

Explaining the Rise of the UK Independence Party in the 2014 European Parliamentary Elections

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Abstract

This paper examines European Election Study data in order to determine the saliency and opinion of UKIP supporters, immediately following their first-place victory in the UK 2014 elections to the European Parliament. Our results suggests that these UKIP supporters were clearly were anti-EU, with a self-identified right-wing ideology.

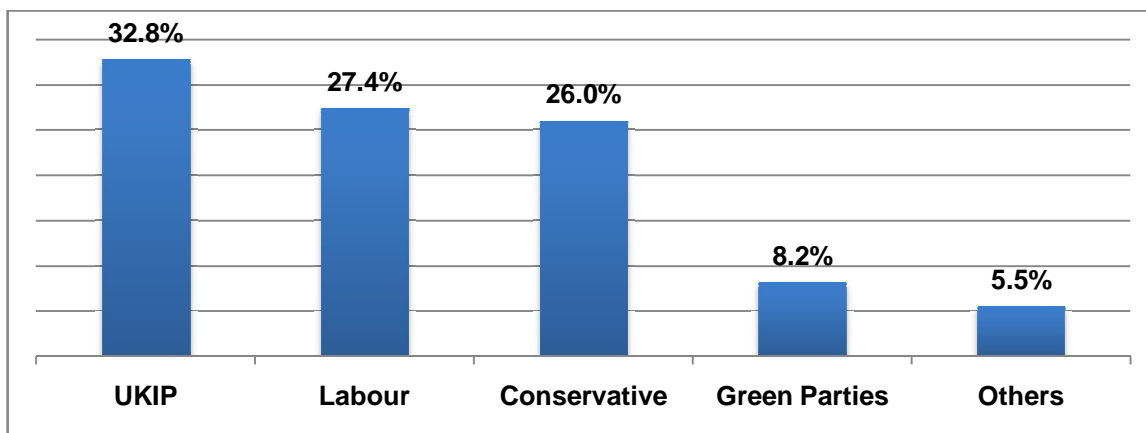
Keywords – UKIP, UK Independence Party, neo-populism, populism, European Parliamentary Elections

1.1 Introduction

In the last five years, the many European countries have experienced growing support for “neo-populist” parties. The Swedish Democrats gained representation for the first time in 2010 with 5.7% of the vote. Two other parties (the True Finns and the Danish People’s Party with 19.1% and 13.8% of the vote, respectively) have achieved third-place status in the most recent elections. Similarly, the Progress Party in Norway is the second-strongest party in that country and received 22.9% of the vote in the 2009 elections.

However, the results of the 2014 European Parliamentary elections sent shockwaves across the region, primarily because of the dramatic success of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and the Front National in France. The Front National party did well in 2009 by obtaining 24.9% of the seats, which increased to 31% in 2012. In the U.K., UKIP had received 16.1% of the seats in 2009, but it rose to first place in 2014 with 32.8% of the seats, as shown in Figure 1 below. This 2014 UKIP success is the first time in over a century that a party other than the Conservative or Labor Party has topped a UK national election (Martin and Smith (2014)). This article is a preliminary effort to ascertain the nature of UKIP supporters.

Figure 1: Distribution of UK Seats after the 2014 European Parliamentary Elections



Source: European Parliament (2015)

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1.2 The Concept of Neo-Populism

Although most of these neo-populist electoral successes have been met with concern by the traditional media, particularly because of the anti-immigrant message that characterizes most of these parties, the nature of their appeal is more complex. Some have defied the “right-wing” label; others have attracted former leftists or urban dwellers; and each contains certain elements of the different strands of populism. Populism is a term that is used in both social science and the public arena to denote a form of antiestablishment political activity. Studies of populism have sought to avoid the normative discussion of populism and instead develop it as a concept. Mudde (2000) notes that much of the debate among scholars is whether there is an all-encompassing form of populism or whether there are different types of populism. He argues for the latter approach, and describes three different types of populism: 1) agrarian populism; 2) economic populism; and 3) political populism. We suggest that the recent electoral successes of populist parties in Western Europe can be attributed to their ability to combine elements of all three types, and that most of these parties do not fit conveniently into a left-right political spectrum – hence the use of the term “neo-populist.”

1.3 Previous Research on Neo-Populist Parties

Several scholars believe that the political divisions of European countries have changed recently, and that this shift has contributed to the rise of neo-populist parties in Europe (Hout et al. 1996). Western European democracies have been characterized by two major cleavage dimensions: 1) the economic cleavage dimension, which pits workers against the owners, and also concerns the degree of state involvement in the economy, and 2) the socio-cultural cleavage dimension, which is about issues such as immigration, law and order, abortion, etc. (Rydgren, 2010) Rydgren believes that populist parties have become increasingly popular as economic divisions have become less salient, alienating many working class voters from their traditional parties such as the Social Democrats. Rydgren (2010) analyzed why neo-populist parties have been highly successful in Denmark but have not done as well in Sweden. He argues that Denmark and Sweden share anti-immigrant sentiments among the electorates and feelings of disenchantment toward the political institutions, but also that the two countries are different with regard to the socioeconomic dimension. While socioeconomic division has lost much of its importance in Danish politics, it is still highly salient in Swedish politics. Secondly, the issue of immigration has been much more salient in Denmark than in Sweden.

While immigration has dominated Danish politics during the last decade, in Sweden the socioeconomic dimension has been more important to voters. Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup. (2008) focus on the incentives for different parties in drawing attention to different issues, in their study of the immigration issue in Denmark and Sweden. Attention to this issue by the parties has been considerably stronger in Denmark than in Sweden. These authors explain this phenomenon by the different strategic situation of the mainstream right-wing parties in these two countries. Focusing on the immigrant issue can lead to a conflict with the center-right, especially socially liberal parties. In Sweden, such a conflict would undermine mainstream right-wing attempts at winning government power. In Denmark, the Liberals governed with the Social Democrats in the 1990s, which made it attractive for the main stream right-wing parties to focus on the issue in order to control the on the support of government with the support of neopopulist parties. The recent successes of the UK in the U.K. have followed a different path, however.

1.4 Previous Research on UKIP

Goodwin, Ford, and Cutts (2012) identified Euroscepticism as the main causal factor for voters supporting UKIP, along with concern over immigration levels and distrust of the political establishment. The typically UKIP voter was generally older than other voters, but Goodwin et al. found no correlation with social class, although UKIP voters did tend to feel more financially insecure. The skilled working class was found to be slightly overrepresented amongst UKIP voters, and there was a higher likelihood that a UKIP voter had grown up in a Conservative-supporting household compared to the average voter. Whitaker and Lynch (2011) concluded that the attitudes of UKIP supporters made them distinct from others voting for right-wing parties. The authors found that voter support for UKIP correlated with concerns about the value of immigration, hostility to immigrants and a lack of political trust in standard political institutions and processes, but the most powerful explanatory factor for support of UKIP was Euroscepticism.

These authors also found in their subsequent 2013 research that the beliefs of UKIP voters were closely aligned to those of the UKIP candidates, particularly on issues surrounding European integration, which resulted in some Conservative voters switching to UKIP due to divisions within the Conservative Party over this issue. Similarly, Hayton (2010) suggests that the UKIP's second-place finish in the 2009 European Parliament elections was a sign of a more generalized shift toward the acceptance of the populist right in Britain. The following analysis examines UK public opinion following their electoral success in the 2014 European Parliamentary elections, in order to assess this 2014 outcome, given the rising discontent with the EU, the worsening economy, and that the UKIP was headed by a charismatic leader.

2.1 Methodology and Results

In order to identify the factors that contributed to the electoral success of UKIP, we conduct a canonical linear discriminant analysis to identify the most important variables that distinguish between the parties in the UK (See Appendix). The data is taken from the European Election Study (Schmitt et al., 2015), which was collected via computer-assisted personal interviews (CAPI) in February and March of 2015, using a multi-stage stratified random sample of residents 18 years of age and over. There were 1421 completed interviews of UK voters, with 440 respondents who identified their party preference.

Table 1: Canonical Linear Discriminant Analysis

Function	Canon. Corr	Eigen-value	Var. Prop.	Var. Cum.	Likelihood Ratio	F	df1	df2	Prob>F
1	0.7065	0.9965	0.5780	0.5780	0.2559	3.4706	176	3791	0.0000
2	0.4898	0.3157	0.1831	0.7611	0.5108	1.9403	150	3489	0.0000
3	0.3281	0.1206	0.0700	0.8311	0.6721	1.3495	126	3185	0.0065
4	0.2851	0.0885	0.0513	0.8824	0.7531	1.1621	104	2876	0.1287
5	0.2362	0.0591	0.0343	0.9167	0.8198	1.0059	84	2562	0.4656
6	0.2174	0.0496	0.0288	0.9454	0.8682	0.9091	66	2242	0.6827
7	0.1816	0.0341	0.0198	0.9652	0.9113	0.7877	50	1914	0.8576
8	0.1604	0.0264	0.0153	0.9805	0.9424	0.6987	36	1576	0.9106
9	0.1451	0.0215	0.0125	0.9930	0.9673	0.5873	24	1222	0.9434
10	0.0922	0.0086	0.0050	0.9980	0.9881	0.3623	14	844	0.9845

As Table 1 shows, only three variables met the F score to be included in the model, suggesting that these three variables were the best discriminators of vote for a particular party. The number of dimensions is equal to the number of groups (Parties) minus 1. In addition, 57.8% of the variation in the model is explained by function 1, 18.3% is explained by function 2, and 7% is explained by function 3, with a cumulative 83.11% of all the variance explained by these three functions.

Table 2: Standardized canonical discriminant function coefficients

Variable	Function 1	Function 2	Function 3	Function 4	Function 5	Function 6
L-R	-0.6550	0.7222	0.0245	-0.0007	-0.0837	0.0540
Terrorism	-0.0465	0.1807	0.0410	0.0243	0.1265	-0.0913
Agriculture	0.1565	0.1339	0.3064	-0.1726	-0.3710	-0.1089
EU power	-0.1090	-0.2434	-0.0555	-0.1891	0.2555	-0.2641
Immigration	-0.3862	-0.2895	-0.2210	-0.3012	-0.0373	0.3154
Crime	-0.1118	-0.1668	-0.0656	-0.3619	-0.3499	-0.4010
Gender	-0.0646	0.1091	-0.0737	-0.1317	-0.1281	0.2163
Age	0.0121	0.1661	-0.5101	0.2214	0.5096	-0.2722
Class	0.0697	-0.0528	-0.1550	0.1742	-0.1118	0.5625
Lost Job	0.0152	0.2271	0.1993	0.5223	-0.0152	-0.0550
Make Less	-0.0794	0.0027	-0.1076	-0.3976	0.0524	-0.2437
Trust EU	-0.3111	-0.3806	-0.0741	0.1098	0.2077	0.2343
Unemployment	0.1575	0.1449	0.6315	0.1920	0.6057	-0.0555
Growth	0.0487	0.1516	0.0519	-0.5109	0.4209	0.3927
Euro	-0.0176	-0.1063	-0.0447	-0.0185	0.0553	-0.1682
Pensions	0.2913	0.2189	-0.5797	-0.1406	0.1156	0.1201

Table 2 shows the standardized discriminant coefficients, which can be interpreted in a similar way as OLS regression coefficients, and are similar to weights, which index the importance of each predictor and the direction of the relationship. The loadings represent the correlation between the observed variables and the unobserved function/dimension, and can be interpreted like a “latent” variable or factor. So, we can interpret Function 1 to represent the Left-Right placement, or ideology. These findings suggests that the most powerful discriminating variable, for parties in the UK, is their left right placemen, as it has a loading of $-.06550$.

Function 2 is trust in the EU, with a loading of -0.3806 . Function 3 is Unemployment (as the most important issue facing the country, according to the respondent), having a canonical loading of 0.6315 . As we mentioned, the other functions are not statistically significant discriminants for the differences among party supporters.

Table 3: Group Means on Canonical Variables

Party	F1- L-R	F2 EU Trust	F3 Unemployment
SF	0.8787	0.1912	1.1738
DUP	-0.0046	0.8227	0.3808
UUP	-0.5820	0.0042	-0.0511
SDLP	1.0116	0.7379	-0.1176
NI	-0.0599	0.3196	0.1077
CON	-0.6813	0.6820	-0.1874
LAB	1.3033	-0.5254	-0.0294
UKIP	-1.1954	-0.5842	0.0279
SNP	0.1364	0.0940	-0.2885

Table 3 shows the group means for each of the functions. For function 1, Left-Right placement, we see that the UKIP party is the furthest right party (standardized mean of -1.19), with the Conservative party as next most right-leaning (standardized mean of -0.68). Labor was identified by respondents as the most left-leaning party. (standardized mean of 1.3), followed by the SDLP in N. Ireland (1.01).

Turning to function 2, which was trust in the EU, the UKIP supporters were the least trusting of the EU, with a mean of -0.5842 , followed by Labor with a mean of $-.5254$. Those two were the only parties to not trust the EU (negative standardized mean), with all other parties ranging from $.004$ to $.8227$ in their trust of the EU. The DUP was most trusting, with a standardized mean of $.8227$. The Conservative party was also trusting of the EU with a score of $.6820$. Function 3, was Unemployment (as a major issue facing country). The party most focused on Unemployment was Sinn Fein, with a mean of 1.17 , and no other party was over 1 . UKIP seemed in the middle on the issue, with a score of 0.0279 . Conservatives and Labor were much less likely to list unemployment as a major issue with scores of -0.1874 , and -0.0029 respectively.

Table 4: Means on All Variables by Party

Variable	Party											
	SF	DUP	UUP	SDLP	NI	CON	LAB	UKIP	SNP	Plaid	LD	Green
L-R	5.2222	7.0000	6.9474	5.7333	6.6667	7.7973	3.6667	6.9636	6.2000	7.1429	5.3333	4.5333
Terrorism	0.1111	0.2222	0.1579	0.1333	0.0952	0.1757	0.0714	0.1364	0.0000	0.1429	0.0952	0.0333
Agriculture	0.0556	0.1667	0.1053	0.2000	0.0952	0.0676	0.0595	0.0636	0.0000	0.2857	0.0000	0.1000
EU power	0.1111	0.1111	0.2632	0.2000	0.0952	0.1622	0.1429	0.2909	0.2000	0.4286	0.2381	0.0333
Immigration	0.2222	0.3056	0.6842	0.2000	0.4762	0.4595	0.2143	0.7636	0.4000	0.2857	0.1905	0.1667
Crime	0.1111	0.1667	0.3684	0.0000	0.1429	0.1351	0.1310	0.1818	0.0000	0.4286	0.0952	0.1000
Gender	1.5000	1.4722	1.5263	1.6000	1.4286	1.4459	1.4286	1.4182	1.4000	1.4286	1.4286	1.5667
Age	44.9444	56.6111	52.1053	54.3333	54.4286	63.3784	54.8452	61.2091	62.4000	60.5714	63.3333	48.9667
Class	2.0000	2.0556	2.0526	2.4667	2.2857	2.2703	2.1786	2.0818	2.6000	2.1429	2.1429	2.3333
Lost Job	1.8889	1.9444	1.7368	1.8667	1.8095	1.9595	1.8810	1.8091	2.0000	1.8571	1.8571	1.9000
Make Less	1.4444	1.6944	1.5789	1.6667	1.6190	1.6216	1.5595	1.5545	1.2000	1.5714	1.7143	1.5333
Trust EU	2.5556	2.4722	2.8421	2.2000	2.6667	2.9189	2.5000	3.5545	2.8000	2.4286	2.3810	2.3667
Unemployment	0.7778	0.3333	0.2632	0.3333	0.3333	0.2162	0.2857	0.2273	0.2000	0.4286	0.1905	0.1667
Growth	0.4444	0.4167	0.5789	0.6667	0.4286	0.2973	0.4048	0.1727	0.4000	0.1429	0.3810	0.1667
Euro	0.0000	0.1389	0.1053	0.1333	0.0476	0.1081	0.0952	0.1455	0.2000	0.1429	0.0952	0.0667
Pensions	4.3333	3.7222	3.8421	5.9333	3.9048	3.4324	4.6667	1.6727	3.8000	4.2857	6.3333	5.0667

Table 4 shows the (unstandardized) group means on each question included in the model. This shows that the UKIP and Conservative party had scores of 6.96 and 7.79 on the Left-Right scale, showing that they were among the most right-leaning parties.

The UKIP supporters were less likely to trust the EU than Conservatives, with a score of 3.55 (UKIP) compared to 2.92 (Conservative). Both parties were about equally likely to mention unemployment, with 22% of UKIP voters mentioning it and 20% of Conservatives. (77.78% of Sinn Fein voters mentioned it.) Finally, a note about age. The UKIP and Conservative voters were the oldest in the dataset, averaging over 60 for both parties (UKIP 61.2, Con 63.3), with the overall average age at 57, and the Labor party average of 54.8. These findings are consistent with previous research on the UKIP, and suggest that this Euroscepticism was a key ingredient in their appeal in these 2014 elections, and portends the Brexit vote in 2016.

2.2 Update: the UKIP and the “Brexit” Referendum

The ‘Brexit’ referendum stunned governments and markets around the world, resulting in an almost instant shakeup of the UK government. Much of the ‘Brexit’ strategy was engineered by the UKIP and hinged on two messages; first, that the UK is a victim of exploitation by the technocrats of Brussels. The claim was that the EU takes 350 million pounds a week from UK residents that could be better spent on the NHS (Stone, 2016). Second, immigrants from Syria and other parts of the world who ‘lack the skills’ to be productive members of society will be a burden on UK in the form of social services and increased crime (Johnston, 2016). Our findings corroborate both the ‘Brexit’ political agenda and this 2016 vote, which demonstrates that UKIP occupied a unique position in the debate over this referendum. Moreover, our canonical discriminant analysis supports Goodwin’s research by indicating that UKIP has the support of the right-leaning people, Eurosceptics, and perhaps most interesting, a relatively stable middle class.

In other words, while UKIP voters express great anxiety about unemployment—or the thought of losing their employment to an outsider—they are not disproportionately poor or unemployed. This suggests that the ‘Brexit’ vote is likely a combination of protest toward the EU and also a preemptive measure against the threat of further perceived social and economic decline. The political climate of the ‘Brexit’ moment seems to have been a combination of UKIP’s populist appeals and the referendum process itself. Considering that UKIP has been consistently successful in EU-level politics, and that there was a great deal of uncertainty, even among more traditional conservatives, with regard to the relationship between the UK and EU, it is not surprising that a neo-populist party prevailed in both the 2014 European Elections and the Brexit referendum.

Appendix

The analysis was conducted using weighted prior probabilities for each party’s proportion of the population. Linear discriminant analysis involves the determination of a linear equation like regression that will predict to which group a case belongs. The form of the equation is: $D = v_1X_1 + v_2X_2 + v_3X_3 + \dots + v_iX_i + a$ Where D = Discriminant function, v = discriminant coefficient or weight, X = respondent’s score for that variable, a = a constant, i = number of predictor variables.

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