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Citation for final published version:

Dorey, Pete 2025. Binary rhetoric and divisive discourses on the populist Right. *Global Discourse: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Current Affairs* 15 (2-3) , pp. 126-147. 10.1332/20437897y2025d0000000052

Publishers page: <https://doi.org/10.1332/20437897y2025d0000000052>

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Binary rhetoric and divisive discourses on the populist Right

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Right-wing populism entails discursive divisions both between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’, and between ‘the majority’ in society and ‘minorities’. In both instances, the former are attributed with positive attributes and characteristics, while the latter are invariably ascribed negative connotations and qualities, to the extent of being portrayed as inimical to ‘the people’ or ‘the majority’, and possibly even a threat to national identity or security. Through such ideologically defined or socially constructed binary divisions and polarities, ‘the people’ or ‘the majority’ are portrayed as being decent, hard-working, imbued with common-sense, law-abiding, loyal, and patriotic. By contrast, the ‘the elite’ is usually depicted as being corrupt, decadent, incompetent, out-of-touch, self-serving, and unpatriotic, while sundry ‘minorities’ are often accused of being deviant, disloyal, practicing unorthodox lifestyles, refusing to integrate, and subscribing to alien, or even subversive, values which are inimical to dominant or indigenous culture. Having constructed such binary divisions, the populist Right deploys discourses which perpetuate the identification of so-called ‘enemies within’ or ‘alien others’ against whom ‘the people’ and ‘the majority’ can be mobilised. Such discursive mechanisms serve simultaneously to divert popular attention from the failings or negative consequences of neoliberalism and/or right-wing policies (such as corporate greed and corruption, increasing job insecurity, inequality, and poverty), and promote divide-and-rule, by persuading ‘the people’ and ‘the majority’ that socio-economic problems are the fault either of ‘the elite’ or sundry ‘alien’ minorities. These then serve to legitimise authoritarian policy responses, accompanied by further discourses, often entailing Biblical or military imagery and symbolism, about a Manichean battle between good and evil, or the nation-state facing a serious, even existential, threat from sundry internal or external enemies.

Keywords elite • minorities • the people • nation-state • authoritarian(ism)

Key messages

- The article discusses how populism establishes dichotomies, such that phenomena and people are reduced to simple ‘either/or’ alternatives, and these are invariably portrayed as good/bad.
- The article discusses how the nation-state is defined favourably against other nation-states.

- The article discusses the social construction or ideological definition of ‘the people’ within the nation versus ‘the elite’.
- The article discusses the discursive identification of ‘enemies within’.

To cite this article: Dorey, P. (2025) Binary rhetoric and divisive discourses on the populist Right, *Global Discourse*, Early View, DOI: 10.1332/20437897Y2025D000000052

Introduction

A key characteristic of populism is the manner in which it establishes or entrenches dichotomies, such that phenomena and people are reduced to simple ‘either/or’ alternatives, and these are invariably portrayed as good/bad. The existence of complexity or nuance is thus effectively denied, and differences are often deprecated. As Taggart (2000: 112–13) notes, a key ‘effect of populism on political debate is that it dichotomizes issues, forcing them to be couched in either pro- and anti- terms’. While there is certainly a form of ‘Left populism’, as personified by prominent political figures like Jeremy Corbyn in the UK and Bernie Sanders in the US and parties/movements like Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain, this article is exclusively about the populist Right and its particular use of divisive discourses and rhetoric intended to discredit and demonise its political opponents and sundry sociocultural minorities.

In terms of the populist Right’s deployment of binary discourses vis-à-vis ‘the people’, there are three dimensions to consider: first, the manner in which the nation-state is defined favourably against other nation-states, either in terms of its supposedly superior cultural or political values and historical achievements and legacy, or with regard to an alleged threat posed by external enemies (real, imagined or ideologically/politically manufactured); second, the social construction or ideological definition of ‘the people’ within the nation, and how they are compared favourably to an allegedly duplicitous or mendacious ‘elite’; and, third, the manner in which the populist Right socially constructs minorities, usually on the basis of ethnicity, lifestyle or sexuality, either as ‘enemies within’ or as a latent threat vis-à-vis the supposedly mainstream or silent majority. All three of these discursive definitions entail socially constructed definitions of who and/or what is deemed good or natural and who/what is viewed as bad or ‘alien’. As we will see, this process of bifurcation also entails the phenomenon of ‘othering’, whereby some nations and people are purported to be superior and others are deemed inferior. When the populist Right is in government, this will often have serious repercussions for the type of policies enacted, with authoritarianism often likely to be imposed on sundry minorities and those deemed to represent ‘the other’.

Having discussed these three dimensions to the socially constructed definitions and binary rhetoric of the populist Right, we will also briefly consider three other aspects pertaining to how these divisive discourses are rhetorically expressed in order to imbue them with credence and credibility and thus broaden their appeal among ‘the people’: the manner in which their critiques and proposed policy solutions are depicted as mere ‘common sense’; the extent to which the populist Right often depict politics as a Manichaean battle between good and evil; and the tendency of the populist Right to venerate charismatic leaders.

The discursive dichotomy of the nation-state versus external threats or enemies

Nationalism and patriotism are invariably core components of the populist Right, with the nation-state eulogised for its commendable historic achievements and legacy, the purported superiority of its cultural values, the ascribed supremacy and durability of its socio-political institutions, or the supposedly superior shared characteristics, morals and virtues of its citizens (on the nation-state as an ‘imagined community’ [see [Anderson, 1983](#)]). These are not only deemed to be intrinsically commendable but also invariably compared favourably to the supposedly lesser achievements, or even purported inferiority, of other countries, which are often viewed as less civilised or socio-economically or culturally advanced. This sense of national superiority is then utilised by the populist Right to promote a ‘them and us’ discourse and can then be invoked to legitimise a belligerent foreign policy or increased expenditure on defence and the military.

This discursive duality becomes more pronounced in times of crisis, when individual or societal feelings of anomie, alienation, insecurity, resentment and/or vulnerability are likely to morph into a more explicit or virulent nationalism. It is in such epochs of national crises that the populist Right invariably acquires prominence and its binary nationalistic discourse becomes more pronounced and prevalent: ‘our’ country or people against ‘them’ out there, or ‘over the water’.

Throughout the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, the Right in Britain and the US routinely identified the former Soviet Union as the external threat, against whom constant vigilance and defence were necessary. Moreover, domestic critics of the Right and/or advocates of greater equality and state intervention in economic affairs were often portrayed as sympathisers or ‘stooges’ of the Soviet Union who supported Communism. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990, right-wing populists have socially constructed and discursively defined new external, foreign enemies who can be cited as a threat to the nation-state and democratic systems of government, and against whom ‘the people’ should be mobilised and vigilant.

In Britain, the populist Right demonised the European Union (EU) as the external threat that constantly needed to be resisted, and from the mid-2000s onwards, EU migrants were also identified as a threat due to Poland and Romania joining the EU in 2004 and 2007 respectively, whereupon their citizens could benefit from the EU’s ‘free movement of labour’. The resentment in some deindustrialised and impoverished English towns against the influx of such migrant workers was exacerbated by the period of austerity that followed the 2008 global crash, whereupon these migrants were often accused not only of taking British workers’ jobs and/or undercutting wages, but also of compounding the problems of overstretched public services whose funding was being cut in the context of the aforementioned austerity. Even after Britain had left the EU, the populist Right continued to benefit from concern over other sources of immigration, to the extent that in the 2024 general election, Nigel Farage’s populist Right party, Reform UK, won more than 4 million votes and five parliamentary seats, with concern over continued immigration – and particularly asylum seekers crossing the English Channel from France in dinghies – being a major factor for many of these voters; many of them had previously voted Conservative but believed that the party had failed to reduce immigration and that Reform UK was now the only party seriously committed to stopping immigrants and the boats.

In the US, the main external socially constructed threat has been Mexico due to its shared (almost) 2,000-mile boundary with the southern US, which provides Mexican refugees or other immigrants with ample opportunities to cross the border undetected. As we note later, many of Donald Trump's speeches entail verbal attacks on Mexico and those of its citizens who enter the US. Trump also regularly denounces China, though mainly as an economic 'enemy' of American workers.

The populist Right's binary distinction of 'the people' versus 'the elite'

This is the most common means by which the populist Right discursively invokes binary opposites, juxtaposing 'the people' against 'the elite', with populists clearly aligning themselves with the former and alleging that the masses have been routinely ignored or betrayed by 'the elite' (Wodak, 2020: 8). Indeed, most writers consider the binary distinction between 'the people', who are pure and patriotic, and 'the elite', who are duplicitous and disloyal, to constitute the core essence of populism (see, for example, Breeze, 2019; Canovan, 1981: 294; Pelinka, 2013; Mudde, 2004: 543; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: esp 68; Müller, 2017; Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018; De Cleen, 2019; Taggart, 2000: ch 8; Wodak, 2020).

However, as with any discourse, the definition and meanings are not innocent: they do not derive from purely objective, empirically verifiable or universally agreed criteria, but are socially constructed and reflect political assumptions and objectives (Bourdieu, 1990; Hall, 1992: 293–5). Thus, when the populist Right deploy discourses invoking 'the people' and 'the elite', neither exists a priori; rather, they are defined, indeed socially constructed, in a highly contingent and contextual manner that imbues the former with positive attributes and the latter with correspondingly negative characteristics, which effectively 'others' them. Who or what constitutes 'the people' and 'the elite' is defined by the discursive and socially constructed definitions of the populist Right.

For example, the populist Right imbues 'the people' with virtuous characteristics, invariably depicting them as decent, family focused, hard-working, honest, law-abiding, loyal, patriotic and virtuous. In stark contrast, 'the elite' is invariably depicted negatively as arrogant, contemptuous (of 'the people'), corrupt, duplicitous, out of touch, self-serving and (potentially or actually) traitorous. In the context of such binary and (deliberately) polarising definitions, many of the problems and hardships suffered by 'the people' are attributed to betrayal or incompetence by the arrogant and/or unpatriotic elite.

This last feature means that the populist Right often becomes more prominent or popular in times of socio-economic crisis and/or when many ordinary people are experiencing a sense of alienation, or anomie, due to extensive and/or rapid sociocultural changes that have weakened traditional communities and values (on anomie, see Durkheim, 1933 [1893]; 2006 [1897]). In such circumstances, some citizens become susceptible to populist Right claims that their plight is largely due to the arrogance or incompetence of the elite(s), who have misgoverned the country and thereby betrayed 'the people'.

In Britain, the populist Right is mainly located on the radical/authoritarian wing of the Conservative Party, or beyond, most notably in explicitly anti-EU and anti-immigrant parties like the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), the Brexit

Party and now Reform UK. For all of these, the EU was the external threat across the water, its policies constantly weakening Britain's independence as a sovereign nation-state, and its 'free movement of labour' being responsible for the influx of migrant workers who moved to Britain from 2004.

When the 2016 EU referendum yielded a 52:48 per cent vote in favour of the UK leaving the EU, this was immediately hailed as 'the will of the people', variously accompanied by the triumphalist claim that 'the people have spoken'. Indeed, Brexit supporters have continued to insist that the result reflected 'the will of the people' ever since. Yet, this definition of 'the people' is problematic for two reasons. First, with the referendum turnout at 72 per cent, 'only' 37 per cent of the UK adult population actually voted to leave the EU, compared to 35 per cent voting Remain. It therefore seems extravagant to define this 37 per cent as 'the people' and effectively disqualify the 63 per cent of the populace who did not vote to leave the EU.

Yet, even if one focuses solely on those who did directly participate in the referendum, it is surely contentious to define the 52 per cent who voted Leave as representing the 'will of the people' given that this was just over half of those who voted. It also implies that the 48 per cent who voted Remain do not qualify as 'the people': that they are somehow, non-people and, moreover, by implication, unpatriotic. This is a stark example of how the discourses of the populist Right, particularly when invoking binary opposites, entail a process of 'othering' to delegitimise those who are not defined as 'the people', or part of the majority on any specific issue, regardless of how narrow that majority might be. Hence, [Webber \(2023: 854–5\)](#) notes that when speaking of 'the people', populism invariably 'ends up advancing a limited and tendentious definition of the people', or 'a bounded definition of the people', while [Pelinka \(2013: 7\)](#) emphasises that 'the people they are speaking for are defined by the exclusion of others'.

However, just as 'the people' are socially constructed in the populist Right's discourses and thus selective in who is included, so too is 'the elite' defined in a particular, invariably derogatory or negative, manner and the term usually invoked pejoratively. This is particularly important for two reasons. First, the Right has traditionally venerated elites as a natural consequence of innate human inequality and unevenly distributed personal qualities and talents. The Right's belief in natural inequality and thus the inevitability of hierarchy means that 'elites' are inevitable: an immutable fact of life. Moreover, their purported superiority means that elites are uniquely equipped to exercise their intelligence and wisdom to govern society and make (often complex) decisions in the national interest.

Second, some of the populist Right's political leaders either emanate from or have acquired positions of socio-economic privilege and might therefore be deemed part of the elite themselves. For example, Donald Trump is a billionaire businessman with an extensive portfolio of luxury properties and leisure facilities, while Nigel Farage is a privately educated former commodities trader on London's stock market ('the City'). Indeed, on the eve of Trump becoming president of the US for the second time in January 2025, retiring President Joe Biden warned that, 'Today, an oligarchy is taking shape in America of extreme wealth, power and influence that really threatens our entire democracy, our basic rights and freedom', supported and funded by an ultra-wealthy 'tech-industrial complex' ([BBC News, 2025](#)). In the US, therefore, a network of prominent billionaires portrays itself as being on the side of ordinary working people against 'the elite', with the latter supposedly having oppressed and

victimised them. This, of course, is intended to fuel the sense of grievance and smouldering resentment that the populist Right promotes and then politically thrives upon by depicting itself as the fearless saviour of 'the people' and the nation.

Of course, when the populist Right excoriates 'the elite', it is invariably people in senior cultural, political and social positions who are usually being castigated, not the economic elite(s). Even when globalists (enthusiasts for globalisation) are condemned by the populist Right, it is the political proponents of this trend who are the target of criticism rather than bankers, big businesses, corporate millionaires and multinationals. In appealing to 'the people' who have apparently been betrayed by 'the elite', the populist Right rarely blames capital or the capitalist class(es).

Moreover, the elite(s) who are targeted by the populist Right are invariably denigrated for their purported social liberalism or 'progressive' political views, which often include enthusiasm for the EU, a favourable stance towards immigration and asylum seekers, and strong support for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and other sexual orientations and identities (LGBTQ+) identities and rights. For these reasons, when the populist Right invokes the binary discourse of 'the people' versus 'the elite', the latter is invariably depicted as disloyal, unpatriotic and often contemptuous of the supposedly common-sense views and legitimate concerns of 'ordinary' people. Hence, the populist Right invariably equates the 'liberal elite' with a betrayal of the nation-state and, consequently, the majority of its citizens.

As the main leader of Britain's populist Right, Nigel Farage has regularly criticised the apparent liberal elite or 'Establishment' and variously called for their overthrow. In his 2015 'memoir', he enthused about giving 'the Establishment in Westminster a bloody nose', urged 'our "People's Army" [to] bring down the political establishment', complained about 'the utter contempt that the establishment have for us' and proudly portrayed himself as an outsider who 'despise[s] the establishment' and its 'appalling snobbery' (Farage, 2015a: 4, 14, 29, 205).

The first populist Right party he led, UKIP, contested the 2015 general election by denouncing the 'liberal metropolitan elite' (UKIP, 2015: 60), while in the 2017 election campaign, the Brexit Party (which Farage was then leader of) claimed that 'the political Establishment has conspired to frustrate democracy over Brexit' (The Brexit Party, 2017: 6). The successor to the Brexit Party is Reform UK, on whose website leader Nigel Farage claims: 'We are ruled by an out of touch political class who have turned their backs on our country.'¹ Similarly, Reform UK's 2024 election manifesto condemned 'the corruption of our government and politics by an out-of-touch, London-centric elite', before pledging a series of policies that would supposedly reflect and serve the interests of 'the British people' (Reform UK, 2024: 21).

This sentiment has been echoed by some populist Conservative MPs, such as John Hayes, who has insisted that 'The overwhelming majority of the British public, and in particular the working-classes – the class that I come from – take a view different from that of the bourgeois metropolitan elite. Most people in this country are deeply proud of their country and its history' (Hansard, 2020: col 982). In August 2024, during a week of riots ostensibly protesting about immigration, the Conservatives' shadow Communities Minister, Kemi Badenoch, suggested that ethnic integration and multiculturalism had failed but that too many people, including senior politicians, had refused publicly to acknowledge this because they 'don't want to upset the cultural establishment that wants to pretend that nothing is going on' (The Independent, 2024). In effect, the 'cultural establishment' was deemed largely to blame for community

tensions in England, not the 14 consecutive years of Conservative government that had only just ended, having enthusiastically pursued a policy of austerity (cuts to social spending) throughout.

Although we have drawn an analytic distinction between the discursive binary discourses of the nation-state versus external threats or enemies, and ‘the people’ versus ‘the [domestic] elite’, there is often a linkage between the two, in that the populist Right often accuses the elite, or the political ‘Establishment’, of enabling or even encouraging external ‘enemies’ to establish themselves in the nation-state and thereby weaken national identity or sovereignty (Pelinka, 2013: 8). This then reinforces the discourse that the (liberal) elite is disloyal, unpatriotic and guilty of betraying ‘the people’. In Britain, this negative depiction of the elite casts them as the most enthusiastic supporters of both the EU and immigration and, therefore, as contemptuous of the interests and concerns of ‘the people’.

Similarly, in France, Marine Le Pen has complained that ‘Our political class no longer has any convictions. They no longer believe in France – they have a post-national worldview. I call them France-skeptics. That’s why democracy is collapsing here in France’, adding that ‘I place the blame with our own leaders who are not defending our interests’ (*Der Spiegel*, 2014). Meanwhile, according to de Lang and Akkerman (2013: 32), Belgium’s most electorally successful populist Right party, Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest), claims that the political class is buttressed by a cultural elite, ‘which populates institutions such as academia, the church, the judiciary, the media ... and the trade unions. Together ... the cultural and political elites undermine the sovereignty of the people.’

One other aspect of the populist Right’s denunciations of ‘the elite’ and allegations of betrayal and treachery is the periodic allegation that key policies have been sabotaged by ‘the deep state’, whereby the latter has supposedly pursued or defended its own interests and policy preferences over those of ‘the people’ and their democratically elected governments. Traditionally, it has been the Left that has invoked ‘the deep state’ to explain the failings of socialism in terms of sabotage by ‘the ruling class’, or bourgeoisie (or their representatives and allies in the highest echelons of governing institutions). Now, however, it is the populist Right that deploys this narrative of sabotage by key political institutions and their personnel and, thus, a betrayal of ‘the people’.

In Britain, former Prime Minister (for 45 days) Liz Truss claims that the radical economic policies that she and her chancellor, Kwasi Kwarteng, introduced in October 2022 were immediately sabotaged by ‘agents [of the Left] who are only too active in public and private institutions and what we have come to know as the administrative state and the deep state’ (*The Independent*, 2024). She also claimed to have been grievously undermined by ‘the left-wing economic establishment’ (*The Daily Telegraph*, 2023). Donald Trump also routinely denounces enemies of ‘the people’ burrowed within sundry US institutions and the state itself: ‘left-wing haters, angry mobs, deep state radicals, establishment cronies, and their fake news allies.... Unelected deep-state operatives who defy the voters to push their own secret agendas [who] are truly a threat to democracy itself’ (Trump, quoted in Kelly, 2019: 13).

The ‘silent majority’ versus sundry minorities

A variant of the populist Right’s discursive binary distinction of ‘the people’ versus ‘the elite’ is that between the purported silent, or law-abiding/hard-working, majority

of the population and their purported or perceived nemesis, namely sundry cultural, ethnic, social or sexual minorities who are deemed to harbour different (incompatible) values or to adopt unconventional (immoral) lifestyles: ‘dangerous others’ (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015: 5–6; McDonnell and Ondelli, 2024: 3). These qualitative objections are often accompanied, or underpinned, by quantitative concerns about the actual number of people constituting a particular minority and how visible they are: the larger their number and/or the greater their visibility, the more readily will the populist Right seek to define them as a threat to ‘ordinary’ people and/or traditional morality or lifestyles.

Who is socially constructed and discursively defined as an internal threat or ‘enemy within’ by the populist Right depends partly on the nature of the extant crisis and its ascribed causes, and partly on the ideological stance or objectives of the right-wing populists themselves, though immigrants and the Left are the most common targets of the populist Right’s blame for many of the nation’s problems. Indeed, there are few, if any, crises – even those intrinsic to capitalism and/or neoliberalism – that the populist Right will not somehow attribute to the Left. Moreover, if the Left is not clearly visible or its alleged culpability is not fully evident when being thus blamed, this will merely reinforce a populist Right narrative about the subversiveness and subterfuge of the Left: that it operates deviously and malevolently in the shadows, or behind the scenes, in sabotaging capitalism to precipitate a socialist revolution.

As always, Donald Trump regularly invokes discourses that purport to identify the internal enemies of the American people and against whom anger, blame and hostility can be fomented. He promised that if elected for a second term as president: ‘We will root out the communists, Marxists, fascists and the radical left thugs that live like vermin within the confines of our country’, who would ‘do anything, whether legally or illegally, to destroy America and to destroy the American Dream’ (*The Washington Post*, 2023a). It is notable that Trump has increasingly referred to Democrats in general as ‘the radical Left’, regardless of how centrist or ‘moderate’ they are ideologically. Elsewhere, he has suggested that ‘the kind of person’ who had pursued ‘false’ legal charges and court cases against him since 2020, was ‘a degenerate psychopath that truly hates the USA!’ (*Truth Social*, 2023).

As noted earlier, Trump has also routinely denounced immigrants illegally entering the US from Mexico, variously accusing them of ‘poisoning the blood of our country’ and ‘destroying our country’ and claiming that ‘These people are very aggressive: They drink, they have drugs’ (*The Washington Post*, 2023b). He has also claimed that many of them either have serious mental health problems, are convicted criminals or are terrorists: ‘mental institutions and insane asylums are being emptied out into the United States, and then you have terrorists pouring in at levels we have never seen before’ (*The New York Times*, 2024). On other occasions, Trump has alleged that many immigrants entering the US from Mexico are rapists and that many of the ‘hundreds of thousands of people flowing in from Haiti’ have AIDS (*Time Magazine*, 2015; *The New York Post*, 2021). Such lurid language and outlandish allegations are a core component of Trump’s discursive ‘othering’ of immigrants and depiction of them as a cultural, employment, health and security risk or threat.

Similarly, in the UK, populist Right politicians have routinely targeted immigrants in general, and asylum seekers in particular, as ‘alien others’ who pose an increasing threat to British (English?) traditions and values, employment opportunities for indigenous workers, housing, overstretched public services, and possibly national security. Again,

the professed objections to immigration are quantitative and qualitative: the populist Right constantly complains that the number of asylum seekers and immigrants is too high and unsustainable (Britain as an already ‘overcrowded island’ with a lack of affordable housing), as well as making the criticism that many immigrants who have settled in Britain permanently have obstinately refused to integrate culturally, linguistically, religiously, sartorially or socially. This has underpinned the populist Right’s claims that multiculturalism has failed, though this complaint is often a manifestation of Islamophobia, as it is Muslims especially who have increasingly been accused of not integrating (Farage, 2015b; 2017; see also Braverman, 2023; Tice, 2023).

Across the English Channel, dire warnings about immigration and (non-integrating) Muslims have regularly been expressed by Marine Le Pen, previously president of the Front National (FN), which has been superseded by National Rally. Although, since becoming the leader in 2011, Le Pen has shifted the FN away from its former opposition to both same-sex marriage and abortion on demand (as part of a detoxification strategy to broaden its electoral appeal and imbue it with political legitimacy), the vehement opposition to immigration has been retained and remains its core component. She has claimed that uncontrolled immigration had driven France to the brink of civil war and that the country was also threatened by Islamic Fundamentalism (*The Daily Express*, 2017). When interviewed by the German *Der Spiegel* magazine, Le Pen accepted the interviewer’s claim that ‘Front National is an anti-immigration party’, responding, ‘Yes, we support putting a stop to immigration’, and adding that ‘We have millions of unemployed and cannot afford any more immigration’ (*Der Spiegel*, 2014).

Also routinely demonised by the populist Right are academics and universities, partly because of the disdain for experts and intellectuals that populism exudes and partly because of the conviction that institutions of higher education, and those who work within them, are overwhelmingly liberal, left-wing or, most recently, ‘woke’ and routinely indoctrinate impressionable students with anti-capitalist views and values (Ignatieff, 2023). For example, Farage has complained about ‘a huge left-wing bias’ in Britain’s universities, with ‘young people’s minds being poisoned against the idea of the existence of nation-states, against the idea of sensible border controls’, and universities having lost sight of their core task, namely ‘to teach critical thinking’ (*The Daily Express*, 2019).

Similarly, in the US, Trump’s running mate, J.D. Vance, has trenchantly attacked universities, claiming that they are at the root of the country’s divisiveness and inequality and accusing them of having abandoned their truth-seeking mission in favour of indoctrinating students with so-called ‘progressive’ political orthodoxy. Consequently, in a 2021 speech entitled ‘The universities are the enemy’, Vance declared: ‘We have to honestly and aggressively attack the universities in this country’ (*The Boston Globe*, 2024; see also YouTube, 2021).

Again, however, the populist Right’s rebarbative rhetorical attacks on universities and intellectuals are fully intended to appeal to a support base that is usually characterised by its lack of formal education and veneration of ‘common sense’ over airy-fairy, ivory tower theories. On Facebook, for example, the ‘bios’ of many supporters of Brexit/Nigel Farage proudly decree ‘school of hard knocks’ and ‘university of life’, and this is also a demographic that is strongly inclined to complain that Britain has too many universities and too many students studying ‘useless’ or ‘Micky Mouse’

degrees, and that academics in general disseminate left-wing or Marxist propaganda inside their ivory towers.

Another binary trope deployed by the populist Right entails socially constructing a division between the moderate, mainstream, ‘normal’ majority of citizens and the ‘alternative lifestyles’ of sundry non-conformist minorities. This is intended not only to strengthen the emotional and political bonds between the populist Right and ‘the people’ but also to delegitimise the political issues or campaigns that such minorities are pursuing or supporting: if specific people or minorities can successfully be discredited, mocked or ridiculed because of their alternative lifestyles and possibly their appearance (how they address or their prominent tattoos and/or extensive body piercings), then the socio-political issues for which they are campaigning can similarly be discredited, as the mainstream majority are unlikely to want to be associated with them.

For example, back in 2004, a progressive Democrat, Howard Dean, was ‘advised’ by some of his right-wing critics to ‘take his tax-hiking, government-expanding, latte-drinking, sushi-eating, Volvo-driving, New York Times-reading, body-piercing, Hollywood-loving, left-wing freak show back to Vermont where it belongs’ (Gage, 2017). In Britain, the populist Right is likely to refer contemptuously to the North London suburbs of Hampstead, Islington and Notting Hill as the places where members of the liberal elite tend to live and socialise. This also illustrates how the populist Right especially has a penchant for engaging in ad hominem attacks on their political adversaries.

More recently, in Britain, when environmentalists staged a sit-down protest in the autumn of 2022 and thereupon blocked traffic, then (Conservative) Home Secretary Suella Braverman derided them as part of ‘the coalition of chaos ... the Guardian-reading, tofu-eating, wokerati’ (Hansard, 2022: col 628). In so doing, Braverman was deploying a very recent ‘mainstream majority’ versus ‘unrepresentative minority’ binary distinction constructed by the populist Right, particularly in Britain, namely the rise of ‘the woke’. This is a term commonly used to characterise social justice campaigners: anti-racists, environmentalists, feminists and supporters of LGBTQ+ rights. Again, John Hayes MP has been a prominent critic of progressive campaigns and social movements, arguing that ‘Black Lives Matter radicals, and Extinction Rebellion rioters, despise our way of life’ and constitute an integral component of the liberal elite’s commitment to ‘perpetuating their heartless rule over working-class patriots’ (Hansard, 2021, col 592; see also Gareth Bacon MP, quoted in Hansard, 2021: col 592; [then Home Secretary] Suella Braverman MP, quoted in Sky News, 2022; Smith, 2022). The attack on woke has constituted part of a wider ‘culture war’ waged by the populist Right during the last decade (on the ‘war against woke’ and its political significance, see Dorey, 2024).

Meanwhile, the leader of Vlaams Belang, Tom Van Grieken, complains that ‘Belgian politics has been distracted by “gender nonsense, climate madness and – ‘oh no’ – the end of the world!”’, adding that there were much more important and salient issues to focus on, for example, ‘Flemish money should first and foremost go to Flemish families’ (quoted in Politico, 2024). Across the Atlantic, Republicans ideologically close to Donald Trump have also denounced woke in their efforts at ingratiating themselves with ‘the people’, depicting woke as an obsession of the liberal elite only. In one speech, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis used the term (pejoratively) five times in 19 seconds (The Independent, 2022). On another occasion, he warned that ‘We will

never, ever, surrender to the woke mob’, thereby illustrating how the populist Right sometimes depicts non-conformist minorities as aggressive or (potentially) violent extremists from whom ordinary people need to be protected (*The Daily Telegraph*, 2022). This also relates to a feature we will discuss later, namely the manner in which the discourses of the populist Right often present politics as a binary, either/or, battle or conflict between good and evil.

The role of ‘common sense’ versus ‘complexity’ and intellectualism

A key feature of populism is its emphasis on simple solutions to socio-economic grievances and problems, regardless of their underlying complexity or multicausal character. In this context, the populist Right’s binary discourses portray these simple solutions as mere ‘common sense’, which again contrasts with the alleged duplicity of the elite in obfuscating problems and deeming them to be more complex than they really are and thus beyond the comprehension of ordinary people. This, of course, is also a further example of the anti-intellectual and anti-expert ethos of the populist Right’s populism and their denunciation of the alleged arrogance of the elite. As Brubaker (2017: 367) notes, ‘the populist style performatively devalues complexity through rhetorical practices of simplicity, directness, and seeming self-evidence’.

In Britain, Reform UK has strongly emphasised its ‘common sense’ views and values, which it presents as a stark contrast to the alleged soggy liberalism or technocratic politics of the mainstream political parties, namely the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats. Thus did the new party contest the 2024 general election by offering ‘an alternative ... a common sense choice in Reform UK’, whose policies included ‘Common Sense Policing not “Woke” Policing’ and ‘a common sense justice system that punishes criminals’ (Reform UK, 2024: 2, 9, 10). According to Ann Widdecombe (2024), a former Conservative MP who subsequently joined Reform UK: ‘Two words sum up the appeal of Reform UK: common sense. It is what underlies all its policies.’

Similarly, in the US, Donald Trump has sometimes described himself as ‘a common-sense conservative’, advocating simple, tough policies to reduce crime, immigration, taxation and unemployment (*Politico*, 2016). On other occasions, however, he has portrayed himself as ‘a man of common sense’ rather than a conservative per se (*Newsweek*, 2024).

This emphasis on ‘common sense’ and the concomitant preference for simple or no-nonsense solutions to (often complex) problems and issues also means that the populist Right evinces three other characteristics: disdain for consensus and compromise; hostility towards intellectuals and experts; and a proclivity for representing problems and their purported solutions via three-word slogans that can either be chanted at public rallies or invoked as a rhetorical retort intended to terminate debate with a political opponent.

Consensus and compromise reflect an acknowledgement that issues are often complex or multicausal in origin, or affect disparate sections of society, such that any solution requires negotiation and mutual concessions to secure broad agreement on a policy. It is not surprising, therefore, that the populist Right is unsympathetic to pluralism because this reflects, even rejoices in, the multiplicity of perspectives

on sundry issues and the diverse range of societal interests these reflect. In effect, pluralism is a key characteristic of a healthy liberal democracy in which decisions and policies are, at least in principle, derived from constructive bargaining, or what [Charles Lindblom \(1959; 1979\)](#) characterised as partisan mutual adjustment. However, this conflicts with the populist Right's binary perspectives or Manichaean outlook, whereby issues are reduced to simple good–bad, for–against, right–wrong polarities, which are often discursively defined according to whether they pertain to the interests or wishes of ‘the people’ or only serve the interests of the elite ([Webber, 2023: 858](#)).

Meanwhile, the populist Right is also invariably hostile towards intellectuals and experts, both of whom are associated with the despised elites(s) ([Webber, 2023: 857](#)). In Britain, during the 2016 EU referendum campaign, senior Conservative Michael Gove cheerfully decreed that ‘the people in this country have had enough of experts ... saying that they know what is best and getting it consistently wrong’, though he subsequently insisted that he was referring explicitly to economists ([Sky News, 2016](#)). More recently, Suella Braverman insisted on the need to be ‘sceptical of self-appointed gurus, experts and elites who think they know best what is in the public’s interest, even when that public is quite certain that they need something different from what those experts are proposing’ ([The Guardian, 2023](#)).

Perhaps not surprisingly, Donald Trump has also been dismissive of experts, not least during the 2020–21 COVID-19 pandemic, when he publicly disagreed with the dire warnings of Dr Anthony Fauci, a leading US expert on infectious diseases. Trump boasted that ‘I didn’t listen to my experts.... [If I had] we would have been in much worse shape’; instead, Trump claimed that ‘We’ve done a good job ... we’re going to be in very good shape’ ([CBS News, 2020](#)). A few months later, Trump alleged that ‘People are tired of listening to Fauci and these idiots’ ([The Financial Times, 2020](#)). By this time, Trump had already made clear his disdain for experts, having used a 2018 speech to the United Nations General Assembly, to condemn ‘so-called experts who have been proven wrong over the years, time and time again’ ([Time Magazine, 2018](#)).

This explicit eschewal of experts is not surprising. First, experts often emanate from or are an integral part of the despised elite, often employed by federal or government agencies, the media or universities. Second, attacking experts reflects the populist Right’s strategy to ingratiate themselves with ‘the people’, particularly those who are experiencing socio-economic hardships or who harbour cultural grievances. After all, the strongest support for the populist Right tends to emanate from specific sections of society, namely the least (academically or formally) educated and those who suffer most from job insecurity, a lack of dignity, low wages, poverty, status anxiety and vulnerability to the socio-economic changes accruing from neoliberalism and globalisation. Older citizens are also often attracted by the populist Right because of a yearning to ‘turn back the clock’ to an imagined Golden Age when life was supposedly better or simpler, not least because there were fewer immigrants or openly LGBTQ+ communities and young people were not proclaiming their ‘gender fluidity’.

The understandable frustrations and grievances of such demographics are readily exploited by the populist Right, who can then mobilise their anxieties or anger against the elite(s), experts and other minorities who serve as scapegoats (often immigrants) and, in turn, foster support for authoritarian policies against minorities or those discursively defined as ‘others’. Indeed, in this context, the populist Right often invokes emotive or visceral appeals to aggrieved or anxious citizens, which contrasts

markedly with the purported rationality of ‘the elite(s)’ or faith in human reason harboured by liberals. As Webber emphasises, populists are generally ‘skeptical ... of assertions of professional expertise, scientific knowledge, or education generally’, with this disdain towards intellectuals and experts often manifesting itself via a ‘non-rationalist and expressive conception of truth, in which what counts is the people’s holding of a belief, rather than that belief’s veracity’ (Webber, 2023: 857).

For example, although so many of Donald Trump’s speeches are comprised of claims that are demonstrably or verifiably untrue, for many of his supporters, their importance is that, even if his oratory is often not necessarily factually true, it ‘*feels as if*’ it is true (Hochschild, 2018: 14, emphasis in original). As another textual analyst observes, while many of Trump’s speeches enshrine hyperbole and metaphors that are ‘not strictly accurate in every detail ... they gesture at [a] deeper *emotional* truth.... The details of Trump’s claims ... may not be factual, but the big picture he paints may *feel* real’ (McIntosh, 2020: 22, emphases in original).

This is grist to the mill of the populist Right because their discourses and rhetoric assiduously appeal to the frustrations and grievances of citizens who have been (or feel themselves to have been) ‘left behind’ by the scale or pace of cultural, socio-economic or technological changes and/or betrayed or ignored by the elite. In this context, the populist Right is particularly adept at exacerbating, then exploiting, the possibly visceral resentment felt by some of the ‘left behind’ (especially older, white, working-class men) towards those who they believe, however erroneously, now enjoy better treatment or more opportunities, especially minority ethnic groups, LGBTQ+ communities and women generally, due to equality and diversity policies and quotas.

A study of Donald Trump’s popularity among some sections of US society found that ‘To white, native-born, heterosexual men, he offered a solution to the dilemma they had long faced as the “left-behinds” of the 1960s and 1970s celebration of other identities. Trump was the identity politics candidate for white men’ (Hochschild, 2018: 227). Trump seemingly acknowledged this in a 2016 speech in Waco (Texas) when he informed the adoring audience that ‘I am your warrior. I am your justice. And for those who have been wronged and betrayed, I am your retribution!’ (quoted in McAdams, 2024).

This alludes to another characteristic of the populist Right, one that strongly appeals to its supporters, namely explicit authoritarianism. Again, their anti-intellectualism and disdain for experts means that they often crave strong but simple solutions to social problems (or issues that are discursively defined as problems), regardless of how complex or multicausal they are in origin or essence. They often believe, or feel, that their country has ‘gone soft’ on issues like crime, immigration and national security and therefore needs a decisive programme of moral renewal and law and order, which is what the populist Right invariably promises to deliver (on the phenomenon of working-class authoritarianism, see Lipset, 1959; 1960).

This disdain for intellectualism and the concomitant penchant for tough or authoritarian policies are also manifested in the populist Right’s tendency to adopt simple three-word phrases or slogans, depending on what or who is deemed to be the problem; if it is immigration, then slogans like ‘keep them out’, ‘send them back’, ‘build the wall’ (in the US) or ‘stop the boats’ (in Britain) are likely to be incanted, while tackling crime is often accompanied by rhetorical demands to ‘lock them up’ or, in Britain specifically, ‘bring back hanging’. Brexit provided a veritable smorgasbord of nationalistic three-word slogans, such as ‘take back control’, ‘reclaim

our sovereignty', 'Leave means Leave', 'get Brexit done' and 'believe in Britain'. These simple slogans also reinforce the populist Right's emotive or visceral appeal and further convince their supporters that economic or social problems can readily be solved with tough policies implemented by strong, decisive political leaders (as opposed to supposedly wishy-washy, liberal centrists).

Politics as a battle between 'good and evil' in populist Right discourses

Another common binary trope of populist Right discourses is the rhetorical presentation of politics and contemporary socio-economic issues as a battle between good and evil. This again reduces political options to just two diametrically opposed alternatives, with the populist Right naturally claiming to be representing good and their political opponents often motivated by evil or wickedness.

Moreover, the allusion to politics as a 'battle' often imbues the populist Right's discourses with both military and religious analogies and symbols and often depicts crises as quasi-apocalyptic. The populist Right's binary rhetoric thus reflects and reinforces a sense of crisis, which, in turn, buttresses claims about betrayal by a decadent or incompetent elite and the identification of 'enemies' who need to be punished, removed or suppressed. Indeed, populists do not merely emerge during a crisis, 'they actively construct a sense of crisis' and encourage or exacerbate dissatisfaction with 'the elite' or political 'Establishment', who are then deemed to have betrayed 'the people' (De Cleen, 2019: 33; Moffitt, 2015).

Following a July 2024 assassination attempt on Donald Trump, when he was shot during a public rally, the prominent and populist Republican politician Marjorie Taylor Greene warned that 'We are in a battle between GOOD and EVIL' against the 'sick and evil' radical Left (*HuffPost*, 2024). This binary or Manichaean world view is shared by Trump's daughter-in-law, Lara Trump, who informed a Republican rally near Dallas that 'There is a true war in America right now ... and it is good versus evil.... We need to take this country back' (*Rolling Stone*, 2022).

Charismatic leaders versus 'mainstream politicians'

Another feature of the deployment of 'binaries' by the populist Right concerns the persona and style of populist leaders themselves, who are usually highly charismatic. This serves three functions.

First, charismatic populist Right leaders present themselves as constituting a clear contrast and alternative to supposedly mainstream politicians, or the liberal elite. The established political class or elites are often perceived to be technocrats who are primarily concerned with managing the status quo and providing piecemeal solutions to socio-economic problems, instead of enacting fundamental or far-reaching reforms that tackle the underlying causes of those problems.

Second, and paradoxically, charismatic populist Right leaders present themselves simultaneously as uniquely strong and courageous and yet claim to stand alongside ordinary people against the elite or 'Establishment'; they are simultaneously elevated above 'the people' yet somehow one of them in terms of their shared grievances, objectives and values. They are seemingly united in their blame and dislike of particular minorities and jointly engage in 'punching down' by demonising those who are 'othered'.

Donald Trump has variously compared himself, or been compared by some of his most fervent supporters, to Jesus. In a 2019 media interview, Trump declared that 'I am the chosen one' (*The Washington Post*, 2019). Some of Trump's most fervent supporters have echoed these claims, whereupon Trump himself retweets them (via 'X', previously Twitter) or posts them on his Truth Social website. For example, Wayne Allyn Root – who has referred to the Democrats' 2024 presidential candidate, Kamala Harris, as 'Krazy Kommie Kamala' (*Root For America*, 2024) – has claimed that 'The attacks on him [Trump] are literally biblical. He is being persecuted like no one since Jesus', adding that 'Trump is literally both a man of destiny, and a walking miracle' and that 'this man has been chosen by God, to save America' (*Root For America*, 2023). Elsewhere, staunch Republican and Trump supporter Rick Perry once asserted that Trump is 'God's chosen one', who has been 'sent by God to do great things' (*Newsweek*, 2019). Meanwhile, a self-confessed white supremacist has deemed Trump to be 'Our Glorious Leader and ULTIMATE SAVIOR' (quoted in *Lopez*, 2020).

In boasting of his supposed superiority, Trump has occasionally endorsed eugenics, claiming to subscribe to 'the racehorse theory': that some people are naturally superior to others due to (family) breeding – a belief widely shared among white supremacists (*D'Antonio*, 2016: 326–7). For example, in a 2020 speech at a Republican rally in Minnesota, Trump told the almost all-white crowd: 'You have good genes, you know that, right?... A lot of it is about the genes, isn't it?... The racehorse theory.... You have good genes in Minnesota' (*Los Angeles Times*, 2020). Referring to his own perceived genetic superiority and avowed heroic leadership qualities, Trump has claimed that 'if I were a liberal ... they would say I'm one of the smartest people anywhere in the world, it's true!, but when you're a conservative Republican they do a number' (*Vox*, 2016).

Trump has also sought to enhance his charismatic leadership credentials and clearly differentiate himself from the supposedly corrupt liberal elite by promoting himself as a unique purveyor of 'the truth'. When he made his first presidential announcement speech in 2015, Trump declared: 'I can never apologize for the truth. I don't mind apologizing for things. But I can't apologize for the truth' (*The Washington Post*, 2015). The following year, Trump claimed: 'I am a truth teller, and I will tell the truth' (*Politico*, 2016). Such declarations are intended to reinforce Trump's claim to be a stark alternative to the supposedly corrupt and self-serving liberal elite, or 'East Coast Establishment', supposedly symbolised by Boston, New York and Washington.

Another rhetorical device utilised by Trump has been to claim that the attacks on him by liberals and the Left are ultimately directed at his supporters. He then claims that he is withstanding the political attacks to protect them, which thus portrays him as a martyr in the eyes of his followers. He has claimed:

I've been very busy fighting and, you know, taking the, the bullets, taking the arrows. I'm taking 'em for you ... the radical left Democrats, Marxists, communists, and fascists ... wanna silence me because I will never let them silence you. And in the end, they're not after me. They're after you. I just happen to be standing in the way. (quoted in *Jones*, 2024)

Such claims, of course, reinforce the public image of Trump as a courageous, heroic and valiant leader, prepared to suffer on behalf of his supporters and the American people in general – literally their protector and saviour.

Meanwhile, in Britain, Nigel Farage has attracted immense adulation and hero-worship from many of his supporters, who view him as a brave and courageous patriot ‘taking on’ the elite(s) and the ‘Establishment’, who was instrumental in securing Britain’s departure from the EU. He recalls a rally he addressed in 2013, while leader of UKIP, and an ecstatic audience member proclaiming, ‘Nigel, you are the Messiah’ (Farage, 2015a: 197; for an analysis of Farage and the ‘hero myth’, see Kelsey, 2016).

Third, the charismatic leader says things that ordinary people feel they cannot say due, they often claim, to ‘political correctness’. Leaders of the populist Right pride themselves on their plain speaking and ‘saying it as it is’, which reinforces the adulation they attract from their aggrieved and resentful supporters. One of the complaints of the populist Right is that free speech has been curtailed by ‘political correctness’ or, more recently, ‘the woke’: ‘You’re not allowed to say that/anything anymore, in case some minority claims to be offended.’ This also reflects the sense of victimhood that frequently characterises supporters of the populist Right: that they are being oppressed, persecuted or silenced.

Donald Trump clearly rejoices in offending his political critics and opponents by openly making derogatory or insulting comments about either sundry minorities or prominent individuals who are associated with those minorities (again reflecting the populist Right’s penchant for ad hominem attacks). In this regard, Trump displays open contempt for what was once termed ‘political correctness’ and is now more commonly known as ‘woke’. This has provided him with two political benefits. First, he delights in making controversial or derogatory claims that he knows will infuriate liberals and the Left; it seems that so many of his public pronouncements are intended simultaneously to enthuse his supporters while ‘owning the libs’, who are then mocked as ‘snowflakes’ when they express abhorrence.

Second, Trump’s readiness to reject politeness and conventional political rules of debate – as supposedly decreed by ‘the elite’ – is perceived by his supporters as further evidence of his courage and heroism. Moreover, when they hear him making non-politically correct (non-PC) comments or claims about feminists, immigrants, liberals, Muslims and so on, Trump’s supporters feel similarly emboldened, having allegedly felt obliged to conceal or suppress their true views and feelings for the last 20–30 years (Hochschild, 2018: 227). As McIntosh (2020: 11) explains, Trump’s ‘anti-PC language ... has allowed his supporters to emerge from the doghouse ... many [of them] have gloried that their leader has brought their true feelings in front of the curtain’.

Conclusion

The populist Right has made notable advances in many Western countries during the last two decades, to the extent that, in Britain especially, conventional right-wing parties have felt compelled to adopt a more populist stance on key issues to prevent a haemorrhaging of electoral support to radical populists. Certainly, in Britain, the 2016 vote to leave the EU has been strongly associated with the vehemently anti-EU campaigning of the populist Right leader Nigel Farage and his (then) party, UKIP, and the way that hostility to the EU was yoked to concerns about immigration.

This increased influence of the populist Right, both electorally and in terms of agenda setting, issue identification and problem definition, has reflected the economic

crisis that has affected many Western countries during the last 15 years or so; it is also a consequence of the growing inequality and poverty arising from four decades of neoliberalism and the associated social dislocation suffered by many deindustrialised communities. It is not just the loss of jobs and earnings that has fuelled discontent among many, mainly poorer citizens – vitally important though these are – but also the concomitant loss of social status and self-worth that paid employment often provided: a sense of identity and validation. These have often been replaced by alienation, anger and anomie, which the populist Right has readily exploited by identifying (socially constructing) ‘enemies’ and minorities to whom blame and culpability are apportioned and against whom authoritarian policies are advocated, often by highly charismatic leaders.

Their often-inflammatory rhetoric deliberately creates or exacerbates divisions between the nation-state and ‘other countries’, between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’, and between the ‘mainstream majority’ and ‘non-conformist minorities’ (often immigrants and/or Muslims). In each of these three polarities, the former is viewed positively, while the latter is depicted negatively. Moreover, the populist Right portrays these discursive dualities as symbolic of a Manichean or existential battle between good and evil, often incorporating military or religious symbolism or language. Furthermore, when liberals and the Left condemn such divisive or racist language and discourses, the populist Right depicts such criticism as an attempt by the out-of-touch elite to stifle free speech or denigrate the common-sense views of the ordinary, hard-working, law-abiding, patriotic, people who the populist Right claims to speak for.

Of course, by blaming or denigrating cultural, political and social elites and sundry minorities, the populist Right serves to deflect attention from the real, underlying causes of increased socio-economic deprivation, inequality and poverty, namely the paramount interests and power of corporate elites, big business and the City (London, Wall Street and so on), all reinforced by four decades of neoliberalism.

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Note

¹ See: www.reformparty.uk.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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