

## Populism as a Form of Identity Politics in the UK: A Case Study of UKIP and BNP

الشعبوية كشكلٍ من أشكال السياسة الهويةية في المملكة المتحدة: دراسة حالة حزب

الاستقلال البريطاني والحزب الوطني البريطاني

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### Abstract :

Since the final decade of the 20th century, a distinctive and undeniable trend has taken root within Western mainstream politics: the rise of the populist far right. Nowhere has this surge of populism been more disruptive than in the United Kingdom, a nation that had been perceived as immune to far-right parties and movements. This study empirically gauges the identitarian components employed by British populist parties, with a focus on the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and the British National Party (BNP). To ascertain the qualification of these parties as populist, a two-pronged approach is adopted. Initially, a minimalist definition is embraced and subsequently operationalized. Next, both political parties are subjected to an elaborate measurement criterion, designed to discern the sufficiency of identity politics as a catalyst for their respective breakthrough.

**Keywords:** populist far right ;United Kingdom; UKIP; BNP; identity politics.

ملخص:

على مدار العقد الأخير من القرن العشرين، ظهر نمط لا لبس فيه في السياسة الغربية: صعود اليمين الشعبوي المتطرف. ولم تشهد أي دولة تأثيراً مزعزعا لهذه التيارات الشعبوية كالذي شهدته المملكة المتحدة، إذ كانت تُعتبر لفترة طويلة منيعاً ضد الأحزاب اليمينية المتطرفة. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى قياس عناصر الهوية التي تُستخدم من قِبل الأحزاب الشعبوية البارزة، وعلى رأسها حزب الاستقلال البريطاني والحزب الوطني البريطاني. ولتحديد ما إذا كانت هذه الأحزاب مؤهلة لتصنيفها ككيانات شعبوية، تقوم الدراسة بتبني نهج مزدوج. في البداية، يتم تبني تعريف مبسط وفقاً لـ كاس مودي، مع تفعيله في دراسة الحالة. ثم يتم عرض كلا الحزبين على معيار قياس مفصل للتحقق ما إذا كانت سياسات الهوية شرطاً كافياً لظهورهما في الساحة البريطانية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اليمين الشعبوي المتطرف؛ المملكة المتحدة؛ سياسات الهوية

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## Introduction:

The recent Brexit vote in the UK came to corroborate a global increase in the electoral fortunes of populist parties. This led many established names in academia to write about the historic outcome of the Brexit vote in 2016 as a part of a populist “tsunami” that had been sweeping politics on both sides of the Atlantic. The rise of the *Rassemblement National* (National Rally) in France, *alternative für deutschland* (Alternative for Germany) in Germany, and the eventful ascendance of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States are indicative of a disrupted political order in the West.<sup>1</sup> Across Europe, populist actors have entered local assemblies and national and European parliaments and won premierships. “A specter is haunting the world- populism.” This opening line from an edited collection by Ghița Ionescu and Ernest Gellner sounded an early alarm about a rising global populist trend during the 1960s; today, it could not have been more resonant.

This new breed of populist far-right parties has existed in Western politics since the 1980s; however, they have been operating on the margins of national politics. Britain, a country that fought fascism firsthand, had always been considered invulnerable to third parties of the far right. Due to widespread public hostility towards extreme movements or groups and a first-past-the-post political system, the far right had for long been a pariah residing on the outskirts of British politics. After the signing of the Maastricht Treaty, however, British populist parties, mainly the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and the British National Party (BNP), sought to capitalize on Eurosceptic popular attitudes and a set of social issues related to Britain’s membership in the European Union. The latter includes rising numbers of immigration from within and outside the EU, security, and welfare.

At first glance, the BNP of the 1980s and 90s could hardly be distinguishable from its predecessor, the National Front (NF). The party appropriated much of the NF’s rationale on immigration, national identity, and race. As Goodwin (2011) indicates, free from the restraining shackles of a powerful populist faction in the NF, Tyndall was let loose on an even more aggressive expression of racial nationalism “under which meant questions of national identity and belonging were defined along the lines of race, or as Tyndall explained: “Race and not geographical location, is the cement that binds nations” (p. 38). With regard to race, the BNP’s official stance was derived from the personal belief of Tyndall himself, who advocated the inherit and logical superiority of the white race over “coloureds”: “My race had for centuries been their rulers and they its subjects, a relationship that it was obvious to me had not come about as a result of some toss of a coin.” The BNP’s racially and ethnically exclusive perception of the nation was often disseminated during anti-immigration campaigns, articles, rallies in the form of inflammatory “replacement” theories, such as “the silent genocide” and “WHITES FACING EXTINCTION”. This conviction on the part of the BNP in the premises of racial supremacy meant that the party had chosen to sit next to parties of the extreme right party family (ERP).

The UK Independence Party was established as a reaction to the negotiation and the later ratification of the Maastricht Treaty between 1991-1993. Founded by Alan Sked in 1993, the UKIP, in its embryonic stage, was a Eurosceptic, single-issue party, whose only *raison d’être* was to oppose Britain’s membership in the EU (Usherwood, 2008). This ridged stance with regard to the EU rendered the party as a “hard-Eurosceptic.” According to Szczerbiak’s typology, “Hard Euroscepticism implies outright rejection of the entire project of European political and economic integration and opposition to one’s country joining or remaining a member of the EU” (Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2008). Therefore, the party was entirely devoted to opposing any official treaty by which Britain becomes a member-state in a European Union, be it economic or political. But unlike the BNP, the UKIP was explicit in its rejection of the extreme language of racism and xenophobia. Reflecting on the party’s stance on such issues, Sked writes, “It was a moderate party with a membership form that stated that it held no prejudices against foreigners or lawful minorities of any kind and would send representatives only to the British parliament” (Sked, 2015).

Both parties, then, underwent a process of modernization aimed at enhancing electoral performance by means of moderating and broadening their ideological platforms. The introduction of the Proportional Representation System (PR)<sup>1</sup> in EU elections further induced both parties to undertake dramatic adjustments.

### **Research Problem and Hypothesis**

The study seeks to test a commonly held hypothesis that the European populist far right is primarily driven by identity-related issues. To do so, we will conduct a case study that is limited in terms of both time and place, specifically focusing on the rise of the populist far right in the United Kingdom. The objective of this investigation is to determine whether the surge in support for the populist far right in the UK, embodied in UKIP and BNP, can be attributed to the identitarian messages propagated by these political parties. Identitarian messages typically emphasize identity-related issues, such as nationalism, cultural preservation, and anti-immigration sentiments. By conducting a specific case study, we aim to delve into the factors that contributed to the rise of the populist far right in the UK. The focus will be on examining the role and impact of identitarian messages in this particular context, shedding light on whether they played a significant role in shaping public opinion and driving support for these political parties.

### **Methodology:**

Cas Mudde, a political scientist known for his extensive research on political extremism and populism, offered a conceptualization of populism as "a thin-centered 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. 542). It is important to note that Mudde defines populism as an ideology, which is a set of beliefs, values, and ideas that shape the way individuals and groups understand the world and their place in it. Ideologies can be more or less comprehensive, and they may provide a more or less coherent worldview. By calling populism an ideology, Mudde suggests that it is a way of thinking about politics that encompasses multiple aspects of political life, including social, economic, and cultural dimensions.

This definition also places an emphasis on the binary nature of populism, as it separates society into two antagonistic groups: "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite." This is an example of Manichaeism, which sees the world in terms of a stark contrast between good and evil. This binary approach to politics is central to populism, as it provides a clear and simple narrative for understanding complex issues. By reducing political conflicts to a struggle between two opposing groups, populists can mobilize their supporters and delegitimize their opponents.

The concept "*volonté générale*", on the other hand, comes from the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who argued that legitimate political authority arises from the consent of the governed. Populists often claim to represent the will of the majority, which they see as the ultimate source of political power. By doing so, they present themselves as the true defenders of democracy, and delegitimize their opponents as elitist or anti-democratic. Finally, Mudde's definition of populism is "thin-centered." This means that it does not prescribe a specific set of policy positions or values. Instead, populism is primarily a way of framing political issues and mobilizing support. This thinness is both a strength and a weakness of populism. On the one hand, it allows populists to appeal to a wide range of people, regardless of their specific policy preferences. On the other hand, it can make populism vulnerable to co-optation by more ideologically coherent ideologies, such as authoritarianism.

Applying Mudde's ideational definition to UKIP and BNP necessarily invites a well-documented association between identity politics and populism. The moral cleavage populism creates within society between "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite" inevitably frames the

debate over populism in identitarian perquisites. A number of scholars have argued that in western Europe, the populist radical right adopts an exclusionary form of identity politics. Others, like Muller, insist that populism is intrinsically identitarian. Political opponents, therefore, are characterized as “morally” unfit to hold any public office or to speak in the name of the inherently “pure” people.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the ideological combination of “nativism and populism,” which is shared by most populist radical-right parties in western Europe adds another identity dimension. According to Taggart (2002), populist parties tend to emphasize questions of identity through their ethnic opposition to immigration; their assertion of regional separatism; and disdain of the current integrationist policy of the EU.

Recently there have been a number of initiatives that aim to classify political parties as populist according to slightly distinct criteria. Among these is the PopuList which is a list of populist parties classified by a number of political scientists, including Mudde, Rooduijn, van Kessel, and Taggart. The PopuList survey does include UKIP as a far-right, Eurosceptic populist party, but it does not include the BNP. This is perhaps due to the BNP’s weightless presence in post-Brexit Britain and, more importantly, due to the disagreement among scholars on the party’s nature as a populist far-right party. The PopuList uses a binary measuring system of 0/1 codes to measure four dimensions of far left, far right, Euroscepticism, and populism whereby 0= negative value and 1= positive value. In the “List,” UKIP scores 1 in all four categories as a far-right Eurosceptic party (The PopuList, 2019).

In addition, this study adapts datasets from three expert surveys to measure identity saliency in both UKIP’s and BNP’s platforms. These surveys were established by reputable political scholars and span a vast geographical space. Furthermore, the datasets extracted from these surveys contain specific identity-oriented elements that are typical of far right populist parties. The datasets are tested to see whether they live up to the established assumption of UKIP and BNP as identity-driven populist parties. These surveys include, the Global Part Survey (GPS), the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHESS), and the Populism and Political Parties Expert Survey (POPPA)

Since the early 2000s, this article argues, UKIP and BNP sought to identify themselves as “normal” populist parties, adopting an identity- driving platform that is derived from the old premises of the theories of “cultural incompatibility” and “the right to difference”. Accordingly, the paper shall proceed as following:

- First, to bolster the scientific rigor of our study we source empirical datasets from recently conducted expert surveys, which are then employed to operationalize Mudde’s minimalist definition to test the validity of categorizing both parties as populist.
- Second, to measure the saliency of identity to each party, other expert surveys are adapted. Moreover, both parties' appeal to identitarian issues is compared and analyzed.
- Third, an interpretation of the results is delivered along with an informed forecast of the political prospects of both UKIP and BNP.
- Finally, the study delivers an overview on the structural, organizationa, and legal factors that were at the center of the populist surge in the UK.

### **1- What is Populism?**

As with most political concepts that end with the suffix “ism”, populism remains a highly contested concept among political scholars, and a “general theory” of populism remains non-existent. Much of the reason behind this lack of a consensus definition can be attributed to the malleability of the populist phenomenon through time and place. for example, Stanly (2008) admits

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” (100). Indeed, during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, agrarian, or classical populism, sprang out on the left of the political spectrum with movements such as the Narodniki in Tsarist Russia and the People’s Party in the United States. Today, however, most exclusionary populist parties tend to be on the far right of the political spectrum. Political geography can also be indicative of the multifaceted nature of populism. For example, most left-wing populist parties and movements are located in the southern hemisphere, including several south European countries, such as Spain, Italy and Greece. On the other hand, most right-wing populist parties are located in the northern hemisphere, specifically Western Europe and North America (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013). This space-time metamorphosis renders populism a challenging concept to define, least of all, to apply to specific case studies.

In academia, the bulk of scholarly initiatives to define populism falls within three main approaches: the political style approach, the ideational approach, and the discursive approach. Each one of these approaches has its advantages and drawbacks, all of which are beyond the capacity of this study to flesh out. However, there are some common core features that are manifested in most populist instances. Primarily, populism reflects a Schmittian perception of the political<sup>9</sup>, that is, it strives to define political contenders in terms of “friends and foes”. Those who belong to “the people” are conceived as inherently “pure”, just, and have the ultimate sovereignty over all matters of political practice. In contrast, the elite are looked at with suspicion and distrust as they are often perceived as collaborating to repress the true will of the “silent majority”. This group is often derogatively referred to as “the establishment”, “the swamp”, or simply “the bureaucrats”.

As for the type of polity populists aspire to erect, they tend to prefer politics of immediacy, that is, a type of a political system that goes beyond the normative procedural aspect of democracy to creating an apolitical zone of deliberation that is primarily plebiscitarian in nature. To illustrate, populist actors often resort to public opinion to decide on a political issue rather than going through the lengthy, bureaucratic hierarchy of due process. Referenda, therefore, can be a lucrative means for obtaining political legitimacy for decision making. A prime example of such practice was the 2016 Hungarian migrant quota referendum that was initiated by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, by which he bypassed the prolonged discussions and negotiations within the EU framework and domestic legislative processes and sought a direct mandate from the people (BBC News, 2016).

Having at least given a skeleton conceptualization of populism, there is a question to ask: what makes a certain movement, party, or a political actor populist? According to Urbinati, for a populist party or movement to be studied as such, two prerequisites are needed: a leader and an office-seeking agenda. Accordingly, leftist movements such as the Occupy Wall Street in the U.S. and Podemos in Spain cannot be considered as populist because they lack both. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance not to rely on discourse, style, or policy as sole indicators for the categorization of populist entities; structural considerations are equally constitutive.

## **2- Classifying UKIP and BNP as Populist Parties Using Mudde’s Ideational Definition:**

To operationalize Mudde’s definition for our case study, we rely on the Global Party Survey (GPS) dataset, an expert survey that gathers the opinions of almost 2,000 party experts from 170 countries, including the UK. The GPS covers the key features that Mudde deems critical in distinguishing populist parties from non-populist parties, such as the corruption of politicians, people’s sovereignty, and the will of the people. Furthermore, we supplement the GPS with data from the Populism and Political Parties Expert Survey (POPPA), which assesses additional features like anti-elitism, a Manichean outlook, people centrism, indivisibility (people’s homogeneity), and the general will of the people. POPPA gathers data from 294 experts on ideology, political style, and party organization in 28 European countries, including the UK.

However, as both surveys were recently collected and published (in 2020 and 2018, respectively), the BNP was not included due to its political irrelevance. As a result, both surveys only feature data on UKIP, which remains a significant contender. Despite this limitation, we can use both surveys to operationalize Mudde's definition.

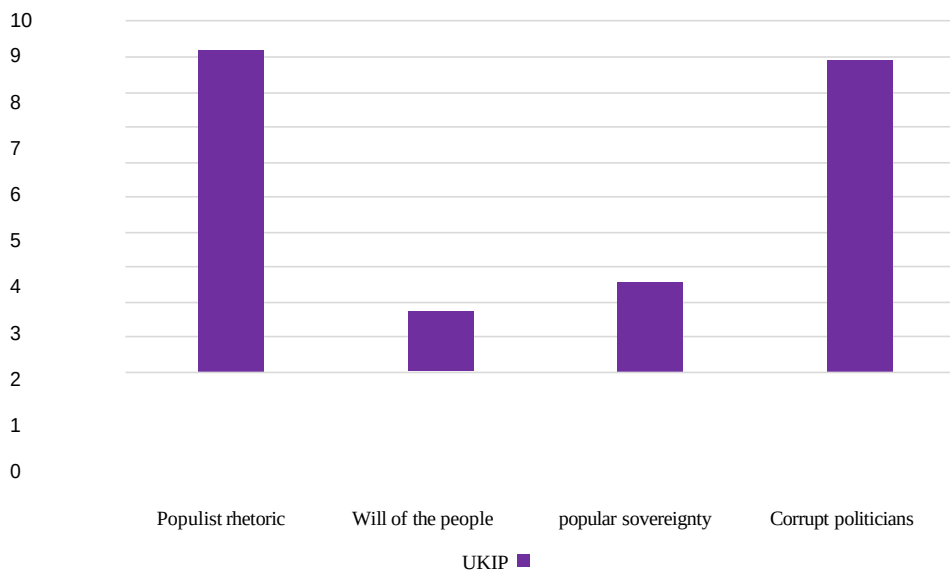
The GPS dataset provides valuable information on four key populist features that are integral to Mudde's ideational definition of populism. These features include: (1) populist rhetoric, which questions the legitimacy of democratic institutions and denounces corrupt officials, measured on a scale of 0-10 where 0 represents a strong preference for pluralist rhetoric and 10 signifies a strong inclination towards populist rhetoric; (2) the concept of a monist general will of the people, measured on a scale of 0-10 where 0 indicates that politicians should adhere to the will of the people and 10 suggests that they should follow public opinion; (3) the belief in the supremacy of popular sovereignty, measured on the same scale where 0 reflects the view that ordinary people should decide important issues and 10 signifies that leaders should make such decisions; and (4) the emphasis on the moral corruption of politicians, measured on the same scale where 0 implies a strong emphasis on politicians' honesty and trustworthiness and 10 suggests a perception of them as dishonest and corrupt. Illustrated in Figure 1, the UKIP party scores notably high in all four categories: 9.2 for "populist rhetoric," 1.7 for the "will of the people," 2.6 for "popular sovereignty," and 9 for the "corrupt politicians" category. These scores align closely with Mudde's conceptualization of populist parties.

To further substantiate the classification of UKIP as a populist radical right party, we have utilized a dataset from POPPA to assess the significance of populist features outlined in Mudde's definition. From the dataset, we have chosen five categories that are central to Mudde's minimalist definition: Manichean struggle, indivisibility (or homogeneity of the people), the general will, people-centrism, and anti-elitism. It is important to note that the survey includes additional populist features; however, for our analysis, we have exclusively focused on those specified by Mudde. Each of the five categories is measured on a scale of 0-10, where 0 represents the lowest value and 10 indicates the highest value. Figure 2 demonstrates that UKIP scores significantly high across all five populist features included in our selected ideational definition. This further strengthens the argument for UKIP's classification as a populist radical right party.

On the other hand, the BNP was not included in these recent populist surveys. This is perhaps the party was better studied as an extreme right-wing party, rather than a populist radical right party. Nevertheless, the party can be studied as a populist party if modernization efforts were taken into consideration. The BNP has been known for its anti-immigrant, anti-European Union, and anti-establishment stance. Its rhetoric has often been divisive and exclusionary, targeting ethnic and religious minorities, and advocating for the deportation of non-British citizens. However, the party has also made efforts in recent years to distance itself from its extremist past and re-brand itself as a more moderate, populist party.

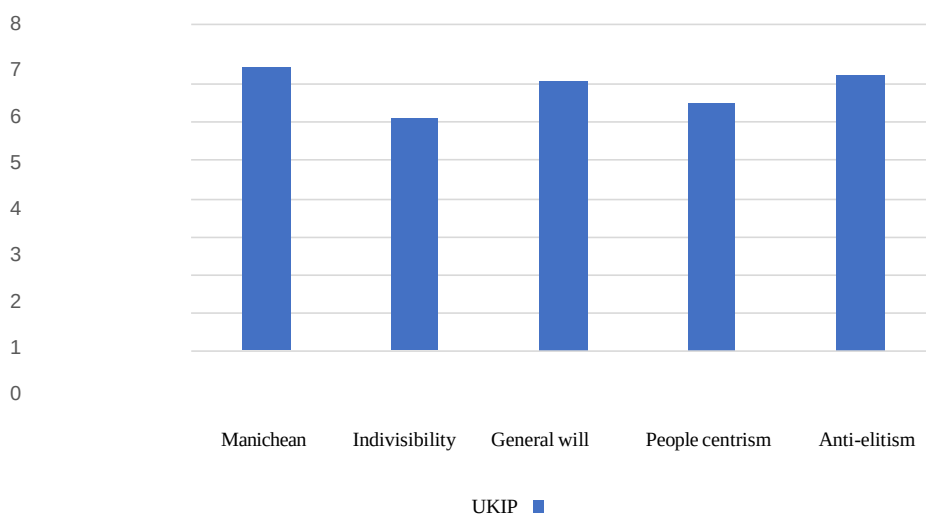
The exclusion of the British National Party (BNP) from recent populist surveys is likely due to the fact that it has historically been viewed as an extreme right-wing party, rather than a populist radical right party. However, it is important to note that the BNP can still be studied as a populist party, provided that a modernization effort is taken into consideration. The BNP has been known for its anti-immigrant, anti-European Union, and anti-establishment stance. Its rhetoric has often been divisive and exclusionary, targeting ethnic and religious minorities, and advocating for the deportation of non-British citizens. However, the party has also made efforts in recent years to distance itself from its extremist past and rebrand itself as a more moderate, populist party. Therefore, certain scholars, such as van Kessel (2015), classify the BNP as a populist party solely on the official statements and publications of the party and its leader, Nick Griffin.

**Fig.1.** Measuring populism using GPS dataset, 2019.



**Source:** adapted from Pippa Norris, “Global Party Survey, 2019,” Harvard Dataverse (Harvard Dataverse, April 1, 2020), <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi%3A10.7910%2F%2FDVN%2FWMGNTNS>.

**Fig.2.** Measuring populism using the POPPA dataset, 2018.



**Source:** adapted from Meijers, Maurits; Zaslove, Andrej, 2020, “Populism and Political Parties Expert Survey 2018 (POPPA)”, <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/8NEL7B>, Harvard Dataverse.; Meijers, M. J., & Zaslove, A. (2020). Measuring Populism in Political Parties: Appraisal of a New Approach. Comparative Political Studies.

### 3- Measuring the Importance of Identity-Oriented Issues:

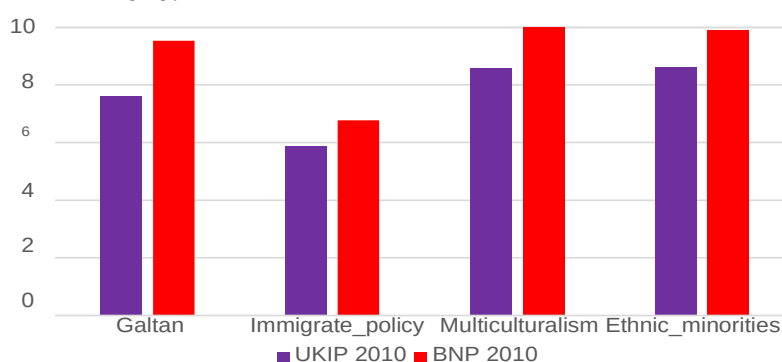
To properly analyze the saliency of identitarian issues to both UKIP and BNP, a panoramic analysis of both side of the populist equation is in order.

## Section I: The Supply Side

The Chapel Hill Expert Survey is another collaborative survey accomplished by more than 400 political scientists, with a broader dataset about the positioning of 277 parties from 32 countries. CHES includes extensive data concerning party ideology, party policy, and party position with regard to EU integration. Furthermore, CHES also provides datasets concerning the importance of identity-oriented issues, such as multiculturalism and nationalism, to each party. The survey does include the BNP, but only provides data from 2010. On the other hand, CHES provides datasets on the UKIP from 1999 to 2019. Therefore, due to the absence of a long-term dataset for the BNP it is only possible to compare data from 2010. Although this does not constitute a trend, it does offer a glimpse into the extent to which each party devotes to identity politics. To achieve this comparison, a modified version of CHES is reduced to only include identity-oriented datasets such as GAL-TAN (Green-Alternative-Liberal and Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist) scale, nationalism, ethnic minorities, immigration policy, and multiculturalism.

The data provided by CHES are measured using a scale from 0 to 10. The galatan category, which measures parties' positions on social and cultural views, is divided across the scale where 0= libertarian/postmaterialist, 5= center, and 10= traditional/authoritarian. A party's stance on immigration is similarly measured, whereby 0= strongly in favor of liberal immigration policy and 10= strongly in favor of restrictive immigration policy, and the same applies to stance on multiculturalism whereby 0= in favor of multiculturalism and 10= in favor of assimilation. Finally, the survey measures support for more ethnic minority rights among parties whereby 0= in favor of more rights for ethnic minorities and 10= opposition to more rights. Nationalism was not included here, as datasets concerning this category lack consistency over time periods from one party to another.

**Fig.3.** The importance of identity-oriented issues to UKIP and BNP in 2010.



**Source:** Data adapted from Jolly, Seth, Ryan Bakker, Liesbet Hooghe, Gary Marks, Jonathan Polk, Jan Rovny, Marco Steenbergen, and Milada Anna Vachudova. Forthcoming. "Chapel Hill Expert Survey Trend File, 1999-2019." *Electoral Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2021.102420>

On the other hand, UKIP's position on the issues mentioned in figure 3 was slightly moderate than the BNP's in all four categories. For instance, the party scored 7.6, positioning the party more on the radical right rather than the extreme right. However, UKIP was only a point and a half lower than the BNP in its opposition for more rights for ethnic minorities and multiculturalism. As far as immigration is concerned, UKIP had a less restrictive stance than the BNP, scoring 5.9. Although the data provided by CHES do not offer a long-term trend concerning

identity issues for our case study, this sample from 2010 shows that both UKIP and BNP were on the far right of the political spectrum, with both parties' positions being strongly identitarian.

Compared with other mainstream parties, both UKIP and BNP are clearly more identitarian. As shown in Figure 4, the Conservatives, the Labours, and the LibDems have less emphasis on identity issues. However, the Conservative Party was the most identitarian compared to Labour and LibDems. In fact, in 2010, the Conservative party outscored both UKIP and BNP, measuring 7.57 while UKIP and BNP measured 5.88 and 6.77 respectively. This could be interpreted as an attempt on the part of the Tories to pull the rug out from under UKIP, who were achieving issue-ownership over immigration, by adopting a stricter stance on immigration. As Figure 5 illustrates, immigration was the second most salient issue in 2010 after the economy and which was the most salient before the global economic crisis of 2008. The Labour Party and the Liberal Democratic Party were scored liberal to moderate in all four categories. This analysis offers a snapshot of the position of far-right parties, UKIP and BNP, on issues of identity at a certain span of time that has been preceded by an important variable, which is the 2008 economic crisis. Moreover, data on the BNP were collected only through a single year, 2010, which limited the analysis to that year and prevented the design of a long-term trend that could be used as a conclusive argument for the question at hand.

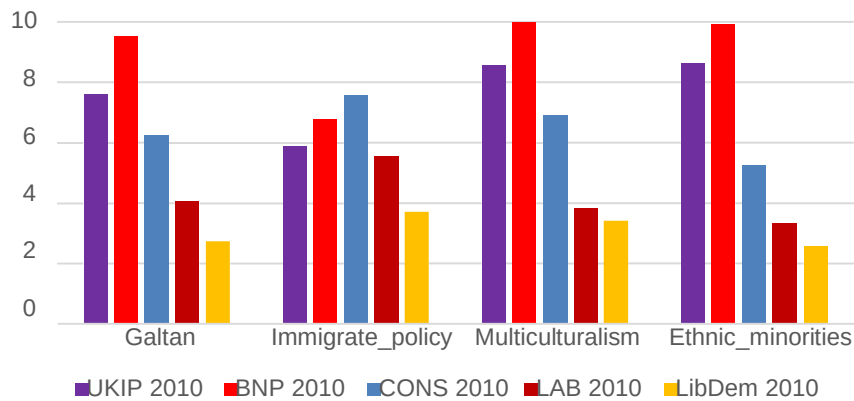
## **Section II: The Demand Side**

In *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*, Norris and Inglehart (2016) put forward a theory of an intergenerational cultural shift in western societies that has had a shadow cast over politics. According to this theory, social conservatism, especially during the 1960s, had begun losing ground to liberal post-materialist values, which were a result of several progressivist and generational factors, "including generational replacement, the expansion of access to higher education, urbanization, growing gender equality, and greater ethnic diversity" (p. 18). The silent revolution, as described by Inglehart, brought issues of identity, self-actualization, and gender and cultural diversity to the center stage of political debate, sidelining material values and security issues, especially after the collapse of Communism in 1990 and the triumph of liberal democracy.

This change also brought a sense of social and cultural estrangement that has been mostly felt by "the left behinds." The social profile of this segment of society consists of "the older, white and poorly educated working class, who share strong feelings about national identity, Europe and immigration, and a lack of faith in established politics" (Ford & Goodwin, 2014, p. 141).

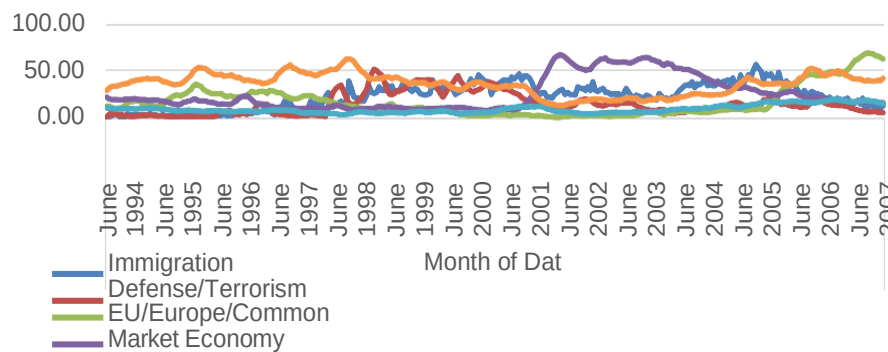
According to the 31st BSA report, those who conceive ethnicity as constitutive of national identity are more likely to oppose immigration (National Identity, n.d.). As opposed to civic nationalism, ethnic national identity stresses one's culture, place of birth, and language. As shown in Table 1, age is a significant factor in shaping one's attitude towards immigration and its impact on British culture. Those who were born before 1946 were more likely to view immigration as having a negative impact on British culture. Educational as well as professional qualifications were also significant in predicting one's attitude towards immigration.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, middle class workers, university graduates, and those who were born after 1965 held more moderate attitudes towards immigration and its impact on the cultural and economic well-being of Britain. The data also illustrates an increasing concern across all social groups on the impact of immigration on the British culture and economy and want immigration to be reduced.

**Fig.4.** The importance of Issue-oriented issues to main. parties and pop. parties in 2010.



**Source:** adapted from Jolly, Seth, Ryan Bakker, Liesbet Hooghe, Gary Marks, Jonathan Polk, Jan Rovny, Marco Steenbergen, and Milada Anna Vachudova. Forthcoming. "Chapel Hill Expert Survey Trend File, 1999-2019." Electoral Studies. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2021.102420>

**Fig.5.** Salience of Immigration in the UK, 1994-2009.



**Source:** data from Scott Blinder and Lindsay Richards, "UK Public Opinion toward Immigration: Overall Attitudes and Level of Concern," Migration Observatory, January 20, 2020, <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/uk-public-opinion-toward-immigration-overall-attitudes-and-level-of-concern/>.

As mentioned earlier, this pessimism about the impact of immigration on British identity and culture had opened venues for the populist radical right to seek mobilization among these dissatisfied voters, who feel alienated by the unresponsiveness of the main parties to the rising numbers of immigration. The cultural backlash, therefore, can be seen as a reaction to the changing political, cultural, and social reality in the UK by those who feel a sense of cultural misplacement and identity loss. The left behind conceive immigration as an unnecessary competition over increasingly scarce job opportunities and a threat to the identity and cultural integrity of Britain. To register their dissatisfaction, these old, angry white men turn to populist parties, whom they feel better speak for their unresolved grievances. An empirical study conducted by Ivarsflaten (2008) concludes that immigration was the uniting factor of right-wing populism in western Europe.

**Table 1.** Negative attitudes about immigration, by social group.

|                                                | Working<br>class | Middle<br>class | No<br>quals | University<br>graduate | Born pre-<br>1946 | Born post-<br>1965 |
|------------------------------------------------|------------------|-----------------|-------------|------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| Immigration<br>needs to be<br>reduced 'a lot'  |                  |                 |             |                        |                   |                    |
| 1995                                           | 45.6             | 37.4            | 51.9        | 18.9                   | 49.5              | 29.8               |
| 2003                                           | 58.2             | 36.5            | 63.9        | 21.8                   | 54.7              | 44.2               |
| 2011                                           | 60.6             | 41.6            | 68.6        | 28.6                   | 64.6              | 42.4               |
| Change                                         | +15.0            | +4.2            | +16.7       | +8.7                   | +15.1             | +12.6              |
| Immigration<br>has negative<br>economic impact |                  |                 |             |                        |                   |                    |
| 2002                                           | 50.8             | 36.1            | 51.3        | 25.9                   | 48.7              | 44.2               |
| 2011                                           | 62.2             | 40.3            | 65.7        | 30.4                   | 57.9              | 46.3               |
| Change                                         | +11.4            | +4.2            | +14.4       | +4.5                   | +9.2              | +2.1               |
| Immigration has<br>negative cultural<br>impact |                  |                 |             |                        |                   |                    |
| 2002                                           | 39.8             | 26.0            | 41.6        | 16.7                   | 42.1              | 26.9               |
| 2011                                           | 55.9             | 37.2            | 62.4        | 24.2                   | 55.6              | 41.8               |
| Change                                         | +16.1            | +11.2           | +20.8       | +7.5                   | +13.5             | +14.9              |

**Source:** Robert Anthony Ford and Matthew J. Goodwin, *Revolt on the Right: Explaining Support for the Radical Right in Britain* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2014): 123.

#### 4- Data Interpretation and Discussion:

In the early 2000s two major events may have boosted the saliency of immigration as an identity issue in the UK. The first was the 9/11 attacks on the US, which had led to a surge in anti-Muslim and anti-immigration attitudes in the West in general (Schüller, 2016). Second, the eastward expansion of the EU and the unprecedented levels of immigrants pouring into the UK led many to doubt the EU's free movement policy while others were more pronounced in their rejection of the British-EU arrangement altogether. During this period, both the UKIP and the BNP were amidst course-changing phases that witnessed the rise of their respective charismatic leaders, Griffin and Farage. As the data indicates, both parties' platforms were strategically tailored to match the increasing saliency of identity politics within the British electoral market. Although in disproportionate rhetorical intensity, both UKIP and BNP targeted a group of electorates who are a typical populist destination. This group of citizenry is geographically located in deprived areas where there are either dense immigration communities or fewer job opportunities. These conditions

created fertile ground for the populist far right to disseminate a fused Eurosceptic anti-immigration message.

The data also shows that the issue of immigration had been gaining saliency since the late 1990s with the exception of the period between 2008 and 2013. This was a period of global economic recession that hit the UK with considerable impact, leading the economy to become the number one issue for five years straight. Prior to the economic crisis, both UKIP and BNP were the most successful far-right parties in the UK. This success further induced both parties to build an electoral pocket within Labor and Conservative territories of xenophobic disillusioned voters. These voters are spread across the political spectrum and had been building up resentment towards the political establishment long before the populist resurgence of 2004. Due to the “permissive consensus”<sup>5</sup> among the main parties on the EU and, to a certain extent, immigration, populist parties were seen as an alternative by the left behind. Therefore, the populist resurgence exploited already existing tension in the British society about the EU and immigration. In the past, both Tories and Labour have managed to navigate this cleavage in a thermostatic manner, but since the two parties developed almost identical stances on the EU, they could no longer respond in this manner. The UKIP and BNP came to fill a gap in British politics, offering voters more choices including racist, xenophobic, and Islamophobic debates, all of which had been previously brushed under the carpet by the mainstream as political taboos.

The populist radical right in the UK, especially the UKIP, channeled those anxieties about the state of the union with the EU and the “harming” policies it entails for the UK and created a multilayered “Other” who manifests itself nationally and supranationally (Tong & Zuo, 2019). Both UKIP and the BNP, through a populist platform, created an alleged association between a Europhilic cartel of elites in Westminster and those in Brussels. Together, these detached elites have stripped Britain of its sovereignty, including the ability to legislate freely and control over its own borders and foreign policy. The modernization attempt of each party was specifically architected to fan those existing voter anxieties as a strategy to harness ensuing defections from the main parties. However, the limitation of such a strategy transpired following the 2008 economic turmoil when voters suddenly shifted to the economy as their most important issue. Both parties took notice of this change, and they both attempted to broaden their policies to areas of education, NHS, defense...etc. The BNP’s move was to oust Griffin in 2011 from party leadership, but this was not enough, as the party was already heading towards the exit since the 2010 GE. UKIP, on the other hand, was performing remarkably better. The party reinvigorated its Eurosceptic platform after the effects of the economic crisis subsided, giving way once again to the issue of immigration to dominate. Another incident that helped UKIP’s campaign was the 2015 Refugee Crisis, which witnessed increased numbers of refugees and asylum seekers, mostly from the Middle East, entering the EU.

It is important, however, to draw a line between the BNP’s version of identity politics and that of UKIP’s. The former had devised a modernization plan that was heavily influenced by its Neo-Nazi past; therefore, many of its policies still advocated differentialist, separatist agendas that had kept the party a political pariah. UKIP, in contrast, had maintained a “reputational shield” by distancing itself from extreme rhetoric and figures, often to avoid being guilty by association. Moreover, UKIP had for long used a civic notion of national identity, in contrast to BNP’s racial nationalism. In doing so, UKIP had managed to become the most powerful third party in the UK without ever holding office.

Identity politics, therefore, was a precondition for the emergence of both UKIP and the BNP. Nevertheless, it was the populist far right that positioned those negative attitudes against a supposed enemy, the EU. Although immigration was consistently presented as a cultural threat, it was only a part of the big problem, which is an ever-expanding federal superstate attempting to erase all traces of national identity and national sovereignty, or to put it in Farage’s words “the quiet assassin of

nation- state democracy.” The fact that the saliency of immigration, and identity politics in general, have receded after Brexit indicates how anti-immigration as driven by identitarian anxiety has become linked to Euroscepticism in the UK. “The Purple Revolution”<sup>6</sup> although failed to reshuffle cards of political power in the UK, was successful in its ability to mobilize quite a significant number of the electorate against the EU. Its success was also visible in its ability to corner the Conservative Party into adopting a hard Eurosceptic stance that has for long been the signature core issue of UKIP.

As it has been advanced so far, the UK had always been the awkward partner in the EU.<sup>7</sup> Due to the country’s unique historical and political development, the question of national identity has still not been resolved; therefore, there has been a void in the meaning of Britishness which the populist far right sought to fill through different interpretations of British national identity. While the BNP defined Britishness along the lines of the old NF tradition of “soil and blood” jargon, UKIP had managed to construct a British national identity that is a total opposite projection of the EU. The rise of populism in the UK had been boosted by several intertwined factors, including political stagnation and the unwillingness of both Labour and Tory to address the legitimate objections of an affected part of the populace. In the midst of this changing reality, identity politics had been given prominence as a defining reference for other issues such as the economy, the healthcare system, terrorism, and the EU. People were angry at immigrants, because they had been portrayed as a burden on the welfare system, a security threat, and culturally incompatible with British values (Baltaş & Steptoe, 2000). Although these attitudes were the strongest among older, low skilled workers, they were strategically stressed by populists to pull “the left behinds” away from the main parties.

After the Brexit vote, both UKIP and BNP witnessed disseminating electoral defeats and both have been out of the British political scene until the time of writing. After resigning from UKIP, Farage moved on to found its Brexit Party, dedicated to ensuring the completion of a complete withdrawal from the EU only to be renamed Reform UK after the finalization of Brexit in 2021.

#### **4.1 The Legal Framework and The Contagious Effect of UKIP and BNP on British Politics**

Being the parliamentary democracy that it is today, the UK’s legal framework guarantees the right of elections for all registered political parties regardless of their ideological leanings, provided that they agree and COMPLY with certain legal requirements, such as registration with the Electoral Commission under *the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000* and also adhere to laws prohibiting illegal activities like inciting violence or promoting hate speech (Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000, 2000; Electoral Commission, n.d.). These legal restrictions definitely put a barrier against the rise of political extremism in the UK; however, they do not exempt populist parties of the far right from participating in free elections, including local, national, or European elections. Therefore, parties such as the UKIP and the BNP were allowed to practice their participatory rights as equally as the mainstream parties so long as they did not explicitly attempt to deviate from the liberal democratic apparatus of the UK.

Besides these legal provisions, however, there are other structural and organizational barriers that are put in place that severely limit the chances of the rise of far-right parties in the country. Perhaps the most obvious of these is the first-past-the-post electoral system that is used in General Elections. This electoral system has an inherent bias that tends to favor larger established parties, such as the Conservative Party and the Labour Party, and makes it exhaustive for smaller parties, such as the UKIP and the BNP, to obtain representation in Westminster. Parties and candidates standing for election under this system only need to secure the most votes in a given constituency to win a seat, which results, in most cases, in a two-party dominance and marginalization of third parties whose support is spread thinly across constituencies (Curtice, 2010).

In the 2015 General Election, UKIP obtained 12.6% of national vote but was only able to win one seat in Parliament, although it performed far better in the 2014 EP election. This highlights the the significant disadvantage of the FPTP system compared to the Proportional Representation system that is used at the European level on third parties, including those of the populist far right.

Prior to the lead-up to that momentous Brexit night, the prevailing belief was that the UK, as the "mother of all parliaments" with its first-past-the-post electoral system, had been immune to the rise of populist far-right parties and movements. The country had long been regarded as one of the most secure democracies in the Western world. However, this cherished notion was shattered by the unprecedented electoral breakthrough of the UKIP in the 2004 European Parliament Election, followed by the emergence of the BNP on the political scene. Despite operating in political limbo, narrowly missing the threshold to gain significant representation, these parties were often labeled as protest and reactionary movements by both the public and the media rather than being perceived as reliable political entities.

The significant achievements of populist parties in the UK shattered the once widely held assumption of the ability of British democracy to keep far-right parties at bay. Populist third parties were able to challenge mainstream parties in European elections and local elections and, for a moment, even had representatives at Westminster. But more than an electoral breakthrough, these parties had the potential to steer the political debate towards the rough terrains of identity politics. The mainstream parties were caught between a rock and a hard place. Either to deprive these parties of their signature issues by adopting them or brushing aside those concerns by labeling them as politically incorrect or pathologizing their proponents.

In retrospect, neither of these strategies has been effective in responding to the growing populist appeal. The fact that populism in the UK was able to inform policy without holding any government office was even more concerning. The contagion effect was enabled mainly as a result of the Conservatives succumbing to the pressure from UKIP to adopt a firmer stance on immigration and a harder Eurosceptic platform towards the EU. While this has had the desired effect of stripping UKIP of its soul issue after the Brexit referendum, it also created deep a cleavage with Conservative ranks between pro-Brexit and pro-EU factions. The same cleavage can also be seen on a macro level, where British citizens continue to be divided on the future of Britain outside the EU.

#### **4.1.1 Constitutional Patriotism as an Alternative for Populist Ethnic Nationalism**

One possible trajectory through which conciliation between national identity and European identity could be attained is to detach the nation from the state, or as Prentoulis states it, "to extract the nation from the state and shape it into a more flexible cultural process independent of political institutions" (Prentoulis, 2001, p. 205). Jurgen Habermas also made a similar remark by calling for what he called "constitutional patriotism" that constructs a public sphere for all citizens of Europe. (Habermas, 2001). National Identity and European identity under such circumstances would be meshed together, each influencing the other and capable of being conceived as separate "imagined communities."

In mature democracies, such as the UK, the essence of constitutional patriotism is already enshrined in the liberal principles of the right of minorities, secularism, and the freedom of political engagement; however, it is political engagement that needs to be fostered among the ordinary citizen. Indeed, constitutional patriotism should not by any means demand uncritical acceptance but rather should invite active participation and reflection to ensure that the political system lives up to its constitutive values.<sup>8</sup> The question that remain here is whether this understanding of citizenship and national identity can hold against the rising tide of the populist far-right across the globe, most of which is dominated by exclusionary, xenophobic platforms. More than that, adapting a secular,

rather than ethnic or national, sense of belonging needs to be realistically adjusted to fit the the scale of supranational clusters, particularly the EU.

### **Conclusion:**

Conventional wisdom in the UK had for decades held that populist far-right parties cannot make a breakthrough into British mainstream politics. This conviction was challenged by the stunning electoral gains of UKIP and BNP in the early 2000s. For most of the 1990s, these parties existed on the fringes of British politics; however, the introduction of the PR system in the 1999 EU election opened up a new electoral space at the European level. To boost electability, both parties embarked on a process of modernization specific to their respective historical contexts. While UKIP's modernization was focused on broadening party policy and preserving the party's respectability as a moderate populist party, the BNP was more preoccupied with sanitizing the party from the ideology of the extreme right that had been immersed in the language of "biopolitics." With leaders such as Farage and Griffin at the helm, UKIP and BNP were being reintroduced to the British electorate as "normal" populist parties such as those in neighboring European countries.

To measure the extent to which identity politics was a driving force behind the populist revolt in the UK, this study first attempted to test Mudde's ideational definition by using two expert surveys, the Global Party Survey (GPS) and Populism and Political Party Survey (POPPA), to measure the importance of populist feature within each party. Both surveys offer expertise judgment of hundreds of political experts and scleritis on political parties from Europe and all over the world. In the operationalization of Mudde's definition only related features were adapted from the dataset of both surveys. Subsequently, the study measures a set of identity-oriented issues of each party using the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) to measure the importance of identity politics to each party.

To calibrate the analysis a closer look was also given to the demand side in the British context. At the end of the 1990s and early 2000s, there was an unmistakable disenchantment among the British electorate about the riding numbers of incoming immigration and its impact on British culture and economy. Therefore, immigration became the second, and first at a certain period, most important issue in the UK. Realizing this change in public mood, both UKIP and BNP readjusted their policy platforms in an attempt to achieve issue-ownership, especially given the lack of a consistent and comprehensive policy from the main parties. Indeed, a considerable constituency of disillusioned Tory and Labour voters, most fall with the typical populist description of old, uneducated, unskilled working class, had switched sides, choosing to cast a protest vote for either BNP or UKIP.

The question that remains is whether Brexit had finally put an end to the rise of populism in Britain. Giving the impact of populism on British politics it is hard to say yes. In their attempt to counter the rising threat of UKIP, the Conservative Party has been infected in the process. Under the premiership of Boris Johnson, the party has since moved further to the right, adopting almost the same hard Eurosceptic rhetoric of Farage. In the Age of Reform, American historian Richard Hofstadter wrote that "third parties are like bees: once they have stung, they die." In the British case, however, rather than leaving a temporary bruise, populist parties have left a permanent scare that would reshape the face of British politics for the foreseeable future.

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1- For a fuller account of these parties, consult Arzheimer, K. (2015). The AfD: Finally a Successful Right-Wing Populist Eurosceptic Party for Germany? *West European Politics*, 38(3), 535–556. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2015.1004230>; Surel, Y. (2019). How to stay populist? The Front National and the changing French party system. *West European Politics*, 42(6), 1230–

1257. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2019.1596693>; Ferguson, T., Page, B. I., Rothschild, J. E., Chang, A. Z., & Chen, J. (2020). The Roots of Right-Wing Populism: Donald Trump in 2016. *International Journal of Political Economy*, 49(2), 102–123. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08911916.2020.1778861>

2- Proportional representation (PR) is an electoral system that strives to allocate seats in proportion to the votes received by political parties or groups. Unlike winner-takes-all systems, PR aims to ensure that the composition of the legislature accurately reflects the overall popular vote. It benefits third parties by providing them with increased opportunities for representation. Under PR, smaller parties can secure seats in proportion to their level of support, allowing them to have a voice and influence in the decision-making process. This promotes a more inclusive and diverse political landscape, fostering pluralism and giving a platform to alternative perspectives that may otherwise be marginalized in systems favoring larger parties. By offering better representation to third parties, PR encourages a broader range of ideas and allows for greater political competition.

3- For a detailed discussion on the moral foundations of populism, see Barbieri, G. (2021). *The Fifth Cleavage: Genealogy of the Populist Ideology and Parties*. Lexington Books.

4- For an empirical investigation on the correlation of educational qualification and populist party support, see Evans, J. (2005). The Dynamics of Social Change in Radical Right-wing Populist Party Support. *Comparative European Politics*, 3(1), 76–101. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.cep.6110050>

5- Permissive consensus, as a decision-making approach, is primarily associated with the European Union and its functioning, rather than being directly adopted by mainstream parties in the UK. However, it is worth noting that the UK, as a member of the EU until 2020, was subject to EU decision-making processes that sometimes operated on the basis of this notion. During its EU membership, mainstream UK political parties were involved in negotiations and discussions within the EU institutions, where compromises were sought to accommodate different national interests. The permissive consensus approach within the EU allowed the UK, like other member states, to exercise flexibility by opting out of certain EU policies or initiatives, maintaining a balance between integration and sovereignty.

6- "The Purple Revolution: The Year That Changed Everything" is a book written by Nigel Farage. Published in 2015, it discusses Farage's political journey, his role in the UK Independence Party (UKIP), and his perspective on the changing political landscape in the United Kingdom, particularly leading up to the Brexit referendum in 2016. The book delves into Farage's experiences and insights during that crucial period of British politics.

7- Britain has often been seen as an awkward partner within the European Union due to its history of Euroscepticism and reluctance to fully embrace European integration. The country's pursuit of opt-outs and special treatment has made it a unique member with exceptions to EU policies and initiatives. Britain's assertive and confrontational approach in negotiations, particularly on issues such as budget contributions and repatriation of powers, has added to its reputation as a challenging partner. The decision to leave the EU through Brexit further reinforced this perception, as the lengthy and contentious negotiations highlighted the complexities and difficulties of Britain's relationship with the EU. Collectively, these factors contribute to the notion that Britain has often been regarded as an awkward and distinct participant within the European Union.

8- for more on the concept of constitutional patriotism, see Müller, J.-W. (2007). *Constitutional Patriotism*. Princeton University Press.

9- for insight on Carl Schmitt's perception of the political, see Schmitt, C. (2007). *The concept of the political* (G. Schwab, Trans.; Expanded ed.). University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1932)

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