

Right-wing euroscepticism in the UK: the cases of the uk independence party and the conservative party between 1993 and 2015

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Abstract

The outcome of the 2014 elections of the European Parliament and the results of the 2015 national elections begged the question of whether the parties defending Eurosceptic positions are becoming prominent political forces in the UK.

The research question is as follows: what are the similarities and differences between the two main right-wing parties of the UK, namely the Conservatives and the UKIP, in their anti-EU rhetoric in the last two decades?

I used public speeches of the UKIP leader which showed that the national identity and national sovereignty are of a great value for the party. In this work, I also used other primary sources: the parties' manifestos (1997, 2001, 2005, 2010, 2015), the Eurobarometer surveys (in 1999, 2004 and 2015) and YouGov surveys (between 2012 and 2015). They show that the British public is hostile towards Europe and immigrants from Europe.

This article draws the similarities between the Conservatives and the UKIP. They both criticize Brussels for over-centralization of power. According to them, the aim of any British government is to reduce the competences of supranational bodies and return certain powers to the state capitals. In addition, the Conservatives and the UKIP pledged to fight against immigration. However they have different approaches towards the same problems: the Conservatives would have Britain renegotiate the membership terms, while the UKIP favors a withdrawal from the EU.

The main difference between the parties in question is that the Tories are far more cautious than UKIP. They believe that Britain can renegotiate the terms of membership and returning certain powers back to the national level. For the UKIP, the EU is bad in its nature. The Conservative party wants to be in Europe but not run by Europe while the UKIP argues that it is impossible to be in Europe but not run by Europe.

Keywords: Euroscepticism, UKIP, Conservatives, Britain

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1. Introduction

The outcome of the 2014 elections of the European Parliament (EP) and the results of the 2015 national elections begged the question of whether the parties defending Eurosceptic positions are becoming prominent political forces in the UK. According to Bache & Jordan (2006), almost all British parties are Eurosceptic or have strong Eurosceptic factions (p. 11). According to Glencross (2014), all British mainstream political parties “tend to be less favorable to integration and supranationalism than their continental counterparts”.

It is worth noting that no other party in the UK was affected more by the EU than the Conservatives (Geddes, 2006). Euroscepticism became “the defining characteristic of the Conservative party” (Baker, Gamble, Randall & Seawright, 2008). Furthermore, the emergence of the most vocal anti-EU movement in Britain (the UKIP) is also the “direct consequence of EU membership” (Bache & Jordan, 2006). Both parties are strongly associated with Euroscepticism and therefore are included in this research.

The research question is as follows: what are the similarities and differences between the two main right-wing parties of the UK, namely the Conservatives and the UKIP, in their anti-EU in the last two decades?

I chose the period from 1993 until 2015. According to many scholars, 1992-1993 is a watershed that marks the rise of Euroscepticism across Europe. Leconte (2010) points out that after the Treaty of Maastricht the EU support fell 17% on average (p. 167). Furthermore, Startin (2005) adds that since the Treaty of Maastricht there has been an increase of votes for parties adopting Eurosceptic positions (p. 65). In addition, 1993 is crucial for both parties in question, since this was the final year of transformation of the British Conservatives from the “party of Europe” to “one of the most Eurosceptic mainstream parties in the EU” (Hobolt & Tilley, 2014). As for the UKIP, 1993 is the year when the party was founded.

I used public speeches of the UKIP leader which showed that the national identity and national sovereignty are of a great value for the party. In this work, I also used other primary sources: the parties’ manifestos (1997, 2001, 2005, 2010, 2015), the Eurobarometer surveys (in 1999, 2004 and 2015) and YouGov surveys (between 2012 and 2015). They show that the British public is hostile towards Europe and immigrants from Europe.

2. Defining Euroscepticism

Euroscepticism is a rather new term that was not used in the first years of European integration. During the first decades of existence of the European Economic Community, opponents of integration were referred to as nationalists, communists, Gaullists or “anti-marketeters” (for opponents to the common market in the UK). The word “Euroscepticism” was first mentioned in article of *The Times* in 1985 as a synonym to “anti-marketeter” and, since then, became a common word for all people disaffected by the process of European integration.

The scholars normally divide Euroscepticism into “soft” and “hard”. Hard Euroscepticism is the “principled opposition to the EU and European integration” (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2008) while Soft Euroscepticism is characterized by “qualified opposition” to the EU and dissatisfaction with certain EU policies.

Soft Eurosceptics do not propagate withdrawal from the Union, they advocate reforms. The main features of soft Euroscepticism are “opposition to a so-called ‘European super-state’ or ‘federal Europe’, a strict limitation of the Commission’s powers, and emphasis on the European Council as the overarching institution of the Union, seen as a way to trim the Commission’s powers” (Leconte, 2010, p. 25). Ideology of Soft Eurosceptics was brilliantly summarized by Tiersky: “The minimum integration

for peace and prosperity coupled with the maximum preservation of national sovereignty” (Tiersky, 2001). What is important, the two parties concerned fall into those two categories: Soft Eurosceptics (for the Tories) and Hard Eurosceptics (for the UKIP).

3. Immigration from the EU

Immigration has become perhaps the most debated issue in contemporary British politics. In the 2004 Eurobarometer survey on the eve of the Eastern enlargement, the UK was the only EU Member State that named migration among the three top challenges that have to be solved (Eurobarometer 60, 2004). The majority of respondents in other Member States named unemployment, terrorism and poverty as their priorities.

The EU expansions in 2004 and 2007 have brought immigration even higher on the agenda in Britain. It became a wide spread belief in the UK that immigrants from poorer regions in the EU come to Britain only to apply for social benefits. This implies that the UK government pays money to people who were not born in the country, have not paid taxes before and do not even hold a British passport.

According to the 2014 YouGov survey, the overwhelming majority of British citizens (83%) are not in support of allowing EU citizens to claim benefits in other EU countries until they have lived there for at least a year. In contrast, in Sweden this figure was 51% (YouGov, 2014). In addition, the majority of British people (64%) would support a quota on the number of EU nationals who can move to another EU country each year. This is the highest figure in the EU. In Sweden, the idea of enforcing quotas is only supported by 31% of respondents (YouGov, 2014).

In one of the latest Eurobarometer surveys, 38% of respondents in Britain named immigration as a key issue in comparison to the 18% EU-average (Eurobarometer 82, 2015). Evidently, immigration is higher on the agenda in the UK than in other EU Member States. What is more, this has been the case for at least 10 years and even before the Eastern enlargement. The latter only worsened the situation.

What is crucial to note is that the British public holds Brussels responsible for the immigration problem. The results of the survey conducted in 2009 show that people in Britain place a large responsibility on the EU for immigration (Hobolt & Tilley, 2014).

Both parties in question immediately seized the opportunity and included immigration in their political programmes. The UKIP called immigration one of the major issues of British politics (UKIP Election Manifesto, 2015) while the Conservatives promised to fight against the “abuse of free movement” (Conservative Party Manifesto, 2015).

Both parties are very critical of the Labour rule in 1997-2010, which, according to them, had brought too many immigrants to the UK. The Conservatives announced in 2005 that “it is not racist to impose limits on immigration” (Conservative Election Manifesto, 2005) while the UKIP Manifesto 2005 includes a stating “NO to uncontrolled immigration” (UKIP Party Manifesto, 2005). Furthermore, both parties share the same view that immigration is a result of the EU free movement policy. As a consequence, both the UKIP and Tories did not miss the opportunity to make Brussels the main scapegoat.

Both parties pledged to change the rules for people outside Britain who seek to get social benefits from the state. The Conservative Manifesto 2015 states: “We will negotiate new rules with the EU, so that people will have to be earning here for a number of years before they can claim benefits, including the tax credits that top up low wages” (Conservative Party Manifesto, 2015). Similar words can be found in the UKIP Manifesto (UKIP Election Manifesto, 2015). The fact that people can legally come to the UK from the EU and claim social benefits is something that fuels Euroscepticism in the two parties under study.

4. Issue of national sovereignty

There is a predominant view in British post-war society that since so many had sacrificed their lives during World War II to ensure Westminster's parliamentary sovereignty together with UK's territorial integrity, "it was neither desirable nor politically feasible voluntarily to surrender these symbols of independence" (Forster, 2002, p. 17). Nowadays, the situation is no different than it was after the Second World War. The notion of parliamentary sovereignty remains an emotive concept in British politics.

National sovereignty is a sensitive issue for both Conservatives and the UKIP. David Cameron's Euroscepticism is not the result of the influence of a handful of hardline rebels as it is sometimes portrayed; rather his determination to defend national sovereignty reflects the majority opinion in the parliamentary party. It is no mistake that Cameron's party is a member of European Conservatives and Reformists political group in the European Parliament and not the European People's Party (EPP). Conservatives withdrew from the EPP in response to what they deemed to be "the unacceptable federalist agenda" of the centre-right grouping (Harmsen, 2007).

Almost each Conservative Party manifesto reflects the need to restore national sovereignty. In 1994, while admitting that British national interest "lies in Europe" because "millions of our jobs depend on Europe" the Conservatives committed themselves to fight for "a Europe of nation-states" and "not a European superstate" (Conservative Manifesto for Europe, 1994). The Manifesto 2001 emphasized "the threat that is now posed to our independence" by the EU. In 2010, the Manifesto stated that the Lisbon Treaty ratification "has been a betrayal of this country's democratic traditions" and that the Conservatives would not tolerate further extension of EU's powers "without the British people's consent".

The UKIP argues that the cost of EU membership cast in terms of sovereignty exceeds its benefits. At the outset, the main aim of the UKIP was to end Britain's membership in the EU. According to the 1994 Manifesto, Europe is a disaster for the UK (Kessel, 2015, p.151). The party argues that the Government should "put Britain first" (UK Independence Party Manifesto, 1997). Brussels imposes legislation "that prevails in much of continental Europe, and it is very different from British tradition" (UK Independence Party General Election Manifesto, 2001). The UKIP calls the EU "a failing super-state that tells us what to do and does not listen to what we want" (UKIP Election Manifesto, 2015). The party strongly believes that European officials in Brussels are incompetent and unqualified when it comes to the problems in the UK and thus are impotent to improve life in Britain. The conclusion is quite logical: "[...] it is not right to have our country run by institutions across the Channel" (UKIP Party Manifesto, 2005). Hence, the UKIP is "determined to bring power and control back to Westminster and the British people" (UKIP general election Manifesto, 2010).

Both the Conservatives and UKIP believe that the EU threatens the primacy of the nation state. Both parties claim that the EU has to transform into an intergovernmental organization where each state has a veto right with the Commission as a subordinate body, which does not initiate legislation but rather implements laws that are negotiated in the European Council.

Both parties want to return a higher status for Westminster by reducing the power of supranational institutions. The UKIP believes that Britain is capable of making "our own laws, in our own parliament" (UKIP Election Manifesto, 2015) while the Conservatives point to over-centralization of power in Brussels (Conservative Party Manifesto, 2015). Both parties say that EU institutions have too much power in too many areas.

5. Anti-elitist character of the UKIP

In each of its manifestos, the UKIP makes it clear that it is opposed to the “establishment parties” (UKIP Election Manifesto, 2015). According to the UKIP, the British political class is completely disconnected from the people: “They do not understand the thoughts, hopes and aspirations of ordinary people” (Farage, 2013). “Old political parties” (UKIP Party Manifesto, 2005) have for a long time imposed their will on the British people but the UKIP promised to reverse the situation.

The current ruling party (the Conservatives) is a perfect target for such accusations. The Tories are considered as an elite club because members of the party were educated at the country’s best universities. In addition, the Conservatives have an image of a party that represents interests of big businesses. The Tories are an ideal “establishment party”, which fulfils all criteria, and thus receives a large amount of criticism from the UKIP.

The UKIP goes further and accuses the British elites in participating in a kind of European ‘plot’ against the UK and its people. According to the UKIP, the British people were deceived in 1973 when the UK joined the European Community. The British people were promised that the UK would join the Economic Community but not the Political and Monetary Union. Nigel Farage has repeatedly pointed out that his parents voted in favour of staying in the EEC in 1975 but they would have rejected membership in the current EU (Farage, 2013). They conclude: “The other parties are not telling us the truth about the EU” (UK Independence Party General Election Manifesto, 2001).

The UKIP portrays British membership in the EU as a joint plot by both European and British elites. Hence, the UKIP not only opposes British “establishment parties” but also the European ruling class as a whole. Sometimes the UKIP describes British mainstream parties as puppets in the hands of their continental ‘masters’, too weak and too frightened to argue with the EU. “The current political elite - ‘the LibLabConsensus’ - [...] serves EU interests before those of their own country” (UKIP general election Manifesto, 2010). The party positions itself as the only alternative: the UKIP “alone can defend our national sovereignty” (UK Independence Party Manifesto, 1997).

The same cannot be said about the Conservative Party. The Tories are the mainstream party, which tries to avoid populist rhetoric. Anti-establishment sentiments are alien to the Conservatives as Tories have been a ruling party for quite a long time. The British Conservatives do not oppose European elites. They set a goal to renegotiate the membership terms and show a constructive approach towards its continental partners. The Tories do not accuse Europeans of forming a plot against Britain. They are much more cooperative and EU-friendly than the UKIP.

The main difference between the two parties is that the UKIP is a classic populist movement, which is unlikely to change its rhetoric because ‘catchy’ slogans are the party’s main reason for its survival, whereas the Tories are the classic establishment party with its members originating from the country’s upper-class. It is highly unlikely that the Conservative party would turn their back on the elite or big businesses that comprise their main sponsors. Therefore, the positions of the parties seem in this case entirely irreconcilable.

6. Future relationship with the EU

The future relationship with the EU is another key difference between the UKIP and the Conservative party. The Conservatives took a practical view of the EU membership. They think that sovereignty is a commodity to be used for national advantage, not some untouchable heirloom to be hoarded at all costs.

One of the subsections in the 2015 Manifesto of the Conservative Party is called “Real change in our relationship with the European Union”. According to the manifesto, the Conservatives “say: yes to the Single Market. Yes to turbo charging free trade. Yes to working together where we are stronger

together than alone. Yes to a family of nation states” (Conservative Party Manifesto, 2015). In other words, the Tories would prefer to stay in a reformed Union that meets their requirements rather leave the EU.

The UKIP dedicates the whole section in the 2015 Manifesto to the future of UK-EU relations. The name of the section leaves no room for interpretation. It is called “Brexit”. Hence, the UKIP is quite clear on what it wants from Britain.

The UKIP believes that Britain is capable of making “our own laws, in our own parliament” (UKIP Election Manifesto, 2015). They add: “We have nothing to lose and everything to gain by leaving the EU” (UKIP Election Manifesto, 2015). It is worth mentioning that every UKIP Manifesto begins with the words that Britain has to leave the Union (UK Independence Party General Election Manifesto, 2001; UKIP Party Manifesto, 2005; UKIP general election Manifesto, 2010; UKIP Election Manifesto, 2015), whereas Conservative Manifestos never took the issue of withdrawal from the EU seriously.

Although both the Conservatives and the UKIP support the referendum on EU membership, another difference between them is that the UKIP is ready to provide an electorate the alternatives to the EU while the only alternative vision of the Conservative party is the reformed EU membership. The Conservatives claim they “will honour the result of the referendum, whatever the outcome” (Conservative Party Manifesto, 2015). However, they do not say what they expect to have in the future if the British say ‘no’ to Brussels. The Conservatives do not give any alternative except for reformed EU whereas the UKIP proposes to strengthen links with the USA and the Commonwealth. In 1997, the UKIP urged to strengthen ties with the Commonwealth which shares the same language and business methods (UK Independence Party Manifesto, 1997). Until now, the party remains a strong advocate of the turn of British foreign policy from the EU to the English-speaking world. The 2001 Manifesto stated: “Friendship with the United States and our role in the Commonwealth link us directly with more than a quarter of the world’s peoples, and some of the richest and fastest-growing economies” (UK Independence Party General Election Manifesto, 2001). In 2005, the UKIP once again emphasized the desire to establish closer ties with NAFTA and Commonwealth partners “who share our language and business methods” (UKIP Party Manifesto, 2005). According to the UKIP, the Commonwealth and the USA have been “shamefully betrayed and neglected by previous governments” (UKIP general election Manifesto, 2010).

Although Conservatives acknowledge the importance of the Commonwealth, the latter is not a priority for them. The EU is UK’s biggest trading partner. Therefore, the Conservative party does not want to ‘break up’ with Europe. In his EU speech, David Cameron emphasized the importance of close trade links with the EU and said that Britain has to play “a committed and active part” (Cameron, 2013, 6:30) in the development of fundamentally reformed Europe (Cameron, 2013, 12:22).

7. Conclusion

This article draws the similarities between the Conservatives and the UKIP. They both criticize Brussels for over-centralization of power. According to them, the aim of any British government is to reduce the competences of supranational bodies and return certain powers to the state capitals. In addition, the Conservatives and the UKIP pledged to fight against immigration. However they have different approaches towards the same problems: the Conservatives would have Britain renegotiate the membership terms, while the UKIP favors a withdrawal from the EU.

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