

Class, Electoral Geography and the Future of UKIP: Labour's Secret Weapon

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Introduction

We thank Rob Ford and Matt Goodwin (Ford and Goodwin, 2015; henceforth F&G) for their comment on our article "Working class votes and Conservative losses: solving the UKIP puzzle" (Evans and Mellon, 2015). Though the article was not directly aimed at their book *Revolt on the Right* (Ford and Goodwin, 2014) it covered considerable shared territory and developed a rather different argument about the implications of the emergence of UKIP for the two main parties in 2015 and possibly beyond, and the classes who provide UKIP's support.

F&G critique our argument in three sections: 1) UKIP's social bases of support, 2) the role of values in explaining UKIP support and 3) what the likely future of UKIP will be. We have no disagreement on their second point: that attitudes are vital for understanding UKIP support. Indeed our article shows how attitudes towards immigration and the European Union in 2010 strongly predict current UKIP support. We also agree that UKIP support is rooted in other demographic characteristics in addition to occupation. However, as indicated in the title, our analysis focuses on a debate on the electoral impact of UKIP in 2015 and the role of class, rather than these other influences on UKIP support. We shall therefore focus on relevant points of disagreement.

A wider picture of support?

F&G concede our argument that the class basis of UKIP support derives from both traditionally Conservative and Labour supporting classes: "we agree with

their characterisation of UKIP as ‘an alliance of the working class and self-employed’” and they accept that “This is an important addition to our own account of the class basis of UKIP voting and is consistent with findings on support for the radical right in other European states” (F&G, 1). However, they argue that this is less important than it first seems, because the employer/self-employed groups are not as large as the manual occupations. This is certainly true, and we point this out quite clearly in Figure 5 (in the original article), where we make clear that most of UKIP's support is neither working class nor self-employed, but middle class. Indeed we show that the single largest source of support for UKIP actually comes from “lower professionals and managers”, which is quite contrary to F&G’s assertion that it is the “blue-collar manual workers who comprise the backbone of UKIP’s support”.

F&G also cite the role of economic perceptions in UKIP support, presenting responses to a recent public opinion poll indicating that UKIP voters have a more negative economic outlook than Conservative voters. However, their table mainly shows a split in economic perceptions between supporters of the two coalition parties and other voters, and it is hardly surprising that government supporters are more positive about the coalition’s economic impact than are opposition supporters. Moreover, the effect of political affiliation on voters’ responses to such survey questions, as opposed to *vice versa*, is well established: when asked in the same survey, economic evaluations are typically highly endogenous to party choice (Wlezien, Franklin and Twiggs 1997; Evans and Andersen 2006; Evans and Pickup 2010; Pickup and Evans 2013). This is simply not convincing evidence of why people vote UKIP.

The Future of UKIP?

While predicting the future of UKIP is clearly not the primary aim of our article, we do take a different view of UKIP's future prospects than F&G. F&G cite recent by-election results as evidence that UKIP can draw a large proportion of Labour voters and that UKIP will perform particularly well in the North of England. However, as F&G admit, by-election results tend to show much more dramatic vote swings than General Election results do (Upton, 1991). By-elections are unrepresentative of wider results in a number of ways. They reflect a very local campaign rather than the national campaign that voters are exposed to in General Elections. In addition, by-elections are generally not able to change government control, so voters may feel freer to cast a protest vote and ignore tactical considerations. In addition to these considerations, some of the by-elections cited by F&G are unusual because they clearly involve a personal vote for incumbents who defected to UKIP (especially Douglas Carswell), a factor that will clearly not be present in almost all seats contested in a general election.

Rather than relying on such indirect and questionable evidence of electoral potential among different groups, we can instead look at voters' preferences *directly* using propensity to vote (PTV) scores (see van der Eijk et al 2006, for an overview). PTVs are measured using the question "How likely is it that you would ever vote for each of the following parties?" with answers given on a 0 to 10 scale for each party. The key word here is *ever*. Answers to these questions can thus give insights into exactly the sorts of future potential F&G refer to. This is done by obtaining voters' second preferences on the basis of the highest PTV score that they give to a party, other than the one for which they intend to

vote.¹ This gives us a good idea of a voter's second preference and which, if any, other party could hope to obtain his or her vote in future.

F&G's most general claim is that UKIP supporters would have been inclined to flow back to Labour if UKIP were not an electoral choice. They question whether it is "really unrealistic to argue that Labour could win a portion of [the voters who left Labour after 2005 and now support UKIP] back?"

We think it is: Figure 1 shows UKIP supporters' second preferences (as captured by PTV scores). While we cannot account for the different political climate that would have been in place without UKIP, current UKIP supporters are far more likely to state that the Conservatives are their second preference (42%) than Labour (20%). Indeed Labour's share of UKIP second preferences is not appreciably higher than the Green Party's. These results therefore suggest that UKIP has not been primarily intercepting votes that would otherwise have gone to Labour and that it is unlikely that Labour will win them back in large numbers. It also calls into question F&G's claim that Labour has placed greater emphasis "on issues where the outlook of the average UKIP supporter is closer to Labour than the Conservatives". If this is the case, it certainly does not appear to have translated into UKIP voters being willing to ever consider voting Labour.

F&G also claim that there is no evidence that UKIP "voters would be more willing to return to the Conservatives in opposition than they have proved to be with Labour in opposition". Based on second preferences, by far the most

¹Some respondents give all the other parties zero on the likelihood scale and these respondents are dropped from the analysis. Even among those who did give other parties a score, some give multiple parties the same second highest score. In these cases, we randomly choose one of the respondent's top parties to give their vote to. The analysis therefore has a degree of sampling error. However, the results as interpreted are robust to re-sampling. We avoid breaking the analysis down into smaller categories (such as sub-regions or party-region combinations) for this reason.

common second preference for UKIP voters are in fact the Conservatives (42%). There is therefore a large proportion of UKIP voters who could potentially return to voting Conservative. This outcome is not guaranteed of course; it is also possible that UKIP could further erode the Conservative's vote (45% of Conservatives have UKIP as second preference). By comparison, Labour is a much shallower source of potential UKIP supporters (just 19% of Labour voters have UKIP as second preference) and there are far fewer potential Labour recruits from UKIP (only 20% of UKIP voters have Labour as second preference). The evidence does not therefore support F&G's claims.

Does geography matter?

F&G also claim that UKIP is expected to do most well in the labour seats particularly in the North of England: "Most of the Labour seats with the largest concentrations of UKIP leaning social groups are seats located in Labour's traditional geographic heartland of the industrial North of England." and that in these seats "a larger portion of the total electorate find UKIP appealing, and hence there will often be greater electoral potential for UKIP". To examine these claims we break down potential UKIP support by 2010 constituency winner and region. We use two measures of UKIP potential: 1) the proportion of voters who choose UKIP as first or second preference, and 2) the proportion of the electorate who rate UKIP better than a 5 on the PTV scale in Table 1, allowing us to get a picture of where UKIP could gain supporters.² Both measures show that UKIP has the highest potential support in Conservative-held constituencies, with considerably lower potential in Labour and Liberal Democrat held seats (this is also the case if we look at mean UKIP PTV scores). The table also casts doubt on F&G's claims that Northern seats are particularly

² We exclude Scotland from this analysis in order to avoid conflating a lack of UKIP support in Scotland with a lack of UKIP support in Labour seats.

fertile ground for UKIP. Across both measures, the North³ shows lower levels of UKIP potential than the South, with only London, Scotland and Wales showing consistently lower UKIP sympathy. It is worth noting that UKIP's support actually varies relatively little across the English regions compared with its variation by 2010 winner. Contrary to F&G's assertions, geography isn't actually that important.

Constituency type	% of voters choosing UKIP as 1st or 2nd preference	% of voters giving UKIP a PTV of greater than 5
Conservative 2010 (England only)	46	32
Labour 2010 (England only)	38	27
Liberal Democrat 2010 (England only)	35	24
North	41	28
Midlands	42	30
South	44	31
London	38	29
Scotland	17	13
Wales	37	29

Table 1 Potential UKIP support across different constituency types in England

Moreover, part of F&G's reasons for expecting a strong UKIP in performance in the North is that "[t]he Thatcher government has cast a long shadow on Conservative prospects in many of these seats, which suffered severely from the decline of traditional industries from the 1970s onward. For many working-class voters in these areas the Conservative Party remains anathema". However, this claim is not backed up by evidence on UKIP voters' views of Thatcher's legacy. Working class voters' disdain for Thatcher and the Conservatives is true in general, but the evidence is weak for UKIP supporters in Labour seats. BES data show that UKIP supporters in Labour seats still have positive views of

³ We define the North as the government office regions of North East, North West and Yorkshire and the Humber. The Midlands includes East and West Midlands and the South includes South East, South West and Eastern regions.

Margaret Thatcher (54% say she was good for Britain versus 32% bad for Britain) that are only a slightly lower than UKIP supporter's views in Conservative seats (64% say she was good for Britain versus 22% bad for Britain). This does not suggest that UKIP will be able to succeed where the Conservatives failed because of Thatcher's legacy.

Conclusions

There are a couple of points where F&G's views are consistent with our own – typically on questions that were not central themes in our paper. However, we find no support for their claims in all of the key areas in which they argue against the thesis presented in Evans and Mellon (2015). In fact, there are good reasons to think that Labour is *benefitting* from the electoral presence of UKIP. If we reassign UKIP's current voters to their second preferences, Labour's lead over the Conservatives drops from 4.5 to 0.8 percentage points (as seen in Figure captions:).

In other words: UKIP are indeed Labour's secret weapon, both nationally and in terms of their impact on constituency-level competition.

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Figure captions:

Figure 1 2014 UKIP supporters' second preferences

Figure 2 National vote intention 1) observed in BES data and 2) with UKIP voters reassigned to second preferences