Voting for Extremists: Demographic, Attitudinal and contextual predictors of support for the British National Party

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Introduction

Support for the far right British National Party has increased sharply in the last decade (Figure 1). In the last General Election the party secured over half a million votes, the best ever result for an extreme right party in Britain. The factors driving far right support are poorly understood. This is due in particular to data constraints: public opinion surveys generally only contain a handful of extreme right supporters, so previous research on the support base for these parties has often had to rely on qualitative analysis of small, non-random samples of voters and activists. These studies make use of new large scale data sources to cast new light on the background and motives of British extreme right voters.
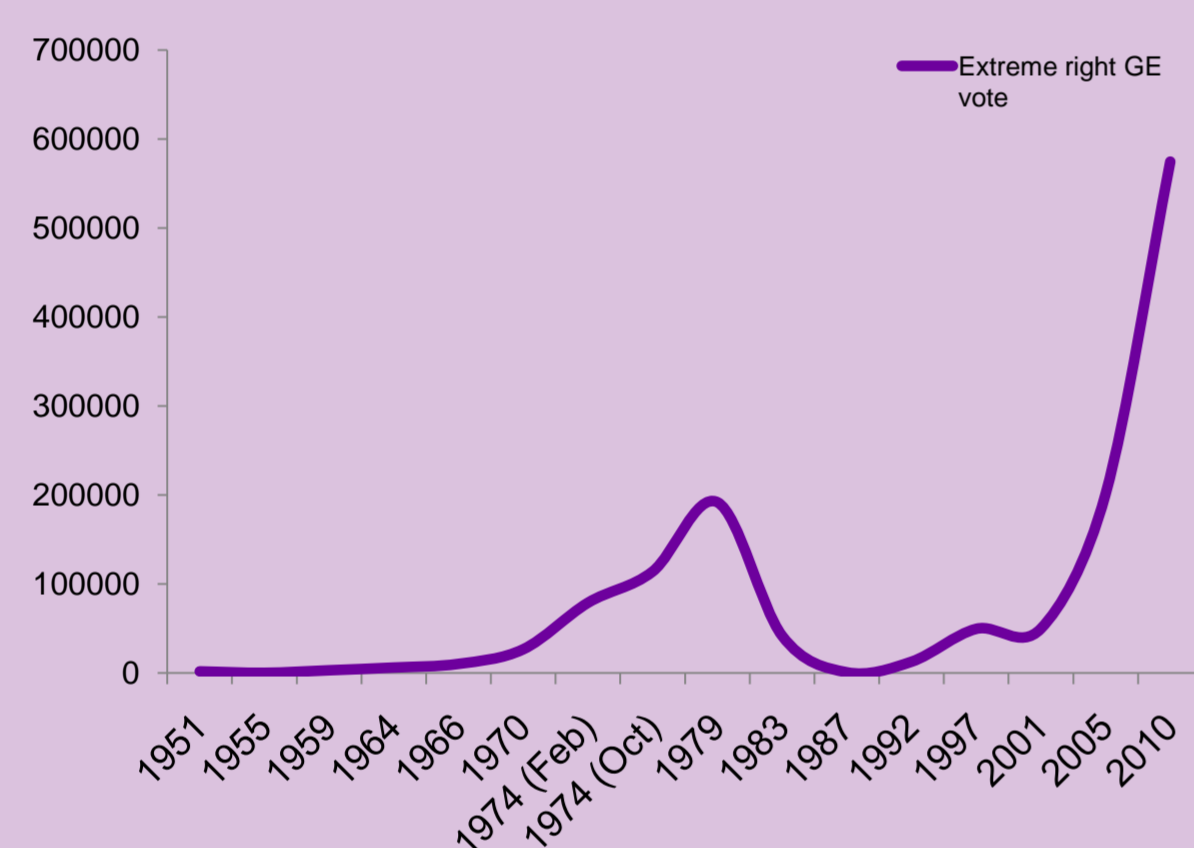

Figure 1 Support for the extreme right (National Front and British National Party) in Westminster Parliament elections 1951-2010

Aims

1) To identify the **demographic factors** associated with BNP support: age, social class, gender, education, economic circumstances etc.

2) To identify the **attitudinal factors** associated with BNP support: hostility to immigrants and ethnic minorities, attitudes towards politics and the mainstream parties, Euroscepticism,

3)To identify **contextual factors** associated with BNP support: does the BNP do better in economically deprived areas or areas with large ethnic or religious minorities?

Data and Methods

Two new large scale dataset were employed to examine BNP and UKIP voters. Both of these were far larger than typical public opinion survey, enabling us to gather a representative sample of BNP voters despite the relatively low overall support for this party:

1) Aggregation of 4 years of fortnightly IPSOS-MORI opinion surveys (2002-6). Total sample: 149,655 BNP voters: 965
2) YouGov "mega-poll" conducted after the 2009 European Parliament elections. Total sample: 32,268. BNP voters: 985. This dataset additionally contained large batteries of questions about voter attitudes on immigration, race and other contentious topics

These datasets were analysed in two studies:

Ford and Goodwin (2010) matched the IPSOS-MORI data to information on the local context (constituency) in which each respondent lived. The influence of social background, attitudes and local circumstances on BNP voting was examined using multilevel logistic regression modelling

Cutts, Ford and Goodwin (2011) examined the YouGov "mega-poll" sample using Multiple Indicator- Multiple Cause (MIMIC) modelling to examine the impact of background and motivations on BNP support
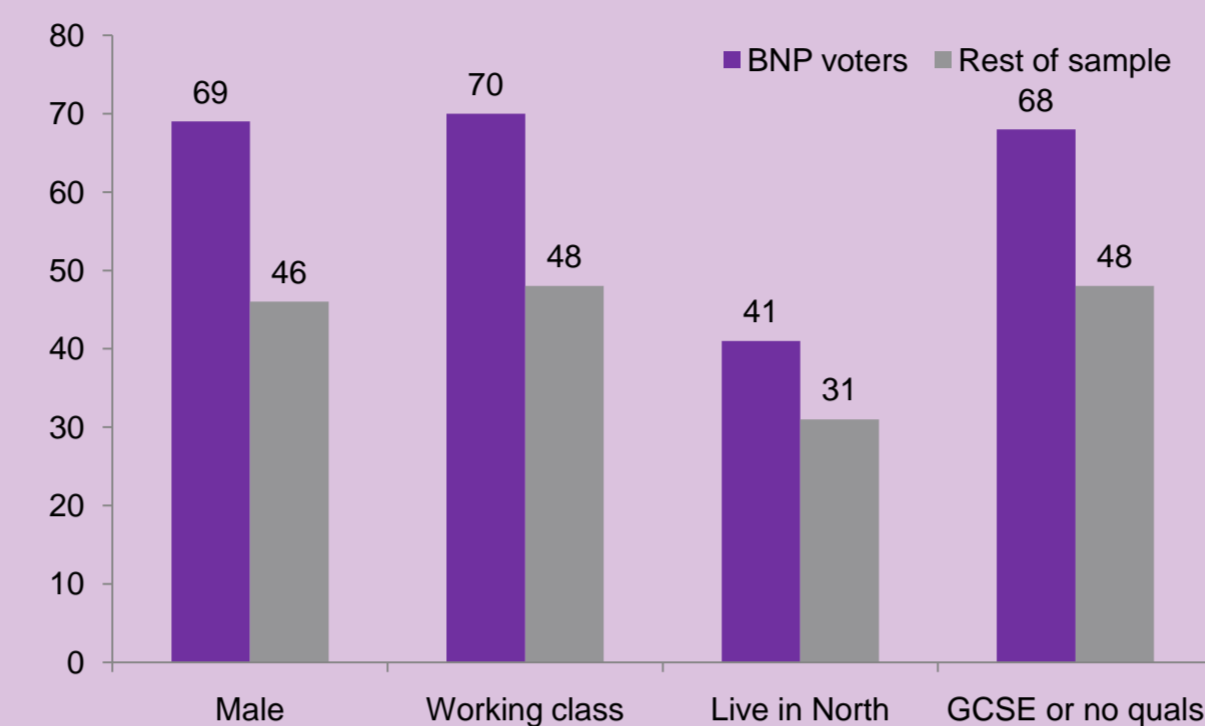
Results

Figure 2 Key demographic predictors of BNP support, MORI 2002-6 sample

Demographics – Labour's losers: Both studies reveal a very similar demographic distribution of BNP support. The BNP does best among older, white working class men with few educational qualifications living in the North of England. They tend to report having grown up in a Labour household, and to describe Labour as a party which used to care about people like them, but no longer does. We may summarise this group of voters as "Labour's losers" – older working class voters from Labour's industrial heartland who believed Labour was "their" party but who believed the "New Labour" government had brought no improvement to their lives.

Attitudes – Intolerant, angry, and insecure: both studies also reveal a consistent attitudinal profile to BNP supporters. Voters backing the extreme right in Britain tend to be very **intolerant:** hostile to both immigrants and established ethnic minorities, and to favour extreme policies such as discriminating in favour of white workers and paying settled migrants to leave, which are rejected by the vast majority of mainstream voters. BNP voters were also very **angry** with the political establishment – reporting very high levels of hostility to the main parties and their leaders, judging most politicians to be corrupt, including their local representatives. BNP supporters also tend to be economically **insecure** – with high levels of anxiety about the economy and their personal finances.
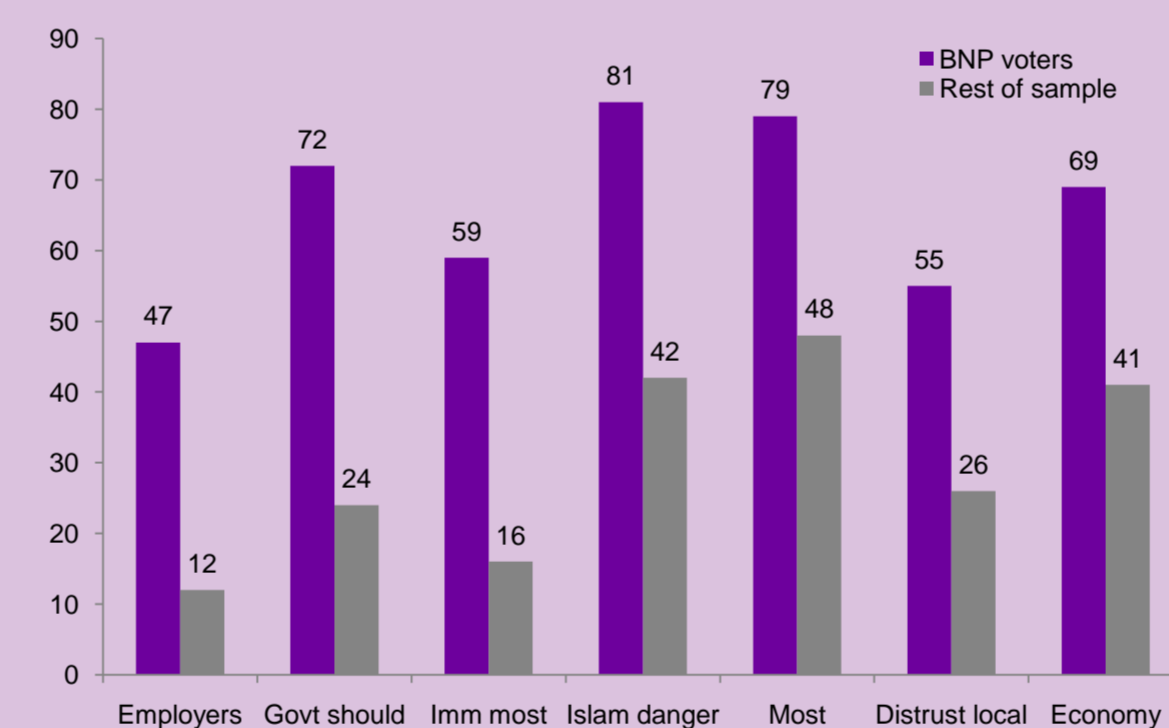

Figure 2: Attitudes of BNP voters, MORI and YouGov samples

Context: Local conditions were also significantly related to BNP voting levels. In particular, areas with high concentrations of uneducated voters and large Muslim populations show higher levels of BNP support. However, not all forms of diversity are associated with increased BNP voting: the BNP does worse in areas with large black populations, and the presence of non Muslim Asians has no correlation with BNP support. Contrary to our expectations, the BNP did not do significantly better in economically deprived constituencies – in fact, the party does better in areas where employment levels are high.
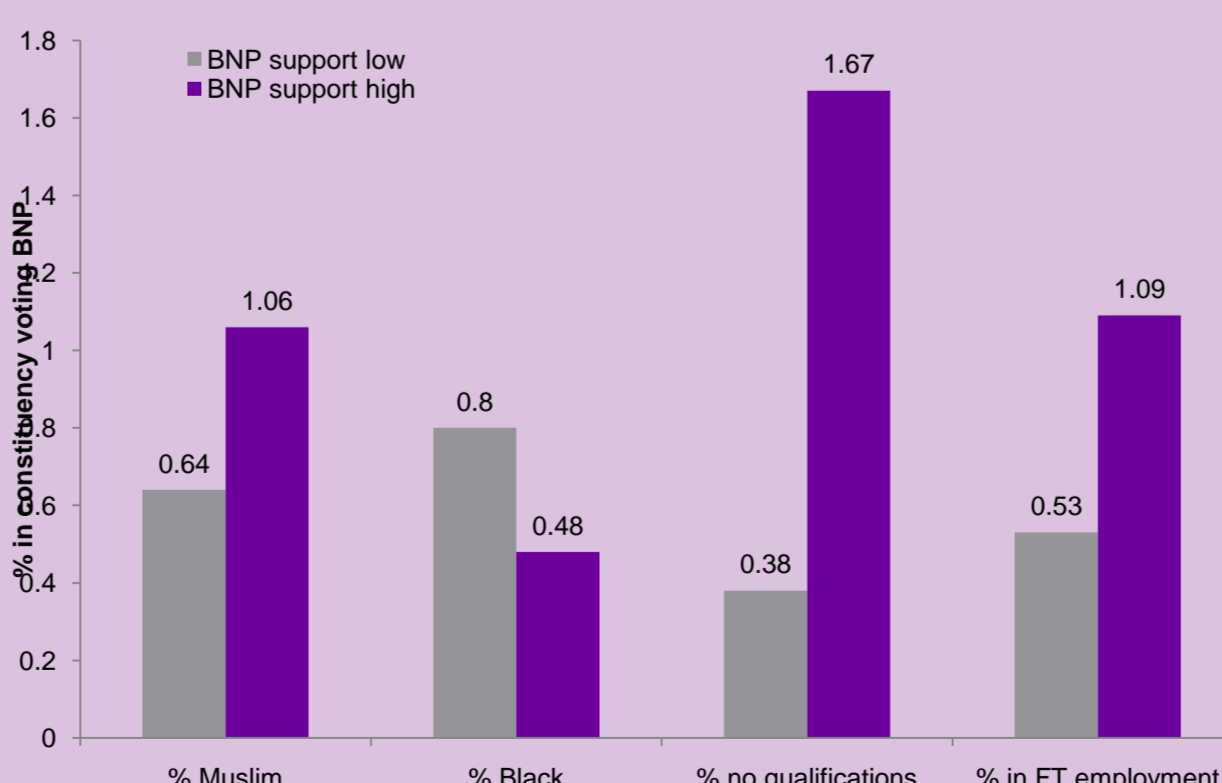

Figure 3: Effects of contextual characteristics on predicted BNP support, MORI sample
Grey: 5th percentile of constituency distribution Purple: 95th percentile

Conclusions

The BNP's boom in the 2000's shows that in Britain, as elsewhere in Europe, a potent mix of anxiety about immigration and diversity, disaffection with "politics as usual" and economic insecurity among unqualified workers in declining sections of the economy can rapidly propel a "radical right" party to unprecedented success.

Yet despite winning record vote hauls, and historic success at winning seats in local councils, the London Assembly and the European Parliament the BNP remains weaker and more marginal than similar parties in many nations of Europe. Why is this?

Legitimacy: The BNP first emerged in the 1980s from the ashes of the violent, fascist and openly racist National Front. Many of its senior members, including party leader Nick Griffin, have links to the NF, and a long public record of racist intolerance and fascist sympathies. This legacy has hampered BNP's efforts to re-invent itself as a broader populist movement focussed on anxieties about Islam and immigration. Many voters who share the concerns the BNP campaign on consider the party an unacceptable choice as a result.

Resources: The BNP has very limited organisational, financial and leadership resources. Although many British voters agree with the BNP's core message, the party has struggled to identify these voters, or wage credible campaigns to mobilise them. The candidates the BNP has put up have frequently proved to be incompetent at running for office or, if they win, hopeless at holding office. Few BNP incumbents have been re-elected, and several have resigned in disgrace. The party's main resource – its committed cadre of activist "boots on the ground" - is also a key source of weakness, as many of these activists have dubious backgrounds and unsavoury views, and put off moderate voters. Given these manifold disadvantages, it is no wonder than many of the BNP's successes have come in areas of Labour hegemony, where decades of one party dominance often leave the BNP as the only organised opposition.

Competition: The BNP has not had the radical right political space to itself in recent years. The UK Independence Party, which originally mobilised opposition to the European Union, has in recent years broadened its focus, employing anti-elite and anti-immigration messages designed to appeal to the same pool of anxious disaffected voters the BNP has attracted. UKIP does not suffer from the legitimacy problems which handicap the BNP, has greater financial resources and higher quality candidates at its disposal.

Further research

Two further projects are in progress developing two of the key themes emerging from our BNP analysis: the competition the BNP faces for radical right voters, and the legitimacy problems the BNP faces in trying to win over more moderate voters

We have examined the support for UKIP utilising the same data in a follow up paper (Ford, Goodwin and Cutts, 2011). We find considerable evidence that UKIP is competing for a similar pool of voters to the BNP. The issue of radical right party competition will be examined more thoroughly in a forthcoming book (Ford and Goodwin, 2012).

The issue of how party image and voters' sensitivities influence support for the BNP is currently being examined in a work in progress which utilises survey experiments and new measures of sensitivity to social norms sanctioning intolerance (Blinder, Ford and Ivarsflaten, 2011).

References

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