

The Far Right, Class and Opposition to Immigration

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The Far Right: In the early 2000s, the British National Party (BNP), a party that had previously been relegated to the fringes of the political landscape, saw a dramatic change in its fortunes following its turn towards an electoral strategy. From 2003, when the party gained 3 councillors in Burnley, the party went on to gain approximately 60 district councillors, won a seat on the Greater London Assembly and polled just under a million votes in the 2009 European Parliament elections. The BNP became a significant electoral actor in the boroughs of Outer East London, Stoke-and-Trent, and in several Pennines towns and cities. From this peak, the threat of the BNP to become the fourth party of British politics failed to materialize after its chairman, Nick Griffin, came an ignominious third in Barking and Dagenham and the party lost all 12 of its councillors in the borough. The swell of support for the BNP marked a demand for a populist politics premised on ethnic nationalism and opposition to immigration once deemed unlikely within the British electorate.

General consensus has emerged from the research generated by the rise in support for the BNP in three respects: on the characteristics of BNP-supporting areas, as well as on the social profile and attitudes of BNP supporters.

Where? The BNP performed well in areas which were not necessarily more diverse, but had a higher proportion of Pakistani and Bangladeshi residents, suggesting the BNP's championing of anti-Muslim rhetoric had paid electoral dividends. The far right was also stronger in areas with a higher proportion of foreign-born residents and in formerly homogeneous white British areas that had experienced rapid demographic change. Areas with relatively immobile white British populations were more likely to back the BNP. These also tended to be areas with large social housing sectors, higher proportions of working class residents, and with significant rises in unemployment since the onset of the financial crisis.

Who? BNP voters and supporters were disproportionately male, middle-aged (34-49), skilled manual workers with low levels of educational achievement. The far right vote has been conventionally interpreted as a broadly blue collar vote, but the appeal of the far right was one that was segmented within the working classes. Although deprivation, unemployment and large social housing sectors helped create a favourable context for the far right- at the individual level, far right supporters were more likely to be skilled workers than unskilled or unemployed, more likely to be home owners than social housing tenants, and did not belong to the lowest income bands. These were not the most marginalized sectors of society.

Why? BNP voters were distinctive from supporters of other parties in being overwhelmingly concerned with, and holding extremely negative views on, immigration. This concern is not driven solely by perceptions of economic threat and disadvantage, but is linked to a broader discourse concerning distrust of mainstream politicians, perceptions of discrimination and inequitable distribution of resources to the detriment of the white UK-born population.

Opposition to immigration is the main driver of support for the far right and we know from survey evidence that most white British people oppose immigration. This begs the question: why were the BNP unable to build on this sentiment? The answer lies on the supply side of political competition. The BNP's rhetoric of opposition to immigration, prioritization of the rights of the 'indigenous British people' and

disenchantment with the political mainstream taps concerns that are widespread within the British electorate. The BNP failed to capitalize on this demand because their brand suffered from its legacy of association with fascism, the criminal convictions of some of its activists and accusations of anti-Semitism. A 2006 YouGov poll found that large numbers of participants wished to halt all immigration and prioritise British residents and workers in employment and housing, but once these policies were identified with the BNP, opposition to such policies significantly increased.

Immigration: When we looked at attitudes towards immigration using the Citizenship surveys (run by Department of Communities and Local Government), we found that opposition to immigration has been remarkably consistent over time, just over 80 percent of the white UK-born population since 2005. This sentiment is evenly spread across regions of high and low ethnic diversity, with the exception of Greater London, which is more tolerant, in part because a significant share of its UK-born whites have immigrant origins. Respondents who were opposed to immigration shared a similar profile to that of far right supporters: age, education and perceptions that minorities are treated preferentially were important, alongside having lived in the same place for a long time. But, whilst the upper classes, students and the unemployed were less likely to be opposed to immigration, working class respondents were no more likely to be opposed than middle class respondents.

Where class does matter is in the reasons given for negative evaluations of immigration: economic concerns over jobs and to a lesser degree housing fuel discontent amongst the working class, whilst cultural issues such as integration and language drive middle class concerns. If this is correct, policy makers will require different mechanisms to address these issues. More fundamentally, it brings into question what sort of behaviour is considered problematic. Whilst working class attitudes towards immigration resulted, in some cases, in support for the far right, middle class discontent may manifest itself in other forms of behavior, such as moving to less diverse areas or schools, which may have more profound long-term consequences.

The Future: The collapse in electoral support for the far right is more the product of internal BNP machinations than a change of heart among its supporters. Even in the 2010 General Election, which marked the start of the current decline in support for the BNP, the party had a more successful election than is commonly accepted. It maintained its level of support whilst increasing the number of candidates fielded, and, reflecting the mercurial nature of British politics, gained more votes than UKIP in 177 of the 302 seats that both parties contested. The British far right whilst admittedly enjoying limited success has proven remarkably resilient over time, and as the present debate reflects, immigration remains a salient issue. The current fragmentation of the British far right recalls the period following the collapse of the National Front in 1979; when there was an upsurge of racist violence and street mobilization until the return of the far right to electoral politics in the form of the BNP. The evidence remains weak on where ex-far right voters went now that electoral success is more elusive. The fragmentation of the far right leaves the door open to other parties or street movements who are able to more successfully mobilize support based on the widespread public discontent over immigration.

