that Britain sends to the EU was not completely accurate’, but it ‘was an extremely persuasive economic argument’ since it also ‘ran with the grain of public psychology on the EU.’ The Trump campaign’s rhetorical strategy was, if anything, more deliberately provocative than the Brexiteers’, using slander and verbal bullying as its daily bread. These included the constant accusations about ‘crooked Hillary’ and ‘lock her up’, and the suggestions that all immigrants were illegal, and all ‘illegals’ were criminals—which also served as a de-humanizing strategy.

Trump himself freely admitted that he engaged in ‘exaggerating’ in his own favor. As he put it, ‘People may not always think big themselves, but they can still get very excited by those who do. That’s why a little hyperbole never hurts. People want to believe that something is the biggest and the greatest and the most spectacular. I call it truthful hyperbole. It’s an innocent form of exaggeration—and a very effective form of promotion’ (Danner 2016, p. 12). In Kahneman’s psychological approach, this can be seen as ‘anchoring’, as when Trump alleged that Hillary had received ‘millions’ of illegal votes, without any proof, which leaves the impression in the listener’s mind that a large number was involved, even if not that high. Another such psychological strategy would see Trump’s use of vivid information—dropping the name of a celebrity, or describing gruesome Isis executions or murders by undocumented immigrants—as a way of taking advantage of the ‘availability’ heuristic (discussion by Michael Lewis in *Financial Times* Dec. 9, 2016). Even Trump’s speech patterns, such as the incomplete sentences and repetitions, served as effective discursive mechanisms to reinforce his message. The incomplete sentences enabled his audiences to complete them in their heads in many different ways while creating a sense of intimacy because they were in on the narrative. The repetitions, along with ‘Believe me’ or ‘Many people say,’ appeal to unconscious cognitive mechanisms that serve to reinforce peoples’ acceptance of what is said, even (or especially) when they are lies and exaggerations (Lackoff 2016).

Ideas and discourse, then, when activated through a range of rhetorical strategies, may convey a persuasive message not only directly, through the content of the message, but also subliminally, through linguistic and psychological mechanisms. Whatever the strategy, however, the discourse itself serves to bring people interested in a given set of ideas together. This is important, because it suggests that what may hold interest groups together or create new coalitions is not just ‘interest’—as many political scientists

assume—but ideas that serve as the basis for group adhesion and cohesion. One way of thinking about this would be to see ideas as ‘coalition magnets’, with ambiguous or polysemic characteristics that make it attractive to groups that might otherwise have different interests, with policy entrepreneurs gaining power by employing such ideas in their coalition-building (Béland and Cox 2016). Another way is to think of ideas as ‘frames of reference’ (*référentiels*) that naturally draw people together by the common understandings that form the basis for common action (Jobert 1989; Muller 2015), and that also can be seen as the power *in* ideas to structure the political limits of action, such as *laissez-faire*, neo-keynesianism, and neo-liberalism (Muller 2015, p. 184-5). Ideas that serve as empty signifiers can also be ways of bringing disparate people together in a common cause—as we have already seen with the slogans for Britain-out and Trump-in.

### **Agents and the Interactive Dynamics of Discourse**

But who deploys the rhetorical strategies with the ideas that act as coalition magnets or frames of reference, or attract adherents through empty signifiers? What are the processes through which agents are able to translate their discourse into action? Activation of ideas through discourse first of all depends on their construction and dissemination by policy entrepreneurs in national and international settings, generally through policy coordination with discursive communities of policy actors and experts. But this also requires convincing political elites and winning elections, for which political communication is needed by political entrepreneurs able to translate the ideas developed in the coordinative discourse into language that resonates normatively as well as cognitively with the public, so as to persuade them to vote in their favor.

The story of the spread of neo-liberal ideas, for example, is one that began with coordinative discourses among economists in academia, experts in think tanks, and policy actors in and out of government (Schmidt and Thatcher 2013). But for such ideas to take hold, political entrepreneurs were needed to persuade voters that these were the ideas to adopt. For the US and the UK, Wes Widmaier (2016a, 2016b) shows that the building of a new political economic order depends upon the communicative discourse of a ‘rhetorical leader’ who exercises rhetorical power *through* ideas, commanding authority and public trust by employing communicative appeals to shape principled beliefs—in terms of neo-liberalism, these were Reagan and Thatcher, Clinton and Blair. That idea is then extended by technocratic elites (mainly economists) whose coordinative discourse of technical fine-tuning involves epistemic power *over* ideas to consolidate intellectual consensus. But once that consensus is achieved, the structural power *in* ideas takes on a life of its own. This ultimately leads technocratic elites to an increasing overconfidence that creates the very conditions that lead to the order’s destruction, as a result of more bottom-up contestation against the imposition of ideas, thereby opening the way to the eventual rise of a new political economic order brought by a new rhetorical leader.

It is also important to note that ideas—as philosophies and programs—generally take time to take root. ‘Critical ideational developments’ often take a decade or more, as in the shift in the US to ‘illiberal’ politics on race and immigration, where a diverse set of actors was able to organize around a set of ideas and coordinative and communicative discourses that helped them avoid accusations of racism while working against more progressive forces (King and Smith 2014). Moreover, successful ideas—whether introduced through a critical ideational development in illiberal politics or as a new political economic order—can also evolve over time. Often we think about this communicative process as top down, as political parties designate rhetorical leaders able to communicate their ideas in ways that resonate with the larger public. But such top-down logics of elite coalition formation, coordination, and communication to the public is just one of the ways in which ideas are institutionalized. Ideational change is just as likely to result from non-elite coalitions of non-governmental actors (Keck and Sikkink 1998). Social movements in bottom-up mobilization around non-mainstream ideas have become more active and successful either in creating parties of their own, such as the UK Independence Party (UKIP), or in taking over mainstream parties to push their own agenda, as in the case of the Tea Party pushing the transformation of the Republican Party (see Skocpol/Williamson 2012).

Related to this bottom-up discursive power is the increasing difficulty for the elite to control communication and thereby to maintain power *over* ideas and discourse. Such difficulties have been compounded by the rapid, radical change in the means and transmission mechanisms of communication. Long gone are the days when the print newspapers had the monopoly of intermediation, so much so that Hegel could refer to modern man’s reading of the morning newspaper as a substitute for communal morning prayers. The competition for the public’s attention now comes not just from print newspapers or radio and television, including cable, but also from social media such as Facebook and Twitter. To take one example, twitter on its own has altered the communicative dynamics between ideational leaders and their followers, with its means of instant communication in 140 characters. This has provided ideational leaders who master the art with tremendous power *through* ideas to reach their followers with unprecedented immediacy, at the same time that the impact of their tweets is amplified massively by traditional news media reporting on the tweets and social media resending them. In the UK, a sentiment analysis of Brexit-related tweets showed that by summer of 2015, the mood was shifting away from Remain to Leave in response to the refugee crisis, and subsequently stayed there (Porcaro and Müller 2016). In the US, Trump was the champion of Twitter, gaining free media publicity throughout his campaign with his provocative, politically incorrect tweets that became instant news. Trump’s tweeting served to reinforce the direct connection that charismatic populist leaders typically seek

to establish with their followers, without the mediation of traditional media or the filter of other institutions.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

The rise of populism, in particular on the extreme right, constitutes a challenge to political stability and democracy not seen since the 1920s and 1930s (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012; Müller 2016; Judis 2016). The victories of Trump in the US and Britain out of the EU have given populist leaders of extremist parties throughout Europe hope to emulate Britain in leaving the EU and Trump in gaining power, including Marine Le Pen in France, Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, and Beppe Grillo in Italy. They also raise a number of questions: Is this a moment of great transformation, in which a new paradigm will emerge out of the ashes of the liberal order, with neo-liberal economics and social liberalism succumbing to the closing of borders to immigrants, rising protectionism, and social conservatism? Will Trump and May be the rhetorical leaders to construct such a new political order? Or will neo-liberalism be ever resilient?

For the moment, we can't know. What we do know is that President Trump's policy-related tweets don't seem to make for a cohesive policy program, given the contradictory underlying philosophies that include a socially conservative ideology, an 'America First' worldview, and a neo-Keynesian economic philosophy of infrastructure investment combined with a neo-liberal one on taxes. Moreover, Trump's appointment of billionaires with close ties to finance to top economic positions might suggest that although his rhetoric is anti-liberal, his government's policies may remain neo-liberal, at the same time they already belie his promise to 'drain the swamp'. Prime Minister May's pronouncements on Brexit also suggest a preference for patriotism and social conservatism against politically correct multiculturalism, as illustrated by her jibe during her speech at the Conservative Party Conference that: 'If you believe you are a citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere,' and her insistence that 'change has got to come' in response to a 'once in a generation' revolt by millions of ignored citizens sick of immigration, sick of footloose elites, sick of the laissez-faire consensus' (*Economist* Oct. 8, 2016). The problems for May will come if and when a favorable deal on Brexit deal is not forthcoming, economic growth plummets, or the integrity of the UK is at risk, via Scottish independence or Northern Ireland uniting with the Irish Republic.

Social scientific explanations of these phenomena through investigation of the background institutional problems—whether focused on the economic, social, or political issues, using rationalist, historical, or sociological institutionalist approaches—are necessary but not sufficient to understanding what is happening. We also need to

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<sup>6</sup> Adding to such problems is the increase in misinformation, with false news populating the social media in what has now been called the era of 'post-truth' politics, something which exceeds the scope of this paper.



investigate the ideational sources of the problems along with the coordinative and communicative discourses of entrepreneurial agents. This would help us analyze how such agents have been able to use their persuasive power *through* ideas to channel people's anger to their own electoral advantage while challenging experts' power *over* ideas as they upend the long-standing power *in* ideas of the current liberal order. Only by taking ideas and the interactive processes of discourse seriously can we begin not just to understand how we got to this dangerous moment for liberal democracy but also to try to find new ideas and discourse able to channel the anger in more positive directions, to get us beyond this possibly pivotal moment in history. And for all of this, discursive institutionalist analysis serves as an indispensable tool in political scientists' methodological toolkit.

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