

Understanding UKIP: Identity, Social Change and the Left Behind

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Abstract

In this article we explore the structural shifts which help explain the emergence of UKIP as a major radical-right political force in Britain. There are two distinct, but related, aspects to this story. The first is the changes to Britain's economic and social structure that have pushed to the margins a class of voters who we describe as the 'left behind': older, working-class, white voters with few educational qualifications. The second is long-term generational changes in the values that guide British society and shape the outlook of voters. These value shifts have also left older white working-class voters behind, as a worldview which was once seen as mainstream has become regarded as parochial and intolerant by the younger, university-educated, more socially liberal elites who define the political consensus of twenty-first-century Britain. We then move to consider the political changes that have further marginalised these voters, as first Labour and then the Conservatives focused their energies on recruiting and retaining support from middle-class, moderate swing voters. Finally, we show how UKIP has developed into an effective electoral machine which looks to win and retain the loyalties of these voters. Finally, we discuss the longer-term implications of the radical-right revolt, which has the potential to change the nature of party competition in Britain in the 2015 election and beyond.

Keywords: UKIP, radical right, political parties, Britain, elections, immigration, euroscepticism, value change

IN THE May 2014 European Parliament elections, Nigel Farage and the UK Independence Party (UKIP) finished in first place, with over 4.3 million votes and 26.6 per cent of the national vote. As shown in Figure 1, this was the strongest result for UKIP in its history of fighting elections to the European Parliament. It was also the first nationwide election victory for a new party since Ramsay MacDonald led Labour to its general election success in 1929, and the first occasion since 1906 on which a party other than Labour or the Conservatives won the highest share of the vote in a nationwide election. While European Parliament elections are held under a form of proportional representation and hence offer a more favourable context for challenger parties, the fact that a small party with no more than twenty full-time employees was able to win the election outright remains striking.

The rise of UKIP, capped by victory in the 2014 European elections, has captivated Britain's political and media class. This interest has been further fuelled by the subsequent

defection of the Conservative MP Douglas Carswell to UKIP, triggering a parliamentary by-election in Clacton which is likely to deliver UKIP its first elected MP in October 2014. UKIP also look set to capitalise on the 'No' vote delivered by Scottish voters in their September 2014 independence referendum, as Farage and his party have positioned themselves prominently as the voice of English nationalism and identity in the emerging constitutional debates the referendum campaign has triggered. Prior to this surge of interest, the underlying drivers of the steady rise in UKIP support over the past decade were little discussed and poorly understood. In a recent book, *Revolt on the Right: Explaining Support for the Radical Right in Britain* (2014), we challenged the conventional wisdom about UKIP's political insurgency, which portrays the party as a single-issue fringe movement that is filled only with eurosceptic Conservatives. Instead, and drawing on a sample of almost 6,000 self-identified UKIP supporters, we showed how its appeal is

more accurately rooted in three motives: a 'hard' brand of euroscepticism that opposes the principle of Britain's EU membership; strong opposition to immigration and concern about its effects on the British economy and society; and dissatisfaction with established politics in Westminster and how the established parties have managed immigration and the post-2008 financial crisis.¹ Importantly, this appeal is also highly differentiated; while UKIP's message has resonated strongly among certain sections of society, it has fallen completely flat elsewhere. Yet where the message has connected with voters the political effects have been impressive. At the time of writing, UKIP is averaging 14.9 per cent in domestic voting intention polls,² and is already the most popular choice for voters from its core constituency of older, white working-class men. A revolt of this magnitude does not happen by accident. Rather, and as we will show in this article, UKIP is the political articulation of deep divides in British society—divides that have been building for decades.

The transformation of Britain and the emergence of the 'left behind'

Much of the debate about UKIP's support tends to focus only on the changed political context in Britain following the 2010 general election, mainly the advent of the first coal-

ition government for seventy years and the unpopularity of Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron among his party's more socially conservative and Eurosceptic supporters. UKIP, it is often argued, represents little more than a second home for disgruntled Conservatives who, since the arrival of Cameron as the Conservative party leader in 2005, have seen little of their social conservatism and disdain for the EU reflected in their new leader. It is this popular assumption that has led some commentators, such as Matthew Parris, to reject the portrayal of UKIP as a political party in its own right, and to instead frame the movement as 'a mutiny within Conservatism'.³

The reality, however, is quite different. Whether knowingly or not, Nigel Farage and his party have mobilised into politics social and economic divisions that have existed for decades. There are two distinct, but related, aspects to this story. The first centres on changes to Britain's economic and social structure that have pushed to the margins a class of voters who we describe as the 'left behind'; older, working-class, white voters who lack the educational qualifications, incomes and skills that are needed to adapt and thrive amid a modern post-industrial economy. The second aspect is long-term generational changes in the values that shape the outlook of voters on a range of social and cultural issues, particularly on issues such as

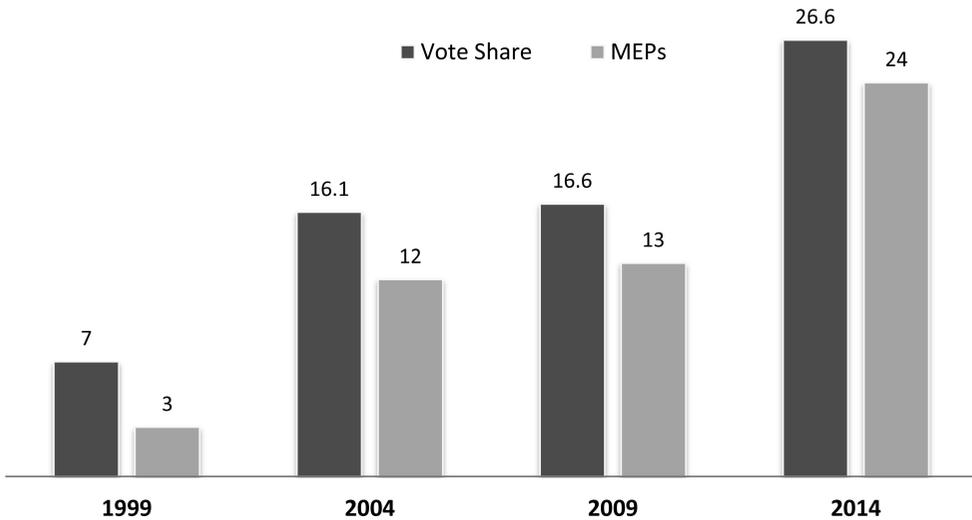


Figure 1. UKIP performance at European Parliament elections, 1999–2014

race and immigration, national identity, gender, rights for same-sex couples, Europe and ethnic diversity. These value shifts have left certain groups of voters behind in a second way, as an outlook that was once seen as mainstream has become increasingly regarded as parochial and intolerant by the younger, university-educated, more socially liberal and financially secure majority who define the political consensus in early twenty-first-century Britain.

Britain's economic and social structure has changed dramatically over the past fifty years, as a manufacturing-led economy gave way to a service-based and increasingly middle-class dominated society. The white working class, once large enough to determine the outcome of national elections, has shrunk relentlessly. When Harold Wilson returned Labour to office in 1964 after thirteen years in the wilderness, almost half of Britain's workers were in manual work, over 70 per cent of voters had no educational qualifications, over 40 per cent of workers belonged to a trade union, 30 per cent relied on the state for housing and 98 per cent of voters were white. Yet by the time that Cameron and the Conservatives returned to power in 2010 after a similar spell in opposition, Britain's electorate looked very different. Only three out of every ten workers were in blue-collar jobs, a decline of almost 20 percentage points since Wilson's time. The share of the workforce that belonged to a union had dropped to 20 per cent, while the power and influence of these institutions had been dramatically curbed. Today, most of the remaining unionised work in Britain is in white-collar and public sector jobs, and voters are also far less dependent on the state for housing; the share of voters in council housing has more than halved, and now stands at just over one in ten. Meanwhile, the ethnic minority share of the electorate was already above 10 per cent in 2010, and is rising very rapidly.

The decline of white working-class voters is mirrored by the sustained rise of a more diverse and educated electorate, with middle-class professionals as the politically and numerically dominant group. In the 1950s, most voters left school with no qualifications at all, but a steady expansion of education has since led to a steep rise in overall education levels. In Wilson's time, less than one voter in twenty had a degree and less than one worker

in five did professional middle-class work. Yet by 2010 one third of voters had been to university and 35 per cent of Britain's workforce was in professional, middle-class jobs.

These shifts in economic and social structure mean different British generations have drastically different experiences of education, the workplace and society. Nearly half of the pensioners surveyed in 2013 by the British Social Attitudes (BSA) researchers had left school with no qualifications, but only 6 per cent of those under 35 had done so, while the proportion of respondents who had attended or are attending university more than triples from just over 12 per cent among pensioners to nearly 40 per cent among the under-35s (a figure which will rise further as many of the youngest respondents will go on to enrol). Class is a little harder to assess across generations, as most employees will move up the workplace hierarchy as they get older. However, even with this seniority effect working in the opposite direction, it is clear that the workplace experiences of younger generations are different: more than half of those aged 35 to 50 in the BSA survey do white-collar work already, while less than 40 per cent of pensioners report their last job being a white collar one. Britain's ethnic diversity is also highly structured by generation—less than 80 per cent of the under-35s identified as white in the 2013 survey, while among pensioners the figure was over 95 per cent.

These broad changes have remade Britain's economy and society, and continue to remake it as younger generations replace the older cohorts whose experiences were so different. As the years passed, a new class of financially secure and degree-holding middle-class professionals came to dominate the national economy, society, politics and media. Furthermore, the prospects facing Britain's mainly middle-class graduates remain bright; despite university expansion, rising tuition fees and austerity, the demand for skilled graduates remains sufficient to provide most with good-quality employment and long-term security. This outlook contrasts sharply with that facing older, low-skilled blue-collar voters, who have been pushed to the margins by rising inequality in incomes and prospects, the collapse of traditional industries and the steady erosion of trade unions. The 'left behind' voters are thus pessimistic for a

reason; their economic and social position in society has been steadily declining for decades and they see little prospect of an improvement in the future, for them or their children.

Yet it has not only been economic change that has left older white workers behind. The past fifty years have also seen profound changes in how Britain sees itself, and in the values and social attitudes of its citizens. Social scientists have long observed how these attitudes and values are influenced strongly by the conditions in which citizens grow up. Younger Britons who were born since the 1980s have come of age in a society that is increasingly diverse ethnically, culturally and religiously, socially mobile and well integrated into European and global markets—a very different world to the Britain in which their parents and grandparents grew up. Britons born before the 1960s and 1970s were raised in a society that was almost exclusively white, and most people would have had very limited contact with migrants or people from other countries. These older cohorts of voters lived through the contentious and highly polarised debates over migration and its impact on national identity led by Enoch Powell and the National Front. Such voters also knew Britain as a country that stood apart from Europe, and remember a nation that once sat at the heart of an Empire. In addition, these voters grew up in a world of strict adherence to authoritarian social rules on issues such as sex, marriage, speech and expression.

The extent and importance of these sharp generational divides can be seen in Table 1, which illustrates the fundamental differences in how different generations of British voters think about race, immigration, national identity, the rights of sexual minorities and relations with the EU, all issues that feature prominently in UKIP's campaigns. These data are taken from the most recent British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey, and highlight the huge generational differences in attitudes on the issues that UKIP campaign on. The party's positions are consistently on the grey side of this divide, which goes a long way towards explaining why the party appeals almost exclusively to older voters. The majority of British pensioners think immigration has had a negative economic and cultural

impact, want migration reduced 'a lot' and report having no migrant friends. Two thirds of pensioners say they would mind if a close relative married a Muslim, while well over half feel that being born in Britain and having British ancestors are 'very important' prerequisites for being 'truly British'. Over 40 percent of Britons over 65 years old believe that gay sex is at least 'mostly' wrong and express objections about gay marriage and gay parents. On the EU—UKIP's headline issue—more than 70 per cent of pensioners don't want Britain to follow EU decisions it disagrees with, and almost half would vote to leave the EU altogether. On all of these issues Britain's pensioners are poles apart from the country's young voters. Only minorities of the under-35s support any of these positions, and often the minority is small. Differences in attitudes by education level show a similar pattern, with university graduates consistently on the liberal, cosmopolitan and euro-phile side of the debate, and young graduates even more so. A look at this chart makes it clear why Britain's political and media class—dominated by university graduates who are often under the age of 50 years old—find UKIP voters' concerns so hard to understand. On a wide range of issues, the two groups are poles apart.

Why 'left-behind' voters feel politically excluded

UKIP's emergence is not just a story of economic change, or generational shifts in values. It is also a story of political change, as shifts in the appeals and strategies of mainstream political parties have opened up space for the radical right.⁴ When we track the proportion of left-behind voters who say they identify with either Labour or the Conservatives over the past thirty years we find a dramatic shift. During the 1980s and 1990s, blue-collar voters and those with no or very few qualifications were continuing to participate in Britain's two-party system. A large majority of them identified with one of the two main parties, most often Labour. However, during the 2000s these left-behind groups steadily lost faith in Labour, yet rather than switch to the centre-right Conservatives, they simply stopped identifying with either of Britain's main parties.

Table 1. British views on immigration, race and national identity by age

	Under 35	35–49	50–64	65-plus
Immigration attitudes				
Immigration has a negative economic impact	41	45	52	52
Immigration has a negative cultural impact	37	43	50	53
Immigration levels should be reduced ‘a lot’	44	51	63	69
Have no migrant friends	30	35	40	59
Racial attitudes				
Would mind if a close relative married a Muslim	27	37	50	66
Would mind if a close relative married someone black	7	14	17	39
Would mind if a close relative married someone Asian	15	17	21	31
National identity				
Being born in Britain ‘very important’ to being truly British	28	32	42	61
Having British ancestors ‘very important’ to being truly British	13	14	28	58
Being Christian ‘very important’ to being truly British	2	6	11	36
Attitudes to gays and lesbians				
Sexual relations between two adults of the same sex ‘mostly’ or ‘always’ wrong	11	18	22	42
Attempts to give equal opportunities to gays and lesbians ‘have gone too far’	17	29	39	50
Gay or lesbian couple just as capable of being good parents as man and woman—% disagree	17	24	34	40
Gay and lesbian couples should have right to marry—% disagree	10	16	23	44
Euroskepticism				
Britain should follow EU decisions, even if it disagrees with them—% disagree	34	55	69	72
EU should have ‘less’ or ‘much less’ power than nation-states	36	63	67	73
Would vote to leave EU in a referendum	27	36	40	47

Source: British Social Attitudes 2013

These left-behind voters have disconnected from traditional political parties because they feel these parties no longer represent or respond to their concerns. Over the past thirty years, working-class Britons and those with no formal qualifications have been consistently twice as likely as the middle-class and graduates to *strongly* agree that people like them ‘have no say in government’. Yet by 2012 the proportion of working-class Britons who felt this way had reached a new record, with almost 40 per cent thinking that they have no say in our politics (compared to 16 per cent among middle-class voters). Such views are likely to mark a response to changes in the patterns of British party competition, with both Labour and the Conservatives increasingly jettisoning appeals to the left-behind groups in favour of a more economic-

ally centrist and socially liberal policy targeted at the professional and middle-class voters that both parties regard as electorally essential. This was reflected first in the rise of ‘New’ Labour, when under Blair the party toned down its traditional left-wing ideology and appeals to poorer voters in order to target the socially mobile, aspirational and ideologically moderate voters of middle England. The same tendency was then echoed, albeit less forcefully, by Cameron’s embrace of ‘compassionate Conservatism’, when young reformers sought to recast the Conservative party in their image—socially liberal, economically moderate and at ease with rising ethnic, sexual and cultural diversity.

Both parties’ moves pulled them towards the values and priorities of the educated middle classes—also the group providing

the parties with most of their MPs and activists. The concerns of left-behind voters were increasingly marginalised. Traditional economic arguments over the redistribution of income, provision of public housing, role of unions and the nationalisation of industries ceased to play a central role in political debate as both Labour and the Conservatives converged on a socially liberal, pro-market consensus. Similarly, generational differences in views about identity and social values in modern Britain, and the cultural impact of immigration and ethnic change, no longer had a clear outlet in mainstream politics after Cameron's accession to the Conservative party leadership. There was a strong logic to both of these decisions, each of which followed a long period of electoral failure, but their cumulative impact has been to leave a large constituency of voters without a mainstream voice, and provide an opening for a new radical-right alternative.

How UKIP mobilised the left-behind

UKIP did not create the social and value divides in Britain that we chart above, but since 2010 the party's rapid rise has given these divides a political expression. UKIP was founded at the London School of Economics in 1993 and united a small number of mainly ex-Conservative eurosceptics who were involved with fringe networks like the Bruges Group and Anti-Federalist League; after 1997, it also absorbed some activists from the Referendum Party. In its early years UKIP was primarily a policy-seeking rather than vote-seeking party; it remained obsessed with influencing policy on Britain's relationship with Europe, expressed little interest in elections and focused heavily on recruiting disillusioned Tories in southern England in the hope of pressuring the Conservatives to adopt a harder line on Europe.

While UKIP did enjoy some limited success at the 1999 and 2004 European Parliament elections, it was not until the aftermath of the 2010 general election and the election of Nigel Farage as UKIP leader for a second time (Farage had previously been leader between 2006 and 2009) that the party adopted a more concerted vote-seeking strategy. Seeking to capitalise on the space opened up by the

trends outlined above, UKIP's founding message of hard euroscepticism was widened to encompass calls for sharp restrictions to immigration and a more developed populist anti-establishment strategy. Strategically, learning from the rise of the Liberal Democrats, UKIP's new leader also encouraged his party to invest more seriously in domestic local and parliamentary by-elections. Farage's 'fusion strategy', meanwhile, sought to merge Europe and immigration in the minds of voters, not least as an attempt to overcome the historic low salience of the EU in the minds of voters, while the embrace of domestic electioneering was intended to help UKIP overcome the barriers posed by the first-past-the-post electoral system by establishing concentrated strongholds of support.

This shift of strategy and the underlying divides discussed above explain why UKIP was able to mobilise the most socially distinctive electorate in British politics: blue-collar, old, white and male voters who tend to have no or very few educational qualifications and feel pessimistic about their future economic prospects.⁵ Rather than a 'catch-all' or protest party that draws support from across society, we find that UKIP has the most working-class following in British politics—the most working-class following, in fact, since Michael Foot led the Labour party into the 1983 general election. Aside from their socio-demographic profile, a detailed analysis of the motivations of UKIP voters revealed that most are driven by a 'Brussels-plus' outlook; while the party's supporters are universally eurosceptic, euroscepticism alone is not enough to deliver many voters into UKIP's camp—the vast majority combine hostility to the EU with strong concerns about immigration, dissatisfaction with the functioning of British politics and negative views about the performance of both Labour and the Conservatives on immigration and the post-2008 financial crisis.⁶ UKIP succeeded once they found a way to link the traditional radical-right appeals—immigration, identity and hostility to elites—to the euroscepticism that motivates their activists and provided their founding principles. Once this winning formula was developed, UKIP discovered that Britain, like most other West European countries, has a large, socially distinctive electorate which is receptive to radical-right politics and

feels that its concerns are not articulated elsewhere in the system.

To what extent will these voters remain loyal to UKIP at the 2015 general election, which will be held under a first-past-the-post majoritarian system that is traditionally harsh on smaller new entrants? More recent data from the British Election Study (BES) throws some light on UKIP's prospects.⁷ Of those who supported UKIP at the European Parliament elections, some 36 per cent are already planning to switch to another party at the 2015 general election—a figure that will likely rise as the election approaches and more voters begin to think about parties' prospects in their local constituencies. Of these voters who will defect, 25 per cent said they will switch to the Conservatives, 8 per cent to Labour and 3 per cent to another party. Yet almost two thirds of those who voted for UKIP at the European elections said they plan to stay loyal to UKIP in 2015. Even if this figure drops a fair amount, it would leave UKIP with well over 10 per cent of the vote, a far stronger base of support than at the previous general election in 2010.

Discussion: UKIP's revolt and 2015

Almost twenty years ago, two academics published the biography of another challenger to the established parties in Britain, the Social Democratic Party. Reflecting on the rise and fall of this earlier insurgency, Ivor Crewe and Anthony King noted how its performance bore a resemblance to a biography of someone who had showed early promise but died too young.⁸ Today, it is too early to assess whether UKIP will suffer the same fate as the SDP—but either way, its rapid rise since the 2010 general election has already opened a window on deep social change in Britain and a constituency of left-behind voters who are turning away from Britain's established politics. This development raises a series of important questions both for the immediate and the longer-term future of British politics.

First, UKIP's rise changes the nature of party competition in the short term. While much of the debate about the 2015 general election will focus on the ability of UKIP to exert a *direct* impact by possibly winning parliamentary seats such as South Thanet,

Thurrock, Great Grimsby or Eastleigh, UKIP also holds the potential to have a significant *indirect* impact on the outcome of the election, in two other ways. The party may recruit sufficient support in key Conservative marginal seats to thwart David Cameron's plans for a return to power. This will be increasingly likely if UKIP is able to more than double its 3.1 per cent share of the national vote in 2010. At the 2014 European Parliament elections, the twenty strongest local authority level performances for UKIP—where the party polled over 41 per cent of the votes—all came in Conservative areas. But UKIP could also hamper Labour's path to victory in 2015 by winning support from blue-collar left-behind groups, disgruntled Liberal Democrat protestors and non-voters, all of whom Labour need to break through in many key marginal seats. UKIP's appeal in many Labour areas was also evident at the 2014 European elections, where the party polled over 40 per cent in Rotherham and North East Lincolnshire, over 35 per cent in Doncaster, Hartlepool, Middlesbrough, Redcar and Cleveland, Scarborough and Kingston-Upon-Hull, and over 25 per cent in areas like Carlisle, Calderdale and Stockport. Some Labour-affiliated organisations such as the Fabian Society have since warned of dwindling blue-collar support for Labour, while identifying six Labour-held seats where UKIP 'won' the popular vote in the 2014 local elections: namely Rotherham, Rother Valley, Dudley North, Plymouth Moor View, Penistone and Stocksbridge and Great Grimsby.⁹ It is these kinds of results that are leading some UKIP activists to talk ambitiously about establishing their party as the only credible alternative to Labour in many of its more northern heartlands.

Second, moving beyond 2015, UKIP's rise also has longer-term implications for Labour and the Conservatives, both of which are continuing to win a lot of support from euro-sceptic and anti-immigration voters. How will the main parties sustain this support while simultaneously fending off a challenge from the radical right? While appealing to older, working-class and less well-educated Britons on issues such as net migration and restricting benefits for EU migrants may be an appealing short-term response, such a strategy has little appeal over the long term. As the years stretch

to decades, many left-behind voters will be replaced by young, socially liberal and ethnically diverse new voters who simply do not share most of these concerns.

A third set of questions relates to the broader social and value changes in Britain that are creating space for UKIP. How can policy-makers, parties and interest groups forge a stronger consensus on contentious issues like immigration and national identity, where Britain is now deeply divided along generational, educational, ethnic and class lines? Britain's political and social elites tend to be drawn heavily from the more liberal end of the spectrum, and stand in sharp contrast to the older, blue-collar left-behind voters who perceive this rapid social change as a threat to their national community, values and ways of life. This tension is exacerbated by the fact that in many areas of public policy on migration, EU-level regulations and legislation mean it is very difficult to impose the kind of restrictions and controls that a clear majority of British voters want to see. EU rules, for example, make it extremely unlikely that any post-2015 government will be able to significantly curb overall migration, dramatically modify the 'free movement of workers' principle or tightly restrict EU migrants' access to the welfare state. This combination of persistent public anxiety, a disconnect in attitudes between elites and voters and constraints on the ability of those in public policy to deliver tangible change are likely to further fuel the rise of UKIP, and of other radical-right parties across Europe.

Notes

- 1 R. Ford and M. J. Goodwin, *Revolt on the Right: Explaining Support for the Radical Right in Britain*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2014.
- 2 R. Ford, W. Jennings, M. Pickup and C. Wlezien, 'Polling Observatory 37: No Westminster polling aftershock from European earthquake', <http://blog.policy.manchester.ac.uk/featured/2014/06/polling-observatory-37-no-westminster-polling-aftershock-from-european-earthquake/> (accessed 27 June 2014).
- 3 Matthew Parris, 'Ukip isn't a national party. It's a Tory sickness', *The Spectator*, 3 May 2014, <http://www.spectator.co.uk/columnists/matthew-parris/9197741/ukip-isnt-a-national-party-its-a-tory-sickness/> (accessed 25 June 2014).
- 4 In early 2009, one of these authors speculated about the potential electorate share for a radical-right insurgent, noting that a radical-right insurgent could win over 20 per cent or more of British voters, but that the BNP (then the dominant far-right force) was too toxic to ever fulfil this potential. See R. Ford, 'Who might vote for the BNP? Survey evidence on the electoral potential of the extreme right in Britain', in R. Eatwell and M. Goodwin, eds, *The New Extremism in 21st Century Britain*, London, Routledge, 2009.
- 5 Here we draw on data on almost 6,000 self-identified UKIP voters from *Revolt on the Right*. See also R. Ford, M. J. Goodwin and D. Cutts, 'Strategic Eurosceptics and polite xenophobes: support for the United Kingdom Independence Party in the 2009 European Parliament elections', *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 51, no. 2, 2012, pp. 204–34.
- 6 For the full results of our analysis see the Appendix in Ford and Goodwin, *Revolt on the Right*.
- 7 See M. Goodwin and C. Milazzo, 'The battle is on to poach Ukip's voters—but they're a loyal bunch', *Guardian Comment is Free*, 29 May 2014; British Election Study website, <http://www.britishelectionstudy.com/> (accessed 26 June 2014).
- 8 I. Crewe and A. King, *SDP: The Birth, Life and Death of the Social Democratic Party*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995.
- 9 L. Baston and M. Roberts, 'Labour seats where Labour lost the popular vote in the 2014 local elections', 12 June 2014, Fabian Society, <http://www.fabians.org.uk/election-2014-the-numbers/> (accessed 26 June 2014).