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Populist-inflected governance in a mature democracy: Bureaucratic de-legitimation and executive control in the United Kingdom (2019–2024)

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IMPACT

This article is of direct practical relevance to UK policy-makers and officials, including elected politicians, senior civil servants, regulators, parliamentary staff and practitioners working in relevant accountability institutions. It shows how populist and anti-democratic forces can influence governance, even in a mature democracy like the UK: attacks on professional advice, pressure on formally independent bodies, and attempts to force policy through legal or administrative obstacles. By examining anti-civil service ‘blob’ rhetoric, reforms to regulators, and the Rwanda asylum scheme, the article offers practitioners a framework for recognizing these dynamics as they emerge. For politicians and policy-makers, it highlights the risks of treating bureaucratic resistance, legal constraint, or regulatory independence as politically motivated obstruction. For officials and campaigners, it identifies where safeguards may be weakest. Its real-world value lies in helping actors who support democratic governance preserve and strengthen mediating democratic institutions, including in other national and sub-national contexts.

ABSTRACT

This article examines the relationship between radical right populism and bureaucracy in the UK—a parliamentary system with strong executive dominance. While much literature on populism and public administration focuses on bureaucratic capture or constitutional rupture, the UK presents a different pattern in which populist pressures operated within existing institutional arrangements. The article argues that populist governance in the UK between 2019 and 2024 represents an effort to reassert an idealized ‘Westminster story’ of executive control against the messy and complex realities of contemporary policy-making and public administration. Drawing on three case studies—the construction of civil service antagonism (the ‘blob’), reforms to the election management body (the Electoral Commission), and attempts to implement the Rwanda asylum scheme—the article traces strategies of de-legitimation, institutional bending, and policy forcing. The UK case highlights how populist-inspired executives seek to bypass bureaucracy without dismantling the administrative state.

KEYWORDS

Arm’s-length bodies; bureaucracy; complexity; Conservative Party; executive governance; populism; United Kingdom; Westminster model

Introduction

Populism’s relationship with bureaucracy has emerged as a central concern in contemporary public policy, public administration and governance scholarship (Thomas & Jones, 2025; Bauer et al., 2021). While much attention centres on cases in which populist governments have pursued overt strategies of bureaucratic capture, personnel replacement, or constitutional overhaul, less focus has been applied to understanding how populist-inflected governance operates in consolidated democracies where highly professionalized, formally constrained administrative systems are present, and where impartiality is formally institutionalized. This article addresses that gap through an examination of the UK. It asks how populist-inspired executives attempt to discipline, reshape, or bypass bureaucratic institutions in a Westminster system where the executive already possesses a high degree of formal power. While existing scholarship often focuses on cases of bureaucratic capture or constitutional rupture, the UK illustrates how populist-bureaucratic conflict may unfold within consolidated institutional frameworks.

Examining Conservative governance between 2019 and 2024, the article shows how executives deploy narratives of bureaucratic obstruction, institutional reform, and policy

forcing in an attempt to reassert an idealized ‘Westminster’ model of executive control. The UK, unlike Hungary or arguably the contemporary US, remains, demonstrably, a liberal democracy—albeit one which has come under significant strain in recent years and presents significant vulnerabilities (Kippin, 2025a). This makes it a revealing case from which to explore populist-bureaucratic interaction, and a useful vantage point to explore what occurs when populist politics is channelled through the institutional forms of a mature democracy. These dynamics became more prominent after the 2016 Brexit referendum, especially when Boris Johnson became prime minister in 2019 and during the premierships of his successors, Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak (Kippin, 2025b).

While the Conservative Party that held office during this period can be categorised as a member of the centre-right family of conservative parties, it began to exhibit certain characteristics associated with those found on its (radical) right (Kippin, 2025a; Bale, 2023a; Bale, 2023b; Zulianello, 2020). Influenced by challenger parties such as UKIP and the Brexit Party/Reform UK and subject to internal ideological change, the Conservatives increasingly adopted the language, style, and, eventually, policy positions

associated with these perspectives (Heinze & Off, 2026). Illiberalism in policy was a key signifier (Kippin, 2025a), and so too was the increased prominence of a long-standing, but previously marginalized, 'hard-right' tendency. One consequence of these changes was the rise of populist-inflected governance: the practice of governing in a manner shaped by populist ideas, rhetoric, and political logic. This triggered mild but observable democratic backsliding (James, 2023). It is in this context that efforts to emphasise top-down control, in line with the 'Westminster story' of executive control against the lived realities and frustrations of complex government (Cairney & Kippin, 2023), must be seen. Rather than accommodating institutional complexity, populist-inspired actors sought to deny, simplify, or simply override it. They did so through strategies such as narrative de-legitimation, selective institutional reform, and top-down policy imposition. Bureaucracy, in this context, was a central political antagonist, framed as an élite 'blob' standing in the way of both popular sovereignty and effective governmental leadership.

The article proceeds in four stages. First, it provides background on radical right populism in the UK, emphasising the historical relationship between Conservative Party factionalism, Euroscepticism, and challenger parties to its right such as Reform UK. This section explains why the 2019–2024 Conservative governments are treated as instances of populist-inflected mainstream governance, rather than wholesale populist governments. Second, it situates these developments within the UK's Westminster system, highlighting the tension between executive-centric constitutional expectations and the messier realities of contemporary governance—summarised as the contrast between the 'Westminster' and 'complex government' stories (Cairney & Kippin, 2023). Third, it develops the article's analytical framework, identifying three strategies through which populist-inflected executives seek to reassert top-down control in a Westminster system: narrative de-legitimation, selective institutional bending, and policy forcing. Fourth, it examines three sub-cases across different sites of the British administrative state: the narrative construction of anti-élitism in public administration through 'blob' rhetoric; reform of the Electoral Commission as an instance of selective institutional bending; and the heavy-handed implementation of the Rwanda asylum scheme as an instance of policy forcing. Finally, the discussion draws these examples together to articulate the wider comparative significance of the UK case for understanding populist-inflected governance in executive-centric parliamentary systems.

Methodologically, the article adopts a qualitative single-case study design, treating the UK as an analytically revealing example of populist-inflected governance within a majoritarian, executive-centric liberal democracy. The empirical material is organized around selected sub-cases, chosen for their capacity to illuminate different forms of executive pressure on the administrative state (rather than to represent the full plethora of relevant UK governance controversies). The sub-cases provide windows through which to explore this article's core concern: how populist-inflected executives seek to de-legitimize, discipline, reshape, or bypass bureaucratic institutions. Other possible areas for exploration, including broadcast regulation, Covid-era procurement, conflicts with devolved administrations, or anti-'woke' interventions, would provide valuable complementary evidence, but are beyond the scope of the

article. The analysis draws on ministerial speeches, parliamentary statements, policy documents, official reports, watchdog and regulatory materials, media interventions, stakeholder commentary and communications, and relevant judicial and legal sources in populating the sub-cases. This article's central contribution to scholarship on populism and bureaucracy is to demonstrate the manner in which populist governance in executive-centric parliamentary systems operates: through narrative de-legitimation, selective institutional bending, and heavy-handed policy imposition, rather than by outright bureaucratic capture of the kind achieved in Türkiye. It shows how these strategies can weaken bureaucratic legitimacy and capacity even when they fail to deliver substantive policy change.

Radical right populism in the UK

The British far right has been prominent throughout the country's more recent history. The Conservative Party, via fora such as the Monday Club and by hosting figures such as the notorious racist Enoch Powell, has played a crucial role in incubating and providing legitimacy to far right and anti-democratic sentiments (Seyd, 1972). These currents, particularly from the 1970s onwards, intermingled with growing Euroscepticism. This shaped Conservative Party politics profoundly from the late 1980s onwards, and Thatcher's late and post-premiership hostility to European integration was a key factor in the Conservative Party splits which blighted successive Conservative governments. Nigel Farage, a former Conservative Party activist, became a key figure in the Eurosceptic movement in the 1990s and 2000s, assuming leadership of the single-issue UK Independence Party (UKIP), which supported British exit from the EU—and reorienting it rightwards. Its key appeal was to Conservative voters, and it provided a voice to the Eurosceptic sentiment that was becoming increasingly dominant on the right, but was held at bay by successive Conservative leaders. Its effective campaigning and increasing electoral success was a key factor in David Cameron's decision to hold a referendum, in 2016, on whether the country should remain in the EU. Farage represented, for the most part, a fairly typical radical right populist politician: UKIP was hostile to immigration, successfully linking this issue with European Union membership. Farage sought to position himself and his party as a tribune of the people—who had been betrayed by 'Europhiliac' élites—reflecting elements of the radical right populist trifecta of nativism, populism, and authoritarianism (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).

Farage played a key role in the outcome of the 2016 referendum via his energetic campaigning and financial support from the billionaire Arron Banks. Together, they led *voteleave.eu*—the 'unofficial' Leave campaign which emphasised a more hard-edged and nativistic Euroscepticism than its 'official' *Vote Leave* counterpart. Notably, Farage endorsed a controversial anti-immigration (and arguably racist) 'breaking point' poster, which connected the refugee crisis of the mid 2010s with EU membership. After Brexit, occurring simultaneously with post-financial crisis austerity, the Conservatives began to shift in a more authoritarian direction (Hayton, 2025; Bale, 2023b). Some of this was not new: the Cameron government, ostensibly liberal, had introduced tough anti-migrant policies such as the 'hostile environment' (Cairney

& Kippin, 2023, p. 225). The figure most associated with that approach, Theresa May, became prime minister (with the unenviable task of negotiating and implementing Brexit). Following three years of struggle, failure, and internecine warfare, Boris Johnson replaced her, with a mandate to 'get Brexit done' (Seldon & Newell, 2024). The demand for Brexit had its origin, in part, in widely held understandings of how UK politics 'ought' to operate, emphasising 'control' of 'sovereignty'.

Johnson's premiership represented an inflection point in UK politics which more fully introduced the language, style, and substance of radical right populism into the mainstream of UK politics—part of a broader trend of mainstream parties adapting to the presence of radical challengers (Heinze & Off, 2026). While the Conservatives—then, and now—fall short of full membership of the radical right populist family, his leadership adopted anti-élite rhetoric, a heavy-handed anti-institutional approach to areas such as party management, the judiciary, and the mediating institutions of government, and an at-times brazen disregard for rules and accountability mechanisms (Kippin, 2025a; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). The 2019 election, which had a populist flavour, resulted in an impressive Johnson victory, and paved the way for Brexit's most decisive phase. His government pursued policies which were, to varying degrees, nativistic and authoritarian—these were continued under (briefly) Truss, and (more extensively) Sunak. During this period, the Conservatives retained one foot in the 'mainstream' centre-right, but planted another into the soil of the radical right, becoming, in Bale's phrase, an 'ersatz radical right populist party' (Bale, 2023b; see also Hayton, 2025). In recognition of this hybrid status, this article characterizes this period as being marked by 'populist-inflected governance', a clear instance in which the political style, governing approach, and policy substance were all decisively influenced by actors, ideas, and approaches on the populist radical right. The potential for overreach of such actors in the context of the Westminster system is significant—a topic to which this article now turns.

Populism and the Westminster model

The UK is the original Westminster system. It is characterized by concentrated executive power, majoritarian decision-making, single-party government facilitated by the plurality electoral system, and constitutional flexibility. While contemporary public policy scholarship questions how closely practice matches this idealized model (Richards & Smith, 2016), it remains a useful shorthand for the institutional and public expectations of UK governance. In summary:

- The UK Westminster model is typically defined by concentrated executive authority, majoritarianism, and strong single-party government (Cairney & Kippin, 2023, pp. 37–43).
- In practice, these features are increasingly contested and qualified within contemporary policy and governance scholarship (Richards & Smith, 2016).
- The UK remains constitutionally unitary, with Westminster retaining ultimate legal authority over devolved governments and local institutions.

- England is governed largely from the centre, with local and city-regional authorities primarily acting as policy delivery mechanisms—rather than autonomous power centres
- Executive and legislative power are fused in a parliamentary system, with strong party discipline enabling governments to dominate the House of Commons (Troughton, 2020).
- The plurality electoral system historically sustained a Labour–Conservative duopoly, though this pattern is increasingly fragmenting
- The UK executive enjoys unusually high constitutional and administrative flexibility, including wide legislative authority and significant prime ministerial powers over government organization and appointments (Heffernan, 2003).

It amounts to a formidable array of powers. In reality, empirical research highlights not uniform, non-discretionary power—but constraint, contingency, multi-stakeholder participation, and a failure to see agendas translate into reality (Cairney & Kippin, 2023). For example, although the prime minister has extensive appointment powers, the pool of politically acceptable candidates is relatively small. It is difficult to imagine the British equivalent of U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth being appointed to a senior government role, let alone leading the Ministry of Defence. Likewise, attempts to appoint politically polarising figures have been strongly challenged. This combination of potential backlash, a sensitivity to public opinion, and a degree of restraint on the part of governments has provided a countervailing pressure and disincentive to diverge to too great an extent from political norms. This has been, partly in jest, and with a nod to the UK's patrician élite, referred to as the 'good chaps' theory of government (Blick & Hennessy, 2019). In recent years, however, this has come under pressure.

Populist attempts to reassert top-down control

The UK's institutional configuration generates a particular set of expectations about the ways in which political and policy-making authority should be exercised—and how policy should be delivered. Electoral victory is taken to confer an unambiguous governing mandate, executive authority is concentrated at the centre, and the bureaucracy is expected to act as a politically neutral but responsive instrument of ministerial will (Cairney & Kippin, 2023; Richards & Smith, 2016). Accountability can be understood primarily in hierarchical and political terms via the rituals of Westminster question times and robust public scrutiny—with comparatively limited emphasis on horizontal or legal constraint. However, as decades of scholarship in public administration and governance have demonstrated, this idealized 'Westminster story' sits uneasily alongside the realities of contemporary governance (Cairney & Kippin, 2023). In practice, UK governance is conducted through a dense institutional web encompassing a plethora of arm's-length bodies, sectoral regulatory agencies, legal institutions, devolved parliaments and executives, international legal commitments, and strongly embedded ways of doing things—within the civil service and beyond. Authority, *contra* appearances, is dispersed rather than

unified, and implementation is negotiated rather than commanded.

Governments with a more radical, externally derived political and policy agenda are likely to take a dim view of official scepticism and resistance. This extends to populist-infused governments, who may wish to 'opt out' of existing ways of doing things—perhaps on the grounds that they have not delivered sufficiently well for 'the people'—and to assert a reductive 'common sense' as an antidote against the 'élites' who currently run things. The misgivings of officialdom are more likely to be seen in this context not as objective good faith advice and expertise, but rather as the special pleading of a corrupt, cosseted, and complicit élite (Bauer et al., 2021). Indeed, there may even be an element of truth in this analysis, in spite of the largely professional and usually well-intentioned nature of those who run the country's key institutions. In any case, this period of populist-inflected government in the UK may be understood as a sustained attempt to reassert the Westminster story against the lived experience of complex government in the name of the people. This analysis builds on Bauer and Becker's (2020) account of populist public administration, particularly their emphasis on the politicization of bureaucratic norms, the reduction of accountability, and the centralization of executive power. The article identifies populist efforts to assert top-down control as operating through three related strategies, specifying how such dynamics unfold in the context of a Westminster political system.

- The first is narrative de-legitimation: the presentation of public officials and institutions as obstructive élites rather than legitimate participants in democratic governance, reflecting an example of the politicization of bureaucratic norms.
- The second is selective institutional bending: the use of appointments, statutory guidance, institutional redesign, or ministerial direction to align formally independent bodies more closely with executive priorities, compromising (but not abolishing) their autonomy outright.
- The third is policy forcing: the use of executive and parliamentary authority to push policy through, around, or against administrative, legal, and institutional barriers. Opportunities for this kind of strategy are many in the UK context, which has few barriers against assertive executive action.

These strategies provide the organizing framework for the empirical analysis that follows. The 'blob' case foregrounds narrative de-legitimation; the Electoral Commission case foregrounds selective institutional bending; and the Rwanda scheme foregrounds policy forcing. Together, they show how populist-inflected executives sought to reassert the Westminster story against the constraints of complex government, taking place not through wholesale bureaucratic capture, but by deploying a lower-intensity repertoire of de-legitimation, institutional pressure, and attempted override. In more detail, the three cases are:

- The Conservative government's narrative construction of a self-interested 'blob', reflecting a shorthand characterization of a corrupt élite, drawing on

longstanding neoliberal anti-government framing, but expanding and stretching this into new, anti 'woke' directions.

- Attempts to tilt the electoral political playing field in the Conservatives' direction via reform of the country's electoral management body, demonstrating the tendency of populist-inclined actors to centralize authority and control.
- Efforts to design and implement a legally dubious framework to absolve the UK of its international legal obligations on asylum through deporting affected individuals to the 'third country' of Rwanda, known colloquially as 'the Rwanda Scheme'.

Taken together, these cases illustrate a common logic: rather than accommodating complexity, populist governance in the UK operated through escalating efforts to de-legitimize, simplify, or override the realities of contemporary bureaucratic government. These are taken in turn below.

The 'blob' and the de-legitimization of bureaucratic resistance

Following the 2019 general election, and the (early) 2020 final departure of the UK from the European Union, Conservative politicians and their allies (see Bale, 2023a for an account of the 'party in the media') sought to blame institutional resistance for repeated failures to both realize an appropriate set of arrangements for leaving the European Union, and a failure to 'make the most' of Brexit. The original usage of the term was American, relating, in homage to a 1960s horror movie, to the federal Department of Education's supposed tendency to suck up public funding. In the UK context, it referred to institutionalized resistance from education stakeholder activities during the 2010–2015 Coalition government education reform agenda, specifically linked to trade unions and professional groups—it is associated with Dominic Cummings, who would go on to act as Boris Johnson's chief adviser (and gain a reputation as a Svengali-like figure).

From 2019 onwards, antagonism towards the civil service had three primary dimensions. The first was related to attempts to frustrate the ongoing process of extricating the UK from the structures and approaches of the European Union, or to affect a more rapid *de-Europeanisation* of UK governance. The scale of the task implied by leaving the European Union was, of course, immense, with decades of accumulated legislation reflecting continued and, in some cases, foundational alignment with European approaches. Given the inevitable challenges related to system-wide capacity to fundamentally reappraise these, there was a strong logic to retaining existing approaches, with deviation coming eventually but arriving only incrementally. One notable setback was the decision to abandon a proposed 'bonfire' of European legislation, which was described as a 'victory for the Blob' by Jacob Rees-Mogg (quoted in Wheatcroft, 2023). However, this clashes with the populist logic of Brexit, and its desire to 'take back control' and reassert popular (aka Westminster) sovereignty. In this, the familiar realities of policymaking and the spirit of the Brexit cause were in fundamental tension. As a result, the Civil Service became an unwilling participant in turf wars

connected to these debates, shaped, it was suspected, by latent pro-European views. This assertion was given strength by the decision of a former Foreign Office official Simon MacDonald's (perhaps imprudent) decision to voice his support for Remain shortly after the referendum.

Second, this apparent antagonism took on a different, and more personal, form, as time went on (and Brexit became a less immediate concern). For instance, the ministerial career of the First Secretary of State/Deputy Prime Minister (in separate stints) Dominic Raab was brought to an end decisively due to bullying allegations. Raab's former Cabinet colleague, Priti Patel, had also been found by an independent process to have bullied officials in the Home Office, with Boris Johnson rejecting calls to remove her from office following the probe (*contra* expectations). Jacob Rees-Mogg, who held the (mildly absurd) sounding role of *Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency* took aim at civil servants for their preference to take advantage of home-working opportunities, particularly in the years immediately following the pandemic. Rees-Mogg, a figure whose genial and *olde-worlde* image belied a hard-right set of political opinions, was highly critical of these practices. Later, while running for the Conservative leadership, Kemi Badenoch offhandedly remarked that 5% of civil servants 'should be in prison' (Elgot, 2024). Liz Truss, fleetingly prime minister, ascribed antisemitic views to civil servants over a perceived advocacy of the Palestinian cause in the context of Israel's attacks on Gaza (Markson, 2022).

Third, these approaches reflected a new version of long-standing critiques of the UK civil service. Margaret Thatcher's government had famously asked whether individuals senior officials were 'one of us'—i.e. sympathetic to her broad approach to politics and policy in which reducing the size and scope of the state (and therefore the role of public officials) as part of a New Right agenda (Diamond, 2020). Civil servants were seen, in this context, as self-interested, occasionally corrupt, and unwilling or incapable of acting in an ideologically defined public interest. While less opposed to state activism and thus the role of the civil service, Tony Blair had castigated the 'forces of conservatism' and described the 'scars on his back' while serving as Labour prime minister, and been critical of the ability of the civil service to deliver the breadth and pace of reforms his government had advocated in public services, linking official inertia with the more active opposition of trade union and professional groups, who sought to resist the market-oriented logic of his changes to public services. David Cameron, too, had been critical of their supposedly anti-business orientation. The decision to reprimand officials during the premierships of Johnson, Truss, and Sunak between 2019 and 2024 was not, therefore, entirely new—however, it took on an increasingly hostile and personal tone—a 'hard rain' was promised in 2019 by Dominic Cummings, who was open in his contempt for the civil service and its ways of working (Diamond, 2020).

Perhaps predictably, and with some irony, it was a civil servant who would deliver the final blow to Johnson's premiership. Although the rolling scandal of 'partygate' (the series of revelations that Johnson, Rishi Sunak, and numerous members of the No. 10 Downing Street political staff had been holding social gatherings in their office

contra lockdown guidance) is often credited with fatally wounding Johnson, it was in fact his bungled response to the complaints over the Deputy Chief Whip, Christopher Pincher, which presented the *coup de grâce*. Pincher, loyal to Johnson, had been accused of acting inappropriately towards several men. Johnson claimed ignorance, implausibly, of Pincher's past alleged misdeeds, and was undermined in this account by Simon MacDonald (the 'pro-European' civil servant mentioned above), who stated very publicly that Johnson's account was untrue. This triggered a further, final wave of ministerial resignations, and, eventually, Johnson's begrudging and unapologetic resignation on the morning of July 7th 2022.

The period from 2019 to 2024 was marked by unprecedented tensions between the UK government and the civil service, with at times open hostility between the two camps playing out in public. The country's most senior civil servant, Simon Case (in the view of some, rather too late), defended his organization in 2023, describing the 'blob' designation as 'insulting' (Thomas, 2023). The mainstreaming of radical right populist sentiment within the Conservative Party during these years was surely a factor in both animating this hostility, and in creating a political incentive system to air it publicly. In power, populism generates demands for the centralization of authority in order to deliver the desired change to politics or policy in the name of the people (defined, in the pro-Brexit Conservative case, as the half of the public that voted the 'right' way). Officialdom, ruled by its caution, adherence to rules, processes, and regulations, inevitably bristled against this emerging way of operating. 'Blob' rhetoric aimed, with some limited success, to de-legitimize bureaucratic expertise and autonomy, and place the failure of both Brexit and its associated policy agendas on internal 'swamp' forces (Diamond, 2020).

Agency reform under the Conservatives: the case of the Electoral Commission

During this period, institutional reform was also prioritized by the Conservative government in a number of areas. A key example is explored here which demonstrates the nature of the Conservative government's approach towards the internal organization of the state—reforms to the remit, role, and governance of the Electoral Commission, which oversees elections across the UK, and of electoral management more widely. The Electoral Commission is the UK's electoral management body—responsible for the oversight of elections and associated processes, including party finance. It works closely with local government in setting benchmarks for integrity and standards for the management of elections, regulates and registers political donations, and publishes election data (such as those related to turnout and political party funding). It was established decades earlier in 2000, as part of the New Labour government's drive to modernize the country's political infrastructure and address 1990s era concerns about propriety, ethics, and 'sleaze' under John Major's government. The Committee for Standards in Public Life (1998, p. 149), in its Fifth Report, emphasised the importance of such bodies being independent:

Those who have advocated the establishment of an Electoral Commission have been emphatic that it should be independent both of the government of the day and of the political parties ... An Election Commission in a democracy like ours could not function properly, or indeed at all, unless it were scrupulously impartial and believed to be so by everyone seriously involved and by the public at large.

In 2022, the government passed the Elections Bill, which granted itself the power, via the relevant government minister, to author a legally binding ‘Strategy and Policy Statement’ that the Electoral Commission must follow by law (Electoral Commission, 2024). This was justified by an apparent loss of faith on the part of some members of parliament in the Commission’s ability to do its job and to enhance parliamentary accountability of its leadership. It has been suggested, however, that the Conservatives’ true rationale may in fact reflect a dissatisfaction with the Commission arising from its rulings over campaign related issues in the 2016 referendum campaign which painted Vote Leave figures in a negative light (Dean, 2022). In particular, the Commission used its powers to prosecute the pro-Brexit organization BeLeave, whose founder Darren Grimes was fined £20,000 for improper campaign activity (following appeal, the proceedings were dropped). As such, the pursuit of the Elections Act may have reflected a desire to ‘rein in’ an Electoral Commission which had been seen as exhibiting pro-European—or perceived anti-conservative—tendencies.

While the government contended that an (ill-defined) ‘operational independence’ remained in place (Electoral Commission, 2024), critics suggested that it in fact threatened that independence by creating a new legal requirement which overrode its other and more established objectives. For instance, the chair of the Electoral Commission John Pullinger described the changes as ‘inconsistent with the idea of an independent body’ (quoted in Fraser, 2023) and urged the government to reconsider its approach. He also noted elsewhere that ‘most people would think that the government of the day has only one strategy and policy priority for the next election, and that’s to win it for themselves’ (quoted in Dean, 2022), perhaps reflecting a cynical view of the partisan nature of contemporary governance and UK politics ‘winner takes all’ base structure. Pullinger additionally took the unusual step of reassuring the public that the independence of the Electoral Commission was safe while he was in charge (Dean, 2022).

January 2024 saw the issuance of the policy statement, which placed strong emphasis on electoral fraud, the administration of new controversial voter identification rules, and electoral security more generally—rather than, for instance, increasing political participation or reducing political inequality in elections. This focus on electoral fraud is significant owing to controversial reforms to identification requirements which were acknowledged by Jacob Rees-Mogg as an attempt to ‘gerrymander’ UK elections (BBC News, 2023). The Electoral Commission continued to make representations which argued that the existence of a statement was incompatible with the required institutional autonomy of the Commission, and called for the repeal of this power. Heeding this advice, the Labour government has since enacted plans to repeal the power to set a statement as part of a broader package of reforms, though

had been criticised for failing to announce such an intention earlier (Hawley & Parrett-Jung, 2025). Spotlight on Corruption (ibid.) argued earlier that the Conservative-era reforms made the UK an outlier amongst peer countries, and draw attention to criticism from international electoral integrity stakeholders and bodies (ibid). Ultimately, the reforms to the Electoral Commission represent an instance in which the independence of institutionally autonomous regulatory bodies is bound ever more closely to the governing agendas and responsive to the political priorities and, perhaps, the interests of populist actors.

The Rwanda scheme

The third case under exploration here focuses on the role of the civil service in both frustrating and enabling the controversial package of measures that collectively came to be known as the Rwanda Scheme. A ‘hard-line’ approach on issues such as asylum and immigration was a key feature of the post-Brexit Conservative government’s approach. In this it combined ‘tough’ ‘textbook populist’ rhetoric with approaches that appeared in tension with the country’s legal obligations under the Human Rights Act and its international legal obligations (Henley, 2023). A component of this approach were plans to forcibly remove asylum seekers from the UK, who would be held and processed in the ‘third country’ of Rwanda, where, if successful, they would remain indefinitely (if unsuccessful, they would return to their countries of origin). This sat alongside an ‘effective criminalisation’ of the act of seeking asylum in the UK from other safe countries’ (Bale, 2023a, p. 204). One public rationale for the plan was to offer a deterrent to criminal groups that facilitate and profit from unsafe journeys across the English Channel from France, which had become (and remains at the time of writing) a salient and pressing political issue. However, a more general populist anti-migrant rhetoric has accompanied these changes, particularly from the former home secretary Suella Braverman, who was the public face of the scheme during Rishi Sunak’s premiership and has since defected to Nigel Farage’s Reform UK (Bonansinga & Forrest, 2025).

The Rwanda policy was cancelled by Keir Starmer’s incoming Labour government as one of its first acts in office. This reflected its intensely controversial nature and a lack of faith on the part of stakeholders that it would have anything approaching the desired effect. The EU Commissioner for Home Affairs described it as not being a ‘humane and dignified migration policy’ (quoted in Gower et al., 2024, p. 7). A coalition of 150 pro-rights organizations highlighted the risks inherent in the scheme were it to be implemented: more, rather than fewer, dangerous journeys (and a commensurate rise in trafficking), Rwanda’s poor record in comparable arrangements with other countries, the ‘astronomical costs’ of similar schemes in operation in Australia, and its broader potential to create ‘immense suffering’ for some of the most vulnerable people on earth (BID International, 2022). Researchers, too, have been critical. For example, McQuinn (2024) describes the scheme as representing ‘policy incoherence’ due to its incompatibility with existing commitments on human rights, environmental development, and joined up government (see also Bonansinga & Forrest, 2025). The Refugee Council (2024) argued in an impact assessment

that it could lead to over 190,000 being detained, including 45,000 children, costing around £9 billion to lock up individuals who could not be removed to other countries. These policies formed part of a broader agenda to essentially absolve the country from its international obligations on asylum—similar in some respects to those adopted by the former Hungarian government led by Viktor Orban. It may be the case that the attendant controversy was part of the plan—reflecting a preference for ‘wedge’ issues which place political opponents on the ‘wrong side’ of public opinion, and particularly those in electorally significant voter demographic groups (Bale, 2023a, p. 245). When the plans were announced by the then prime minister Boris Johnson, he acknowledged that they would trigger what he described as ‘politically motivated’ challenges in court (while simultaneously vouching for their legality) (Sky News, 2022).

The UN’s Refugee Agency quickly announced that the plans were in breach of both the letter and spirit of the refugee charter (UNHCR, 2022) and, in November 2023, the UK’s Supreme Court ruled unanimously that Rwanda was, in fact, not a ‘safe third country’ (a key justification used by the government for the policy—see Walsh, 2024). The chosen response was to introduce government legislation which stated that Rwanda was a ‘safe country’ according to law (known as the Safety of Rwanda Act). This came alongside a strengthening of the treaty, with extra legal safeguards for refugees in a revisited treaty with Rwanda, measures which came into force in April 2024. Despite the long-running, complex, and costly nature of the Rwanda scheme, no asylum seekers were forcibly deported by the government. Indeed, Sunak went into the 2024 General Election pledging that the first flight would take off if his party won the election, despite their enjoyment of a parliamentary majority at that point.

UK policy had been motivated (at least publicly) by a desire to ‘stop the boats’, with Sunak making this one of his five pledges to the electorate upon taking office in September 2022 (Bonansinga & Forrest, 2025; BID International, 2022). It is notable that this focus survived two changes of prime minister under the Conservatives. The scheme was announced under the home secretaryship of Priti Patel during the premiership of Boris Johnson. Liz Truss, during her brief stint in No. 10, supported deepening and extending the scheme (and has supported it strongly out of office), and Rishi Sunak made it the rhetorical core of his premiership. Under Truss and Sunak, the radical right populist Suella Braverman was appointed to the position of home secretary. One impediment faced by all three premiers was the provisions of the Human Rights Act 1998, which has also generally frustrated Conservative politicians over a number of years due to its constraining consequences.

The role of officials during this period was notable. First, upon the announcement of the scheme in 2022, the Home Office’s top civil servant, Matthew Rycroft, was put in the unusual position of requesting a ‘ministerial direction’ from Braverman’s predecessor as home secretary Priti Patel, reflecting misgivings as to the scheme’s ability to reflect ‘value for money’—but perhaps reflecting broader concerns about the efficacy and legality of the scheme. Second, a public sector trade union sought to use legal action to prevent the scheme’s progress, as it placed civil servants in a position where they were expected to develop plans for

the furtherance of the Rwanda policy agenda in spite of a high degree of ambiguity as to the legality of the plans—and therefore adherence to the Civil Service Code. Third, this understandable reticence on the part of public officials was weaponized by Conservative politicians, including Jacob Rees-Mogg, who attributed their resistance to their membership of the ‘blob’ in a statement on his GB News TV programme (Rees-Mogg, 2024). Ultimately, the Rwanda scheme exemplifies some key features of the tensions inherent in the Westminster story vs the more complex realities. A parliamentary majority was available to turn the aspirations for the scheme into legislative and administrative form. Opposition was present, with deep misgivings emerging from within the administrative state, but the top-down assertion of control was sufficient to override these, at least on paper. However, the accumulation of smaller setbacks, political considerations, legal constraint, and the difficulties of actually implementing the scheme meant its objectives did not come close to meeting the expectations set for them—perhaps providing further ammunition for anti-‘blob’, anti-system, and anti-élite populist rhetoric.

The Rwanda scheme demonstrates the limits of policy forcing in a consolidated majoritarian democracy. Ministers possessed the requisite authority and partisan incentives to pursue the scheme, yet implementation was repeatedly disrupted by contested legality, administrative feasibility, collisions with professional norms, judicial scrutiny, international obligations, and, finally, electoral timing. The case therefore shows both the power and limits of populist executive assertion: it can generate institutional strain and de-legitimizing rhetoric, but it does not guarantee policy delivery.

Discussion and conclusion

The analysis presented in this article has examined the populism/bureaucracy interaction in the UK as an incremental and contested process shaped by the country’s distinctive institutional configuration, and expectations thereof. In other words, populism in Westminster systems becomes a project of restoring a partly mythologised executive state that no longer, and perhaps never really did, exist. Across the three case studies, a common pattern can be observed: a populist-inflected government did not seek to dismantle the bureaucratic state wholesale. Instead, leading actors pursued a combination of narrative, institutional, and policy strategies aimed at reasserting executive dominance within a system whose day-to-day functioning persistently frustrated its ambitions. The 2019–2024 Conservative governments are best understood as a mainstream right wing governing party increasingly shaped by radical-right populist pressures, rhetoric, and policy logics, rather than as a fully populist party.

The narrative construction of the ‘blob’ illustrates how populism engages bureaucracy at the symbolic level. Faced with predictable and at times justified administrative caution, legal and constitutional constraint, and well-practised policy inertia, populist actors reframed bureaucratic expertise and proceduralism as ideological obstruction typical of a cossetted élite, ‘blob’, and an ‘enemy within’. The second case, reform of the Electoral Commission, meanwhile, demonstrates how anti-

bureaucracy narratives took concrete, if selective, policy form. This highlights the vulnerability of regulators and watchdogs in an executive-centric system where independence enjoys few formal protections and depends on restraint on the part of governments. Importantly, these reforms largely operated entirely within the bounds of legality (Kippin, 2025a, p. 12). Their significance lies in both the shift to more overt partisanship (or at least the adoption of ideological perspectives) and in the reorientation of regulatory priorities which aligned more closely with ministerial agendas and political interests. This represents a mild or 'soft' form of bureaucratic politicization that is difficult to contest using existing institutional safeguards, yet corrosive to the legitimacy of independent regulation.

The Rwanda asylum scheme, which was more legally contentious, represents the most dramatic example of this dynamic, exposing the limits of populist executive assertion when confronted with entrenched legal obstacles, administrative constraints, and the strong professional norms of a bureaucratic system in a mature democracy. Unlike the previous cases, this represents an attempt to circumvent or override institutional constraints. The scheme's ultimate failure underlines an important core argument of this article: while the UK's institutional arrangements offer populist governments considerable room for manoeuvre, it does not guarantee delivery. The relationship with political success is more ambiguous, still. Complexity, legality, and bureaucratic professionalism remain powerful constraints, even if they can individually be, at least to an extent, overcome. However, these are not unique to populist-inflected governance—rather, they are well observed even during 'normal' times. The UK experience suggests that in parliamentary, majoritarian, and executive-centric systems such as the UK, populist governance is likely to operate through incremental strategies of de-legitimation, institutional 'bending', and occasional imposition—rather than through abrupt administrative capture. These strategies may weaken bureaucratic autonomy and erode democratic norms without triggering immediate constitutional crises. Yet, they do also risk long-term damage to administrative capacity, public trust, policy effectiveness—and democracy.

Overall, this case suggests that in executive-centric parliamentary systems, populist governance may not require the clear capture of the administrative state. Where bureaucracies are professionalized and the rule of law remains, for the most part, resilient, populist executives may instead pursue a lower-intensity set of approaches: de-legitimizing bureaucratic input, 'legitimately' reshaping regulators and mediating bodies, and forcing policy through existing legislative and governing avenues. A final observation relates to the broader political context facing the UK in 2026, when Labour leads a more conventional centrist administration. At the time of writing, Nigel Farage's Reform UK has become a significant force in British politics and is more clearly situated within the radical right populist family than the Conservative Party examined here (Zulianello, 2020). Whether alone, or in partnership with a more rightward facing Conservative Party, their ascension to power is a far from remote prospect.

The analysis presented here suggests that the UK's executive-centric constitution, weak formal protections for

mediating institutions, and reliance on political restraint leave the administrative state exposed to a more overtly populist governing project. Such a government would likely encounter the same constraints identified in this article: bureaucratic and official resistance, independent regulators, rule of law based impediments, and implementation complexity. Such structures could be taken as evidence of elite obstruction requiring stronger executive correction. In that context, the repertoire identified here, narrative de-legitimation, selective institutional bending, and policy forcing, could become more systematic, expansive, and disruptive. The UK case therefore highlights a broader vulnerability of Westminster-style governance: where institutional autonomy depends heavily on restraint and convention, a radical right populist executive may possess considerable scope to discipline, reshape, or bypass the administrative state without abolishing it outright.

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