

Party-Modernization and the Populist Far Right in the UK: A Case Study of the UKIP and the BNP Between 2004-2016

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Abstract:

In June 2016, British voters were asked “Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?” To which 52% of respondents answered “leave”. This vote can arguably be interpreted as a triumph of populism in one of the most liberal polities in the West. Grounded on the ideational approach, advanced by Cas Mudde, this paper fleshes out the emergence of populism in the United Kingdom. Using a case study of the UK Independence Party and the British National Party in the period between 2004 and 2016, the article investigates the populist origins of both parties and their subsequent quest for modernization. Ultimately, it is argued that although the two parties embarked on similar processes of party modernization, it was the UKIP that managed to establish itself as a relatively moderate third-party alternative to the mainstream parties and the extreme far right.

Keywords: The United Kingdom; populism; UK Independence Party; British National Party; party modernization.

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1. INTRODUCTION

By midnight of January 31, 2016, the United Kingdom was no longer a member of the European Union, a partnership that lasted for almost half a century. This stark and historic development in European politics drew some scholars and media pundits to include it as a part of a “populist tsunami” sweeping politics on both sides of the Atlantic. Although populist parties have been gaining steam over a number of issues across western Europe, mainly on immigration and withdrawal from the EU, Britain was thought to be immune to populist third-parties. However, since the first decade of the 21st century, the two most dominant populist parties in the UK, UKIP and BNP, started embarking on a process of party modernization that would allow them to come out of their political wilderness.

The UKIP (United Kingdom Independence Party) and the BNP (British National Party) are two far-right political parties in the United Kingdom. UKIP was established in 1993 and had called for British independence from the European Union, a reduction in immigration, and the return to traditional British values. The BNP, on the other hand, was founded in 1982 and has been associated with white nationalism, fascism, and neo-Nazism. They promote British nationalism, anti-immigration policies, and the preservation of British identity. Both parties have faced controversies and allegations of racism and extremism, with limited success in gaining widespread support in mainstream UK politics.

As a party which used to exist on the fringes of British politics, UKIP had better chances of political “redemption”, since the party was founded as a single-issue Eurosceptic party, with the only defining target of getting Britain out of the EU. The BNP, on the other hand, has had its roots in the morbid atmosphere of neo-Nazi resurgence during the post-war period. This has had almost deterministic effects on both parties. Moreover, the paths both parties have chosen for tuning their parties to suit the liberal sensibilities of the British electorate were equally important for the limited success of UKIP and the absolute decimation of the BNP. While the BNP was always struggling in deflecting accusations of racism, fascism, and xenophobia during all General and European elections, UKIP had enjoyed a

reasonably comfortable space for maneuvering in and adapting to each event.

A study of this kind, however, cannot proceed without acknowledging and properly addressing the elephant in the room, populism. Several scholars of political science attempted to define populism according to different approaches, yet although some of them share some sort of populist motifs in their definitions, a clear consensual definition remains non-existent. Perhaps the main hurdle in such an endeavor is that as a political phenomenon, populism can appear in several places under different guises and stretches along both extremes of the political spectrum. For example, whereas in Latin America populism is mostly associated with the left, in western Europe, it is almost entirely located on the far-right of the political spectrum (with the exception of Podemos in Spain and the Five Star Movement in Italy).

Research Methodology and Approaches:

This article explores the political fortunes of populist parties, UKIP and BNP, in the UK during the period from 2004-2016. The aim being is to show that the UKIP, which started as a single-issue Eurosceptic party, had been able to reinvent itself as a potent contestant against the mainstream parties. The BNP's experience, on the other hand, had been marred by the parties' own internal rivalries and its toxic past of crude racism and xenophobia; and therefore, did not have enough political space for maneuvering in the liberal British political arena.

Hypothesis: The adoption of modernization as a means of electoral rejuvenation had a moderately positive impact on UKIP's electoral fortunes, but had been an abysmal experience for the BNP.

To test the validity of the hypothesis the article shall proceed as following:

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- First, an ideational definition of populism is provided along with a subsequent discussion of its conceptual components and their relevance to the proposed cases of study.
- Second, the rise of both UKIP and BNP in the UK, and their respective trajectories in modernizing their parties as populist far-right parties, is revisited and analyzed.
- Eventually, it is concluded that while the UKIP had strategically managed to keep a fair distance from the toxic language of cultural incompatibility and outright racism, the BNP could not rid itself of this kind of neo-Nazi discourse that eventually caused the party to return to political exile.

As it is implied by now, this analysis employs the comparative approach to evaluate the performative behavior of UKIP and BNP with a time boundary that extends from 2004 (the year UKIP achieved its first electoral breakthrough) to 2016 (the year of the Brexit referendum). The comparative approach allows for adequate understanding of the multiplicity of structural and organizational factors contributing to the success and failure of both parties. Although the comparative approach has been usually used to compare two, or more, parties from distinct political settings, here it is operationalized along the horizontal line that extends from the radical to the extreme right of the political spectrum of the same polity.

Perhaps some of the well-known applications of this approach were elaborated by early scholars of political science, such as Giovanni Sartori and Seymour Martin Lipset. Such classic contributions are considered precedents in the application of comparative studies of political parties, targeting areas of comparison that include: organizational structure, strategy, ideological and programmatic platforms, and official discourse, such as party manifestos and media interviews (Lipset & Rokhan, 1967; Sartori, 2005). More recent examples of comparative studies are more focused on the radical right party family in Western Europe, often within

the same framework of cross-national comparison (Betz, 2018; Vasilopoulou, 2016; Akkerman, 2015).

The performance of UKIP and BNP is to be analyzed and compared as a dependent variable, with modernization acting as an independent variable. This would allow us to look into changes in the electoral performance before and after modernization. The time period is divided into two phase: before and after modernization, with the focus being mainly on the latter. To measure electoral performance, factors such as vote share and number of seats won (both in national and European elections) are examined to see whether they were affected by modernization.

Literature on populism, on the other hand, is dominated by three main approaches which conceive the populist phenomenon as a political style, as a discourse, and as an ideology. Each of these approaches has its advantages and shortcomings, both of which are beyond the scope of this article to examine. Nonetheless, this study will adopt the ideational approach elaborated by scholars such as Cas Mudde, Ben Stanley, and Margaret Canovan. Besides being broadly used by scholars in the study of European parties, the ideational approach enables for comparative studies of both national as well as international cases of populism (Mudde, 2017).

Conceptual Clarification

Many observers and political scholars have often indicated that the most significant characteristic of today's politics across the globe is populism. While some have argued that the populist phenomenon has become mainstream, "a pathological normalcy," others went further to decry it as "revolt"; that we are witnessing a "populist moment" (Mudde, 2010; Ford & Godwin, 2014; Krastev, 2007). This is quite significant, because two decades earlier, far-right populist parties have almost exclusively been operating on the fringes of democracies, especially in the West. As this has no longer been the case for the past two decades, interest in the study of populism blossomed among scholars from various fields of social and political sciences. Therefore, different definitions are reflective of the multidisciplinary nature and the perplexity in dealing with the

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elusiveness of the populist phenomenon. Part of the explanation behind this non-consensus among scholars about the “mercurial” nature of populism is due to the fact that “there is no Populist International; no canon of key populist texts or calendar of significant moments; and the icons of populism are of local rather than universal appeal” (Stanley, 2008, p. 100). While some of these characteristics may not still hold true today, contention among scholars still does.

Whether a political style, a discourse, or an ideology, almost all scholars agree that populism entails a Manichean struggle between a victimized, inherently pure and sovereign people and an always-conspiring illegitimate cartel of elites, who have been consciously repressing the true will of the people. Cas Mudde’s ideational definition of populism catches this anonymity and reflects the populist vision for politics and society. He defines populism as “a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). According to Mudde, this definition can travel beyond the idiosyncrasy of previous definitions, which are usually bound to specific geographical cases or historical periods (Mudde, 2017, p.59). Thus, travelability, allows for cross-regional as well as in left/right wing empirical studies.

Mudde grounds his definition of populism on Michael Freeden’s concept of “thin ideologies”: those whose conceptual structures cannot address today’s complex social, economic, and political issues (Freeden, 1998, p. 750). Because of the lack of a “morphological” corpus, to borrow Freeden’s terminology, populism can only afford to depict politics in an oversimplistic, either-black-or-white terms. But whether populism is “thin” or “thick,” what sets it apart from other ideologies is its moral distinction between “the pure people” and “the corrupt elites.” Unlike nationalism, for instance, which tends to put markers on the border between the “insiders” and “outsiders,” populism creates a *moral* cleavage within society itself.

The populist antagonistic vision extends through vertical structures: one which is upwards, the elites; the other is downwards, the foreigners (Abts & Rummens, 2007, p. 418).

Now, who are the actual “people” populists refer to in their discourse remains context-dependent and varies from one polity to another. The same can also be true with regard to “the elite.” To illustrate, in his inaugural speech in 2017, Donald Trump belligerently scorned politicians in Washington, claiming that “The establishment protected itself, but not the citizens of our country” (Trump, 2007). With a similar hostile tone in the European Parliament, Nigel Farage directed his Brexit victory speech towards another group of elites, “...the main reason the UK voted the way it did is because you have by stealth and deception...you have imposed upon them a political union” (Stone, 2016). Here, both Trump and Farage are speaking against different types of “elites”: one which is local, “the establishment”; the other is supranational, the EU.

2 The Classification of UKIP and BNP as Populist Far-Right Parties

Although there is a vast literature work that put both BNP and UKIP in the one basket of the populist radical right, it is important to highlight that this kind of generic categorization may not apply to our cases of study. While this categorization may be valid in the case of UKIP, as it has been advanced in the introduction, the BNP is better studied as an extreme, not a radical-right populist party.

The classification of UKIP and BNP as populist far-right parties can be achieved by employing the following criteria:

- Because of the BNP’s historical advocacy of National Socialism as an anti-democratic ideology, the party was situated on the extreme right of the political spectrum (Fennema, 1997, pp. 481-482). On the contrary, populist radical-right parties do not challenge democracy “in principle, but in its organizational form” (Mény and Surel 2002, p. 4).

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- Another equally important detail to consider when dealing with populist radical-right parties is that they often espouse an ideological “combination of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism” (Mudde, 2010, p. 5). Depending the political circumstances, for instance, populism does not necessarily have to be the dominant ideology in the ideological core of the populist far right. In western Europe, populism is often a secondary ideology to parties of the populist radical right, whereas nativism or other “host” ideologies may constitute the ideological core of these parties (Akkerman, November2017).

Both the BNP and UKIP espouse populism in their respective ideological platforms, though in combination with different sets of host ideologies. As a splinter party, the British National Party had displayed a racial populist discourse in dealing with issues such as immigration and British membership to the EU. Until 1999, the BNP “clung rigidly to the core pillars of biological racism, radical xenophobia and anti-democratic appeals. Yet with Tyndall at the helm, the party had also absorbed a more overt tradition of neo-Nazism” (Goodwin, 2011, p. 37). Seen as an NF clone, which is riddled with racism and anti-Semitism, the BNP could not establish political legitimacy. Therefore, during most of the 1990s, the BNP existed as a political pariah, with the only exception of the 1993 council by-elections win in Tower Hamlets (John and Margetts, 2009). In short, prior to the arrival of Nick Griffin as the Chairman of the BNP in 1999, the party had had minimum purchase capacity in the British electoral market, and large part of this deficiency was due to the unwillingness of its leadership to acclimatize to the moderate demands of the electorate.

The UKIP, on the other hand, emerged as a reaction to the negotiation and the later ratification of the Maastricht Treaty between 1991-1993 (Tournier-Sol, 2020). Founded by Alan Sked in 1993, the UKIP, throughout its embryonic stage, was a Eurosceptic, single-issue party whose only *raison d'être* was to oppose Britain's membership in the EU. This

ridged stance with regard to the EU positioned the party as “hard-Eurosceptic” according to Paul Taggart and Aleks Szczerbiak’s typology of “soft/hard-Euroscepticism” (2002). It is also noteworthy that during the 1990s, the UKIP could not be classified as a fully-fledged populist party, since it had no power-contestation ambition. The party’s first electoral test came in the 1997 General Election in which it secured a mediocre 0.3% of the vote, ahead of the BNP (Morgan & Cracknell, n.d.). Two years later, the UKIP marked its first electoral success in the European Parliament election, winning three seats with 7% of popular vote, placing it ahead of the BNP which secured only one 1% of vote without winning any seats (Morgan & Cracknell, n.d.).

Unlike the BNP, UKIP provided a relatively moderate vessel for voters who were disenchanted with mainstream parties, but at the same time were uncomfortable voting for extreme BNP. The UKIP itself, although witnessed few in-rank racist slippages, steered clear of extreme rhetoric and maintained a fair distance from BNP affiliations. Nonetheless, until the 2000s, both the BNP and UKIP did not pose any real political challenge to the established parties, be it in local, national, or European elections. After Proportional Representation was introduced in the European Parliament election in 1999, the fortunes of both parties were to increase dramatically, especially after the process of modernization each party chose to implement. As we shall see, the BNP and UKIP wanted to be perceived in British politics as “normal” electable parties, yet each party wanted to stay true the ideological peculiarity which made them distinct from the mainstream parties, and from each other, without annoying the moderate category of the British electorate.

3. Modernization and the Political Potential of UKIP And BNP Between 2004-2016

In the early 2000s, both the BNP and UKIP were on a path of political breakthrough that had never been achieved in contemporary British politics. In the 2004 EP election, the UKIP initiated the populist resurgence when it secured an unprecedented 16.2% of total votes, allowing it to fill 12

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seats in the EP. With this result, the UKIP was not only the biggest winner, but also was able to displace the Liberal Democrats, who took 14.9% of the vote, to fourth place. The BNP, on the other hand, although was able to obtain a remarkable 5% of the vote, it could not secure any seats in the EP. The 2005 General Election came to vindicate the rising trend of the far-right populist parties. Although unable to enter Parliament, UKIP was able to win 606,000 popular votes which was 2% of the total vote and 1% increase since the 2001 GE. The BNP was only able to achieve less than 1% of the vote, equivalent to 193,000 popular votes (National Results, 2019).

The 2004 EP election coincided with the enlargement of the EU which admitted ten member-states, mostly post-Communist states from eastern Europe. Between 2004-05, net migration from A8 countries to the UK reached 129,000 emigrants, 66% of whom came from Poland (Shabi, 2019; Longhi & Rokicka, 2012). The 29th British Social Attitudes report found that 75% of respondents wanted a reduction of overall immigration, while 60% of respondents thought that the settlement of migrants was “bad” for Britain. This event was a major opportunity for the BNP and UKIP, since they both were Eurosceptic, anti-immigration parties. Perhaps more than an electoral opportunity, the 2004 EP election and the following 2005 GE were catalyst for the transformation of both the BNP and the UKIP into “normal” populist radical right parties similar to those in neighboring European countries.

3.1 What is Party Modernization?

At some time during their political life-cycle, political parties may experience periods of electoral regression or moments when they could not reach beyond a certain electoral threshold, especially when mobilizing for a pressing issue. Political parties will, then, normally start adjusting their programmatic platforms either by updating existing policies, they assessed as outdated, or by adopting new stances on particular issues that are becoming salient. Usually, this change in policy occurs as a smooth transition in party attitude, but rarely takes the manner of a sharp U-turn,

where a party becomes unrecognizable or loses its distinctive ideological identity. A recent example of such an endeavor was the Labour Party's modernization into the New Labour from 1997 to 2010. Although the latter was more of a dramatic ideological shift, it, however, was intended as a remedy to long-term electoral stagnation it had been experiencing until 1997.

A party that does not periodically upgrade its platform risks lagging behind the changing attitudes of voters, who might flip to another party they feel offers more appealing choices. "As such when a party commits to modernisation they are making a strategic calculation that (most commonly) sees a disjuncture between modern conditions and party practices as responsible for poor electoral performance" (Dommett, 2015, p. 252). Therefore, newly founded parties which could not do well with their original policies in the electoral market are tempted to readjust their positions on certain issues as a way to access those mainstream votes. When a political party develops into an office-seeking organization, it starts aiming at establishing a credible reputation along with a process of "fine-tuning" its rhetoric towards opposing parties in order to gain legitimacy as normal political contender (Abedi & Lundberg, 2008, pp. 14-15).

3.2 The Modernization of UKIP and BNP Into Populist Parties

After dethroning Tyndall from the BNP's leadership in 1999, Griffin, also an NF veteran, quickly initiated a process of "de-Nazification" similar to Marine Le Pen's *dédiabolisation* of the French Front National. This included the dilution, or even elimination, of biological racism, genetic hierarchy, or any form of crude racist rhetoric that for long had condemned the party as unelectable. This process went hand in hand with the sanitization of the BNP's racist associations with neo-Nazi figures or members of militant groups, such as the Combat 18. Ironically, this meant the expulsion of Tyndall in 2004 after he had been arrested for charges relating to incitement of racial hatred. Another inducement of modernization was the stiff competition from the more moderate UKIP; hence, Griffin was convinced that the only path to compete in Britain's electoral market was "to put the boots away and put on suits" (Cobain, 2006).

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In many ways, the BNP's modernization approach drew mainly from the same old textbook of the French *Nouvelle Droite* (New Right) and its prominent ideologue Alain de Benoist. Throughout its streamlining endeavor, the BNP supplanted its "biopolitics" discourse with a more subtle ideology, which advocated "the right to difference." In its 2005 manifesto, the BNP went on to cite a rationale typical to that of the French New Right: "There is clearly a deeply ingrained human need to 'belong' and to identify with people with whom one shares special things in common...But the idea that this need can be fulfilled by identification with the entire human race is an intellectual fantasy" (BNP, 2005). Under the banner of "cultural separatism," the BNP adopted an "ethnophilic" attitude that aims at preserving cultural integrity through the separation of distinct cultures. This new form of racism is an "'ethnophilic exclusionism' whose central characteristic is a shift in the discourse of racism from 'race exclusionism' and ethnophobia to cultural differentialism and ethnophilia" (Spektorowski, 2000, p. 284). The sanitized version of the BNP also marked a departure from what had previously been a party infested with anti-Semitism to declaring that "There is no conspiracy of wicked plutocrats or sinister Elders of Zion at work here" (BNP, 2005). The new BNP, thus, could claim to have accepted the democratic norm, at least in principle.

On the other side, the UKIP since its founding had maintained a Eurosceptic, single-issue character, dedicated predominantly to "hard" opposition to Britain's membership in the EU. Unlike Tyndall, Sked was an academic and a veteran of the Anti-Federal League, which was an anti-Maastricht party. Contrary to the BNP, UKIP's political record was not contaminated by the toxic language of the extreme right; therefore, they had tremendous advantage in rebranding their single-issue party into a right-wing populist party that covers a variety of issues. These issues include "withdrawal from the EU, sharp cuts to immigration and radical changes to education, taxation and regulation" (Ford & Goodwin, 2014, p. 228). But because the UKIP had confined themselves solely to the European issue for a long period of time, the party was locked in a vicious circle that made it

hard for it to break off its single-issue character. “[D]omestically, the party were not treated as credible due to their single-issue outlook, but domestic failure only encouraged a focus on Europe” (Ford and Goodwin, 2014, p. 226). Therefore, UKIP’s modernization was not aimed at detoxification, but rather recalibration.

After 2004, UKIP broadened its policy through expanding to areas of security, education, foreign policy, and immigration, yet all of these issues were looked at through the lens of the European Union. For example, with regard to immigration, in *We Want Our Country Back*, UKIP claimed that “the numbers of those permitted to enter legally has been rising sharply as a result of both the eastern expansion of the European Union and deliberate government policy” (UKIP). But until 2015, UKIP had been unable to “to translate European victories into domestic support... The voters they attract at European polls often drift away as Westminster elections approach” (Ford & Goodwin, 2014, p. 228). However, despite their incapacity to gain enough momentum that would allow them to have significant presence in Westminster, Farage’s strategy of insistence on bringing the issue of immigration to the forefront of British politics allowed UKIP to achieved issue ownership, especially giving the lack of a consistent response from the Conservatives (Dennison & Goodwin, 2015). This transition to radical-right populism positioned UKIP against the EU “elites” and those in cahoots with them from the establishment at home.

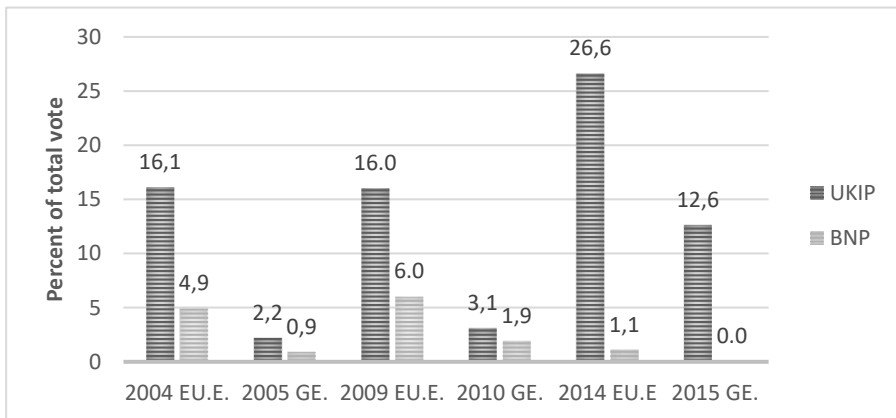
3.3 Electability After Modernization:

After the major breakthrough in 2004, the UKIP, led by Nigel Farage, would proceed for a winning streak in the 2009 EP election, when they won 13 seats, becoming the second largest British party in Brussels after the Tories. The BNP achieved a historic result, winning the two seats of North West England, Nick Griffin, and Yorkshire, Andrew Brons. This was the first time ever a BNP candidate enters the European Parliament since the party’s founding in 1982. In liberal media headlines, it was “A sad day for Britain” as “Two UK fascists are taking their seats in this parliament for the first time” (Traynor, 2019). As shown in figure 1, both parties, however, were unable to match their European performance to

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domestic first-order General Elections. While the BNP never could obtain any representation in Westminster, UKIP's only chance came in 2014 through Tory defectors who flipped UKIP. The latter would mark the two biggest political upsets in contemporary British politics when in the 2014 EP election won 26.6% of the vote, placing the party first. Next year, the party won a historic 12.6% of the vote, placing the party third after the Conservatives and the Labours and ahead of the Lib Dems. On the other hand, the BNP received a disappointing result of 1% in the 2014 EP election, losing its two seats. In 2015, the BNP received yet another catastrophic result of less than 1% of popular vote, sending the party back to exile.

Fig.1. European parliament and general election results 2004-15



Source: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8647/>;
<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/press-tool-kit/6/european-elections-results-1979-2019>.

In 2016, the UKIP would finally fulfill its founding promise of getting the UK outside the EU, with a majority of 52% of British voters choosing to leave Europe. Moments before the official result of the Brexit referendum was declared, UKIP leader, Nigel Farage, hastily announced that “This, if the predictions now are right, this will be a victory for real people, a victory for ordinary people, a victory for decent people”, implying that the 48% who voted to remain the EU were somehow indecent and less real (Withnall, 2016; Müller, 2016, pp. 21-22). But this victory also brought

UKIP to an anticipated political terminal, since its signature issue had finally been resolved. Well before the Brexit referendum, Abedi and Lundberg made the following assumption, “APE [anti-political establishment] parties should be expected to change their structures in the direction of conformity when they start prioritising office-seeking goals – parties that fail to adapt in this way are unlikely to develop the strategic capacity needed to become part of the political establishment, and to ensure their long-term survival” (Abedi & Lundberg, 2008, p. 16). Although UKIP succeeded in achieving issue-ownership over Europe and immigration, it, however, could not envisage itself as an established party capable of competing with mainstream parties when the European issue is no longer on the table. In 2018, Farage quit UKIP because of its “anti-Muslim fixation,” making the party “unrecognizable” for the 25 years UKIP veteran (Walker, 2019).

There are other contributing factors to the rise and fall of both BNP and UKIP besides their respective, relatively, ineffective attempts to turn their parties into electable populist parties. Among these factors is the electoral decline in Western democracies since the 1990s, which created a “void” for populist third parties to exploit (Mair, 2013). As this void between the electorate and the mainstream parties expanded, voters’ disenchantment with “politics as usual” also grew significantly. Moreover, distrust of established parties and mainstream politicians “hit bottom” as “[m]anaging mistrust is what democracies are about today” (Krastev, 2011, p. 13). Amidst this political cynicism, populist far-right parties emerge as a “third way” beyond the indistinguishable politics of mainstream parties. Both BNP and UKIP benefited greatly from this political withdrawal as both parties were seen as alternative vessels through which angry voters can send a protest vote against the establishment.

Both the Conservative and the Labour Parties responded to the populist revolt in such a manner that actually helped further confirm populists’ claims. During the administration of the Europhilic Blair cabinet in early 2000s, levels of immigration were at a record high due to the EU eastward expansion. This led many Labour voters to turn UKIP in working-

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class areas which had previously been considered Labour strongholds (Evans & Mellon, 2015). For the Conservatives, “the formation of the coalition initially limited the ability of the Conservatives to move onto UKIP’s territory of Europe and immigration, as the centre-right party found themselves constrained both by their own leader” (Ford and Goodwin, 2014, p. 200). This led the Conservative government to adopt what Paul Taggart calls “the politics of *attentisme*,” during which the government takes too much time to decide or chooses not to decide in the hope that the issue at hand may lose saliency (Taggart, 1997, pp. 19-20). As events unfolded during the years leading up to Brexit, this policy only allowed populist UKIP to rise as the dominant Eurosceptic anti-establishment party in the UK.

In Britain, voters who are prone to vote populists fall in the category of the “left behind coalition of older, less skilled and white workers” (Ford & Goodwin, 2014). These economically vulnerable electorate constitute the electoral base of BNP and UKIP, but the latter had been a preferable choice by those who find the BNP too extreme to carry their protest vote. UKIP had the privilege of a relatively moderate party. Unlike the BNP, UKIP has had a “reputational shield”¹ that allowed it to appeal to both Labour and Conservative’s disaffected moderate voters. The BNP, on the other hand, was doomed to fail. Since its founding, the party has had ties with neo-Nazi groups and its leaders could not detach their rhetoric from the racist ideology of the NF. Moreover, while the BNP’s electoral fortunes increased significantly after Griffin’s modernization effort, some observers argue that it was more of a “change of clothes” rather than a change of course (Copsey, 2007). Although a tamed BNP seemed to relinquish its fascist convictions, it has kept much of its old racial separatism, often mixed with the theories of cultural incompatibility of the French New Right. As a result, the party could not develop proper office-seeking platform, which would have allowed it to emerge as an electable third-party.

4. CONCLUSION

The assumption of Britain's invulnerability to populism was called into doubt in the early 2000s when two populist far-right parties, once at the margins of British politics, broke through a long-established *cordon sanitair*. The rise of the British National Party and the UK Independence Party in Britain came as a confirmation of the rising trend of populist appeal across the West. To harness the full potential of a changing electoral preference and to resolve the dilemma of the first-past-the-post election system and public hostility towards extremist parties and groups, both the BNP and UKIP went through a conscious process of modernization.

For the BNP, a party with a long history of racism, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism, modernization meant the detoxification of the party from the racist residues of the NF. Under the chairmanship of Nick Griffin, the party undertook a series of disciplinary actions and ideological adjustments in an attempt to compete against the more moderate and relatively successful UKIP. The latter, being originally positioned as a single-issue Eurosceptic party, had a "reputational shield" at its disposal, which enabled the party not only to act as a moderate vehicle for disillusioned voters, but also to achieve issue-ownership over the issues of the EU-membership and immigration; thus, turning the party from a niche party to a mainstream populist party with a broader set of issues.

Although modernization assisted both parties to emerge from their political marginalization, they both could not reach the political maturity which would have enabled them to compete against the established parties. While the BNP remained hostage of its own history and its unwillingness to make a genuine change of course, UKIP also remained fixated on its core issue of leaving the European Union, so when the fate of Brexit was sealed, so was UKIP's.

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