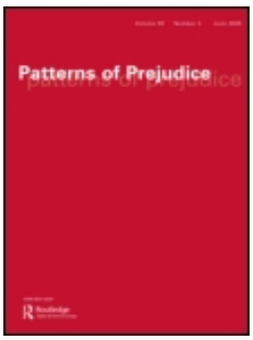

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# The end of a strategic opening? The BNP's window of opportunity in the 2000s and its closure in the 2010s

João Carvalho

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# The end of a strategic opening? The BNP's window of opportunity in the 2000s and its closure in the 2010s

JOÃO CARVALHO



**ABSTRACT** Notwithstanding the endemic failure of extreme-right parties in Britain, the British National Party (BNP) observed a period of electoral growth in the 2000s. After the election of several city councillors nationwide, the BNP experienced an electoral breakthrough in the national ballot of the 2009 European Parliament elections. Yet the BNP's electoral accomplishments dissipated in the early 2010s, fuelling predictions of the party's terminal decline. Within this context, Carvalho seeks to explain the fluctuations observed in the BNP's electoral base in the twentieth-first century by exploring the structure of political opportunities alongside the strategy of the BNP's leadership. Drawing on the convergence thesis and the decline of voting along class lines, he argues that the BNP benefitted from a favourable set of political opportunities in the 2000s, reflecting the decrease in political polarization among mainstream parties, the rise in levels of public distrust, and the intense politicization of the issue of immigration. Despite a general shift to cultural xenophobia, the BNP's leadership remained attached to the ideological traits of neo-fascist parties, including the search for a 'palingenetic rebirth' and a national corporatist economic programme. These ideological formulae had important implications for the scope of the BNP's electoral coalition, as Carvalho demonstrates in a review of the secondary literature on the roots of the BNP's electoral support. Consequently, the BNP's electoral growth in the 2000s was the outcome of an interplay between a favourable window of opportunity in British politics and the party's electoral appeal. Carvalho goes on to link the BNP's electoral collapse in the early 2010s with the closing of the aforementioned window after the onset of the financial crisis, a temporary lack of political interest in the issue of immigration, and the formation of the coalition government in 2010.

**KEYWORDS** British National Party, convergence thesis, extreme-right parties, immigration, political opportunities, xenophobia

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By the end of the twentieth century, the electoral fortunes of British extreme-right parties (ERPs) looked very bleak. Richard Thurlow concluded that the far-right fringe 'had shown few signs of revival, let alone growth'.[1] The National Front (NF) briefly disturbed British politics in the 1970s after polling almost 120,000 votes in the 1977 Greater London Council elections but remained marginal as a political force.[2] The NF's collapse in the 1980s enabled the ascension of a successor, the British National Party (BNP), created by John Tyndall. Under his leadership, the BNP's electoral accomplishments in the 1990s amounted to a victory in a council by-election in Millwall (East London) by a margin of seven votes in 1993. The subsequent expectation of further electoral success failed to materialize and the BNP remained peripheral in British politics.[3] Several causes have been highlighted in the literature to explain the endemic weakness of ERPs in Britain: the electoral constraints imposed by the first-past-the-post electoral system; a deeply rooted civic culture; the activity of anti-fascist organizations; poor leadership skills; intense intra-party conflicts; and the Conservative Party's tough stand on immigration.[4]

Notwithstanding the presence of these factors in the 2000s, the BNP overturned the far right's legacy of endemic failure under the new leadership of Nick Griffin from 1999 onwards. After initially poor results, the BNP enjoyed an electoral breakthrough in Burnley with the election of three city councillors in 2002 (see Figure 1). The BNP's electoral accomplishments at the local level increased during the 2000s, winning an annual average of 12 city councillors between 2001 and 2005, and 48 seats from 2006 to 2010 (see Figure 1). An electoral breakthrough in a national ballot was finally achieved in 2009 after winning 2 seats in the European Parliament (Nick Griffin for North-West England and Andrew Brons for the Yorkshire and Humber Region). Electoral support for the BNP peaked in the 2009 ballot with 943,598 votes nationwide, representing 6.2 per cent of the vote, after having collected 1.13 per cent in 1999 and 4.9 per cent in 2004. A similar rate of electoral growth was observed across the general elections that took place in the 2000s, as the BNP almost tripled its number of votes in 2010 compared to 2005, although it failed to elect a single member of parliament.[5]

1 Richard Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain: From Oswald Mosley's Blackshirts to the National Front* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris 1998), 268.

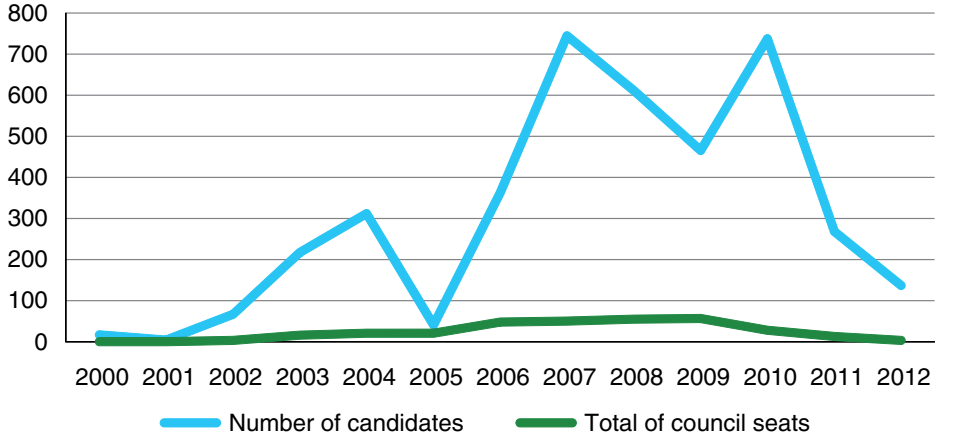
2 Roger Eatwell, 'The extreme right in Britain: the long road to "modernization"', in Roger Eatwell and Cas Mudde (eds), *Western Democracies and the New Extreme Right Challenge* (London and New York: Routledge 2004), 62–80.

3 Nigel Copsey, *Contemporary British Fascism: The British National Party and the Quest for Legitimacy*, 2nd edn (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2009).

4 Paul Hainsworth, *The Extreme Right in Western Europe* (London and New York: Routledge 2008), 58.

5 The BNP won 192,746 votes in 2005 as against 563,743 in 2010; see Nigel Copsey, 'Sustaining a mortal blow? The British National Party and the 2010 general and local elections', *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2012, 16–39 (17).

**Figure 1** Number of BNP candidates in local elections and number of total seats 2000–12




Sources: Edmund Tetteh, *Electoral Performance of the British National Party in the UK 2009*, House of Commons Standard Note SN/SG/5064, 15 May 2009, available online at www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN05064.pdf; Community Security Trust, Elections Report Thursday 3 May 2012, on the *CST* website at https://cst.org.uk/data/file/9/f/Elections-Report-2012.1425054803.pdf (both viewed 7 April 2015).

Electoral support for the BNP collapsed in the early 2010s after a reduction of the party's representatives in local politics to single digits, a decreasing number of its candidates standing in local ballots (see Figure 1), and a drop in the BNP's membership from 12,600 in 2009 to 7,700 members in 2011.[6] These trends fuelled debate over whether the BNP had embarked on a trajectory of terminal decline, and appear to support the following forecast made in the early 2000s: 'while the BNP's rise is a matter of urgent concern, there is no guarantee that these favourable conditions will continue indefinitely and carry the party with them.'[7] Accordingly, the BNP's early electoral successes can be associated with a contingent window of opportunity that has been underexplored in the literature regarding this British ERP. Most of the available research addresses the BNP's historical development, its ideology and electoral strategy, the dynamics of local party competition, and the attitudes of its electorate.[8]

6 Richard Keen, *Membership of UK Political Parties*, House of Commons Standard Note SN05125, 6 February 2015, 6, available on *www.parliament.uk* at www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN05125/membership-of-uk-political-parties (viewed 30 March 2015).

7 David Renton, 'Examining the success of the British National Party, 1999–2003', *Race and Class*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2003, 75–85 (83).

8 See Stuart Wilks-Heeg, 'The canary in a coalmine? Explaining the emergence of the British National Party in English local politics', *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol. 62, no. 3, 2009, 377–98; Copsey, *Contemporary British Fascism*; Peter John and Helen Margetts, 'The latent support for the extreme right in British politics', *West European Politics*, 2009, vol. 32, no. 3, 2009, 496–513; Matthew J. Goodwin, 'In search of the winning formula: Nick Griffin and the "modernization" of the British National Party', in Roger Eatwell and

Some commentators argue that the BNP's electoral upturn was enhanced by the interaction of three factors: 'the asylum issue and the mainstream politicisation of "race", cultivating the appearance of moderation, and grass-roots community politics in isolated pockets';[9] the decay of local democracy and poor canvassing by mainstream parties, rather than electoral frustration with New Labour, resulting in the party's accomplishments at the local level;[10] and, emphasized as an important endogenous factor, the 'modernization' strategy deployed by Griffin to rid the party of its pariah status.[11] By contrast, other authors point to the weaknesses of British ERPs in general, namely, 'poor opportunity structures' as a result of the electoral system, the occupation of the centre ground by mainstream parties, and the Conservative Party's mobilization of support against immigration.[12] Lastly, rumours about the BNP's terminal decline were dismissed as premature because 'support for the BNP's stance on immigration is not confined to a fringe group of radicals'.[13] Accordingly, there was no consensus on exogenous factors contributing to the BNP's electoral expansion throughout the 2000s, nor on reasons for the party's subsequent electoral collapse in the early 2010s.

In order to address this lacuna, this article adopts an integrative approach to the structure and agency debate,[14] by exploring the interplay between the structure of political opportunities,[15] and the electoral strategy of the BNP's leadership during the 2000s. Inspired by the convergence thesis and the decline of class voting,[16] this article argues that the BNP's electoral

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Matthew J. Goodwin (eds), *The New Extremism in 21st Century Britain* (London and New York: Routledge 2010), 160–90; and David Cutts, Robert Ford and Matthew J. Goodwin, 'Anti-immigrant, politically disaffected or still racist after all? Examining the attitudinal drivers of extreme right support in Britain in the 2009 European elections', *European Journal of Political Research*, no. 50, no. 3, 2011, 418–40.

9 Copsey, *Contemporary British Fascism*, 124.

10 Wilks-Heeg, 'The canary in a coalmine?'.

11 Goodwin, 'In search of the winning formula'.

12 John and Margetts, 'The latent support for the extreme right in British politics'.

13 Ted Cantle, 'The far right: rumours about their death are premature', *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol. 65, no. 4, 2012, 888–95 (894).

14 See Colin Hay, *Political Analysis: A Critical Introduction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave 2003).

15 The concept of the structure of political opportunities, borrowed from social movement theory, has been widely employed in ERP studies. The structure of political opportunities refers to the 'consistent dimensions of political environment that provide incentives for collective action by affecting people's expectations for success or failure'. These dimensions include: realignment processes (politicization of new issues); de-alignment processes (declining levels of party identification and political trust); mainstream party behaviour (degree of party convergence); the openness of the political system (electoral system and media access); and institutional factors (availability of mainstream allies). See Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press 1998), 72.

16 Herbert Kitschelt with Anthony J. McGann, *The Radical Right in Western Europe: A Comparative Analysis* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 1995).

breakthrough in the 2000s was boosted by a window of opportunity shaped by the weakening of political polarization across mainstream parties, the growth of public distrust of politics, and the intense politicization of the issue of immigration during that decade. The interrelationship between this favourable context and the BNP's electoral strategy enabled the party to appeal to a particular (and contracting) segment of British voters during the 2000s rather than to the broader electorate. As will be seen, the contingent character of the BNP's electoral expansion became evident after the closing of this favourable window of opportunity in the late 2000s, a setback aggravated by the endogenous weaknesses of the British extreme right.

Accordingly, this article seeks to explain the BNP's electoral success during the 2000s and its decline in the early 2010s. The argument is divided into two main parts. The first part explores the theoretical background that supports the analysis drawing on the convergence thesis and the decline of the class basis of party support. The second part will analyse the BNP's favourable structure of political opportunities in the 2000s by examining, in three distinct sections, the positions of mainstream parties, the levels of political trust and the salience of immigration. The BNP's agency is explored in a separate section in order to examine the party's electoral appeal under Griffin's leadership. Through the review of secondary literature, the socio-economic profile and geographic distribution of the BNP's electoral support in the 2000s are analysed to assess the outcome of the interplay between the identified factors of structure and agency. The last section of the article probes the closure in the early 2010s of the aforementioned window of opportunity and assesses its repercussions on the BNP's electoral fortunes. The conclusion highlights the contribution of this investigation to the literature on extreme-right parties.

## The convergence thesis and decline of class voting

Based on a spatial analysis of politics, the convergence thesis suggests that chances for an electorally influential ERP are initially dependent on the patterns of mainstream inter-party competition and the observation of centripetal politics.[17] The end of the Cold War, alongside the social transformations imposed by post-industrialism (in particular, the decline of the working class, expansion of the service sector and the rise of new post-material political demands), accelerated the reconfiguration of mainstream parties' positions across western party systems. Since the 1970s, the poles of political radicalism have transformed until there is, on the left, an economically redistributive and cultural libertarianism and, on the right, a free market and cultural authoritarianism.[18] In this context, mainstream parties have shifted their focus to the

17 Ibid., 48.

18 Ibid.

median voter in order to enhance their chances of winning first-order ballots.[19] This trend promotes convergence in electoral competition among mainstream parties:

> convergence of SD [social democratic] and MC [moderate conservative] parties, together with an extended period of government participation by the moderate conservatives, thus creates the electoral opening for the authoritarian Right that induces voters to abandon their loyalty to established conservative parties.[20]

The positions of established parties are therefore fundamental for creating a favourable set of political opportunities for the emergence of a new competitor. Whereas social democratic parties face the same dilemma as centre-right parties, the disappearance of Marxist parties facilitated their shift either into more left-libertarian positions or on to centrist grounds in pursuit of catch-all strategies.[21] This process can produce the formation of a pool of disaffected voters on the far left with authoritarian attitudes who no longer identify with the traditional social democratic party, a situation that can be taken advantage of by a new competitor. This simple convergence thesis has been supported by most empirical evidence, while there is still disagreement in the literature about which party enables the electoral breakthrough of ERPs.[22] Some authors identify the ideological position of the mainstream centre-right party as the critical point at which the opportunities of an emergent ERP are enhanced or reduced.[23] However, this article will challenge this perspective because the BNP's electoral expansion in the 2000s suggests otherwise, as will be seen.

Recent research on the relationship between political differences and social class in contemporary democracies supports the main axiom of the convergence thesis, in particular the claim that public preferences reflect the actions of political parties and their strategic positioning.[24] The emergence of post-industrialism across western societies and the hegemony of catch-all electoral strategies have driven left-wing parties to the centre.[25] In the absence of sharp political differentiation between mainstream parties (especially in terms of their preference for more or less redistributive political programmes), voters are unable to select a party perceived as the most representative of their

19 Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row 1957).

20 Kitschelt with McGann, *The Radical Right in Western Europe*, 17.

21 Ibid., 18.

22 Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007), 239.

23 Wouter van der Brug, Meindert Fennema and Jean Tillie, 'Why some anti-immigrant parties fail and others succeed: a two-step model of aggregate electoral support', *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 38, no. 5, 2005, 537–73.

24 Geoffrey Evans and James Tilley, 'How parties shape class politics: explaining the decline of the class basis of party support', *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2012, 137–61 (139).

25 Ibid.

class interests.[26] Therefore, the distance between the positions adopted by mainstream parties influences public behaviour and the longitudinal fluctuations observed across the political choices of the different social classes.[27] The decline of class voting as a consequence of weakening political polarization can be regarded as an additional potential cause of the formation of a pool of voters disgruntled with mainstream politics.

The weakening of political polarization has also been followed by the emergence of valence politics, enhancing the potential influence of electoral campaigns over public behaviour. Public preferences are increasingly shaped by a party's competence on important issues and the image of party leaders, a trend that increases the chances of a breakthrough by a minor party if it presents a credible alternative to the established parties.[28] While low levels of political polarization are the first requirement for the emergence of a new party, this political process is equally dependent on the agency of the party's leadership.[29] In particular, ERPs must possess the ability to build a strong party organization and a winning ideological formula to capitalize on the growing disgruntlement of public opinion.[30] The key here is to find a perfect correspondence between supply and demand in the electoral market within the new post-industrial context.[31] Consequently, ERPs that propose a 'palingenetic' rebirth, a strong authoritarian state, biological racism or a 'third way' beyond capitalism and communism, like the neo-fascist parties of the past, have less chance of appealing to a broad segment of voters than ERPs that adopt a 'postmodern' ideological programme combining neoliberalism with a mixture of protectionism and cultural xenophobia.[32]

'Postmodern' ERPs are considered distinctive because 'not one of the new ERPs points to a corporatist architecture of society, or to a "new order", but rather to a mixture, often dazzling and fallacious, of free enterprise and social protection (limited to the native), of modernizing inputs and traditional reminiscences'.[33] The major ideological innovation of this new type of ERP is to dismiss biological racism in favour of 'ethnopluralism', which emphasizes the necessity of preserving the uniqueness and purity of the cultural identities

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Harold D. Clarke, David Sanders, Marianne C. Stewart and Paul F. Witheley, *Performance Politics and the British Voter* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press 2009).

29 Matthew J. Goodwin, 'The extreme right in Britain: still an "ugly duckling" but for how long?', *Political Quarterly*, vol. 78, no. 2, 2007, 241–50.

30 Kitschelt with McGann, *The Radical Right in Western Europe*, 17.

31 Evans and Tilley, 'How parties shape class politics'.

32 Piero Ignazi, *Extreme-Right Parties in Western Europe* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press 2006), 33.

33 Ibid.

of different ethnic groups.[34] From this perspective, the neo-fascist and 'postmodern' ERPs have distinct constituencies because their strategic appeals affect the composition of their electoral support.[35]

## The rise of New Labour to power: a party realignment

As already argued, the first condition necessary for the emergence of a new ERP is the weakening of political polarization between mainstream parties. This process was initially observed in the British party system in the early 1990s, and it accelerated with the ascension of Tony Blair into the Labour Party's leadership in 1994. Blair presented a 'new Labour' inspired by a 'third way' that overcame the old notions of left and right in order to preserve the post-war social democracy against the threat of globalization.[36] Emphasis was now placed on minimal state intervention in the economy instead of the nationalizing principles of the past, while market mechanisms and the privatization of public services were now acclaimed by the new leader.[37] This programme was interpreted as a centre-left adaptation of the Thatcherite neoliberal agenda in order to situate Labour on centrist grounds.[38] Blair assumed that Labour and its Keynesian economic programme were too far to the left of the median voter, and change was necessary following the decline of the working class.[39] Once in government, New Labour shifted from the macro-economic goal of full employment to anti-inflationary policies, illustrated by Chancellor Gordon Brown's grant of operational independence to the Bank of England.

Consequently, the relationship between the New Labour and trade unions became increasingly strained from Blair's first term onwards.[40] After the 2001 general election, the Labour loyalist and veteran trade unionist Bill Morris complained that 'this is the most pro-business government I can remember'.[41]

34 João Carvalho, *Impact of Extreme Right Parties on Immigration: Comparing Britain, France and Italy* (London and New York: Routledge 2014).

35 Kitschelt with McGann, *The Radical Right in Western Europe*.

36 Judi Atkins, *Justifying New Labour Policy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2011).

37 David Coates, *Prolonged Labour: The Slow Birth of New Labour* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2005).

38 Martin J. Smith 'Conclusion: defining New Labour', in Steve Ludlam and Martin J. Smith (eds), *Governing as New Labour: Policy and Politics under Blair* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2004), 211–25.

39 Colin Hay, *The Political Economy of New Labour: Labouring under False Pretences?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1999).

40 In particular over the government's opposition to the European Union's (EU) legislation designed to improve workers' protection and representation, as well as over the consequences of capital investment in and management of public services on low-paid workers. See Coates, *Prolonged Labour.*

41 Bill Morris, quoted in Steve Ludlam, 'New Labour, "vested interests" and the union link', in Ludlam and Smith (eds), *Governing as New Labour*, 70–88 (70).

The Labour Party's shift to the centre was overtly perceived by the electorate, especially after 2001. Public polls indicate that, while half of the public thought Labour looked after the interests of the working class very closely in 1987, only a third of respondents shared the same opinion in 1997. This perception fell to 10 per cent of respondents by the end of Labour's second term in 2005.[42] Labour was no longer regarded as a 'traditional class party' in 2005, but support from voters with working-class backgrounds was still higher than across the middle classes (the gap narrowed massively due to heavy losses among working-class voters).[43] New Labour's gravitation to the centre was followed by the weakening of political polarization, a process that created a pool of disaffected voters in British politics, markedly among those with a left-wing authoritarian background.

## Erosion of public trust

The second factor contributing to the BNP's structure of political opportunities in the 2000s was the increase of public disaffection with British mainstream politics. Confirming this, electoral participation fell to its lowest level in the post-war period, indicating strong apathy across the electorate in the 2000s. Turn-out in general elections dropped 12 points in a single term, from 71.2 per cent of the electorate in 1997 to 59.2 per cent in 2001, a new historic low.[44] Voter participation in the 2005 general election increased to 61.4 per cent of the electorate and to 65.1 per cent in 2010.[45] A strong expectation of an overwhelming Labour Party victory helps to explain the difficulty in mobilizing the electorate in 1997 and 2001. However, even though the last two general elections developed against a more competitive political background, a substantial recovery of electoral participation was not observed.

Another indication of growing political disaffection in the United Kingdom was the declining rate of party membership, most acute in the Labour Party throughout the 2000s. Overall membership for the three mainstream parties dropped from 3.8 per cent of the electorate in 1983 to just 1 per cent in 2010.[46] The Labour Party observed a significant increase from 265,000 party members in 1994 to 405,000 members in 1997, demonstrating the initial enthusiasm for Blair's project, but membership was subsequently cut to 248,294 in 2002,

42 John Curtice, 'Elections and public opinion', in Anthony Seldon (ed.), *Blair's Britain 1997–2007* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007), 35–53 (41).

43 Ibid., 45. See also Ludlam and Smith (eds), *Governing as New Labour*.

44 Richard Heffernan, 'Tony Blair as Labour Party leader', in Seldon (ed.), *Blair's Britain 1997–2007*, 143–63.

45 John Walton, 'Election 2010: turnout mapped', *BBC News*, 10 May 2010, available on http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/election_2010/8672976.stm (viewed 1 April 2015).

46 Keen, *Membership of UK Political Parties*, 2.

198,026 in 2005, and to 156,000 in 2009.[47] The overall decline was only reversed in the context of the 2010 general election.[48] An internal Labour Party report conducted in the mid-2000s associated the drop in political engagement with members' opposition to particular governmental policies (in particular the 2003 Iraq War) and to the widespread perception that Labour lacked interest in promoting social justice.[49]

Interestingly, the YouGov poll included in that report reported that 41 per cent of Labour's rank-and-file associated their membership with the intention of keeping the Conservatives out of office. This trend suggested a reduced level of potential inter-bloc electoral mobility among Labour's core voters.[50] Lastly, surveys conducted during the 2000s highlighted a widespread and intense public distrust in mainstream politicians among the British electorate, a trend that was already significant before the scandal over the expense claims of Members of Parliament in 2009.[51] In short, the low levels of turn-out throughout the 2000s, the decline of political engagement and failing trust in the political system suggest the existence of a pool of disaffected voters that could potentially be exploited by a minor party like the BNP.

## Politicization of immigration

Nevertheless, this BNP benefitted from yet another important structural factor, namely, the intense politicization of the immigration issue during the 2000s. Since the early 1990s, the importance of this topic on the British political agenda grew after an increased number of asylum-seekers from 1988 onwards, though the intensity of this type of immigration was still below the average of other European countries. A recent investigation across seven European countries, including a systematic study of political claims on immigration as published (for the British study) in articles in the *Guardian* and the *Daily Mail* between 1995 and 2009, confirmed the intense salience of this topic in British politics, especially during the first half of the 2000s.[52] This research highlighted a clear linkage between the growing frequency of references to immigration in the media and expanding public concern on

47 Heffernan, 'Tony Blair as Labour Party leader'; Keen, *Membership of UK Political Parties*, 4.

48 Keen, *Membership of UK Political Parties*, 5.

49 LabOUR Commission, *Renewal—A Two-Way Process for the 21st Century: Interim Report 2007* (London: LabOUR Commission 2007), 22–3.

50 Ibid., 22.

51 Robert Ford, 'Who might vote for the BNP? Survey evidence on the electoral potential of the extreme right in Britain', in Eatwell and Goodwin (eds), *The New Extremism in 21st Century Britain*, 145–68 (159).

52 João Carvalho, Roger Eatwell and Daniel Wunderlich, 'The politicisation of immigration in Britain', in Wouter van der Brug, Gianni D'Amato, Joost Berkhout and Didier Ruedin (eds), *The Politicisation of Migration* (London and New York: Routledge 2015), 159–78.

the issue, as immigration climbed to the top of the public's matters of concern between 2001 and 2005. Furthermore, this investigation indicated that 'journalists' were responsible for 31 per cent of the claims found in the aforementioned newspapers, most of which (71 per cent) expressed unsympathetic or restrictive views of immigration and integration.[53]

Unsurprisingly, the Leveson Inquiry into the British media concluded that negative reporting of immigration was a recurrent practice across sections of the press rather than an exception.[54] In addition, the politicization of immigration reflected intense mainstream party competition on the issue, in particular among the Labour and Conservative parties.[55] After electoral defeat in 1997, the Conservatives established an image for themselves as the national party in opposition to a Labour government steered by a cosmopolitan, anti-national, liberal elite whose policies and attitudes posed a severe challenge to British interests and values.[56] Accordingly, two Conservative Party leaders conducted populist campaigns on immigration in the 2001 and 2005 general elections. William Hague's (2000–1) electoral strategy encompassed a combination of neoliberalism and authoritarian populism with a strong emphasis on the issue of asylum, which included accusations that the centre-left government was turning Britain into a 'foreign land'.[57] Michael Howard (2003–5) adopted a valence politics strategy on immigration that involved the proposal of withdrawal from the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention.[58] Immigration was only downgraded in the main opposition party's electoral strategy after the elevation of David Cameron to party leader in 2006 with his project to push the Conservative Party to the centre ground.[59]

The Labour government also contributed to the politicization of immigration. The Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 implemented a voucher system and dispersal scheme that accommodated asylum-seekers in detention centres, provoking national concern over what previously had been a problem restricted to the London metropolitan area.[60] From 2001 onwards, the Labour

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid. A report on community cohesion in the early 2000s had already found 'clear evidence of negative, unbalanced and inaccurate reporting likely to promote fear and tension within communities across London': Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees in the UK (ICAR), *Media Image, Community Impact: Executive Summary* (London: ICAR, King's College London 2004), [7].

55 Carvalho, *Impact of Extreme Right Parties on Immigration*.

56 Roger Griffin, '"No racism, thanks, we're British": how right-wing populism manifests itself in contemporary Britain', in Matthew Feldman (ed.), *A Fascist Century: Essays by Roger Griffin* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2008), 117–31.

57 This ideological formula maintained the unity of the centre-right party while aiming to divide Labour's core voters. See Tim Bale, *The Conservative Party: From Thatcher to Cameron* (Cambridge: Polity Press 2010).

58 Matthew Tempest, 'Howard calls for asylum cap', *Guardian*, 24 January 2005.

59 Bale, *The Conservative Party.*

60 Anthony M. Messina, *The Logics and Politics of Post-WWII Migration to Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007).

government adopted a laissez-faire approach to the immigration both of highly skilled immigrants (HSI) in 2002, and from the new member states of the European Union (EU) in 2004, in order to maintain a highly flexible labour market in the context of economic prosperity.[61] The intensity of labour immigration and intra-EU migration flows expanded significantly throughout the 2000s, as is demonstrated by the 447,000 applications to the Worker Registration Scheme by citizens of the new EU member states between 2004 and 2006.[62] However, this neoliberal stance on immigration was coupled with a highly restrictive approach to asylum in order to neutralize Conservative attacks. In 2002 Home Secretary David Blunkett justified the detention of asylum-seekers' dependents and their removal from the state school system to prevent the 'swamping' of local schools.[63]

Notwithstanding the dramatic drop of asylum-seeking in the United Kingdom after 2003, immigration became Blair's top domestic priority after successive scandals at the Home Office dealing with the immigration system.[64] The Labour government responded to each crisis with the publication of a new bill or White Paper meant to tackle claims of widespread abuse of the immigration system, a strategy that helped to intensify public anxiety rather than to defuse it.[65] The succession of Blair by Gordon Brown in 2006 was followed by a more restrictive approach to HSI, as the new Prime Minister announced his intention to promote 'British jobs for British workers' at the national conference of the Trades Union Congress.[66] This proposal seemed to come straight out of the BNP's election manifesto, and was interpreted as an attempt to reconnect with the working class.[67] Within the context of hegemonic perceptions of widespread abuse by immigrants, the expansion of labour inflows in the 2000s provided fertile ground for the

61 The new EU member states were the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia. See João Carvalho, 'British and French policies towards high-skilled immigration during the 2000s: policy outplays politics or politics trumps policy?', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 37, no. 13, 2014, 2361–78.

62 Home Office, Department for Work and Pensions, HM Revenue and Customs and Department for Communities and Local Government, *Accession Monitoring Report May 2004–June 2006* (London: Home Office 2006), 1, 5.

63 'Row erupts over Blunkett's "swamped" comment', *Guardian*, 24 April 2002.

64 One Minister of Immigration (Beverley Hughes) and two Home Secretaries (David Blunkett and Charles Clarke) were forced to resign after the emergence of successive scandals dealing with management of immigration. See Sarah Spencer, 'Immigration', in Seldon (ed.), *Blair's Britain 1997–2007*, 341–60.

65 Ibid.

66 Toby Helm, 'Gordon Brown pledges jobs for British workers', *Daily Telegraph*, 11 September 2007.

67 Roger Eatwell, 'Responses to the extreme right in Britain', in Eatwell and Goodwin (eds), *The New Extremism in 21st Century Britain*, 211–30.

BNP's xenophobic discourse, as Labour MP Jon Cruddas pointed out in 2005.[68]

## The BNP's electoral strategy under Nick Griffin's leadership

Under the new leadership of Nick Griffin, a Cambridge graduate, the BNP embarked on a 'modernization' process that emphasized, first, 'responsibility' through the adoption of non-aggressive rhetoric and proposals to increase the party's credibility, and, second, 'professionalism' in the employment of modern campaign methods.[69] The new BNP leader seemed eager to appeal to voters who felt unrepresented by the system and whose sense of Britishness felt threatened to expand his party's constituency beyond the neo-Nazi fringes.[70] In the meantime, the BNP became increasingly careful in its organization and propaganda. Local politics were prioritized and a new electoral strategy was implemented, inspired by the Liberal Democrats' electioneering techniques involving intense canvassing and grassroots organizations in selected areas.[71] Notwithstanding the modernization strategy, Griffin still presented the BNP as a 'movement for the cultural and spiritual rebirth of our land and people', indicating his attachment to the 'palingenetic' element characteristic of neo-fascist parties.[72]

Overall ideological reform was downgraded by Griffin in 2001, but the BNP still dropped its compulsory repatriation programme of all non-Whites in favour of a voluntary repatriation scheme before the 2001 general election.[73] A halt to all further 'non-white' immigration was demanded to ensure that the British people retained what was now referred to as their 'unique identity' rather than their 'racial purity'.[74] On the economy, the BNP proposed the reduction of imports to promote British production, opposed foreign ownership of national assets and demanded discriminatory access to the labour market.[75] The BNP's local campaign slogan, 'Rights for Whites', reflected the party's racial populism, covert fascist nostalgia and authoritarian corporatism.[76] The terrorist attacks in the United States on 9/11 and in London on 7/7 fuelled the BNP's campaign against Islam and in defence of

68 Jon Cruddas, Peter John, Nick Lowles, Helen Margetts, David Rowland, David Shutt and Stuart Weir, *The Far Right in London: A Challenge for Local Democracy?* (York: Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust 2005), 23.

69 Copsey, *Contemporary British Fascism*.

70 Griffin, '"No racism, thanks, we're British"'.

71 Goodwin, 'In search of the winning formula'.

72 Nick Griffin, quoted in Griffin, '"No racism, thanks, we're British"', 120.

73 Eatwell, 'The extreme right in Britain'.

74 'Where we stand!', BNP 2001 general election manifesto, available on the *Political Science Resources* website at www.politicsresources.net/area/uk/e01/man/bnpstand.htm (viewed 2 April 2015).

75 Ibid.

76 Ignazi, *Extreme-Right Parties in Western Europe*.

'western civilisation', providing an opportunity for Griffin to water down the BNP's antisemitism in favour of hatred of Islam.[77] The disappointing electoral results of 2004 forced Griffin to promise a major ideological overhaul.

In the 2005 general election, the BNP's electoral campaign included new critical approaches to multiculturalism and against British 'liberal totalitarianism' in defence of freedom of speech.[78] Eugenic conceptions of a British 'race' were replaced by warnings of a 'genocide through integration' of immigrants.[79] Multiculturalism was no longer the outcome of a Semitic conspiracy but a product of the 'blind economic force of global capitalism'.[80] Griffin pushed his party towards cultural xenophobia and conflated immigration with globalization, but traces of past antisemitism persisted throughout the 2000s.[81] The BNP's economic programme demanded Britain's withdrawal from the EU and stood for a 'British national economy' opposed to 'globalism, international socialism, laissez-faire capitalism and economic liberalism', suggesting an alternative 'third way' characteristic of fascist parties.[82] Moreover, Griffin's article entitled 'The Deadly Twins', published twice on the BNP's website, argued that, 'despite the opinions of orthodox Know-Nothings, capitalism and communism were never diametrically opposed opposites'.[83]

Notwithstanding the efforts of the BNP's leadership to promote cultural xenophobia as the new ideological cornerstone, a strong level of continuity was observed regarding the party's authoritarian corporatism and its attachment to a 'nationalist community' project characteristic of neo-fascist parties. This ideological formula resulted in a diminished electoral appeal and reduced the BNP's potential audience to fringes rather than the overall British electorate.[84] Unsurprisingly, Griffin failed to water down the BNP's pariah status, as one poll conducted before the 2009 European Parliament elections

77 Nick Griffin interview, in Sharon Sadeh, 'The British Le Pen is euphoric', *Haaretz*, 30 April 2002.

78 The new opposition to the British state helped the BNP to distance itself from its fascist legacy and to present the party as a victim of a liberal conspiracy at a time Griffin was on trial for incitement of racial hatred; see Copsey, *Contemporary British Fascism*, 158.

79 *Rebuilding British Democracy: British National Party General Election 2005 Manifesto* (Welshpool, Powys: BNP 2005), 20.

80 Ibid., 19.

81 Goodwin, 'In search of the winning formula'.

82 *Rebuilding British Democracy*, 33. According to Roger Eatwell: 'the various forms of fascism can be conceived as attempting to forge what some openly termed a "Third Way" (neither capitalism or socialism)'; Roger Eatwell, 'On defining the "fascist minimum": the centrality of ideology', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1996, 303–19 (310).

83 Nick Griffin, 'The deadly twins', was first published by the BNP in 2004 and then revised and republished in 2012, the revised version available on the *British National Party* website at www.bnp.org.uk/tyn/deadly-twins (viewed 2 April 2015). For the ideological inspiration behind Griffin's articles, see Ignazi, *Extreme-Right Parties in Western Europe*, 181–2.

84 Ignazi, *Extreme-Right Parties in Western Europe*.

indicated that, whereas 4 per cent of respondents recognized that they 'would definitely' consider voting for the party, 66 per cent said they would 'never consider' it.[85] Moreover, Griffin's modernization project faced increasing difficulties in appeasing the BNP's core voters and simultaneously expanding the party's electoral support in the late 2000s.[86]

## The roots of the BNP's electoral inroads

Drawing from a review of quantitative and qualitative studies on the BNP, this section explores the party's constituency in the 2000s, and how this electoral coalition was an outcome of the interplay between the aforementioned strategic opening and the BNP's electoral formula.[87] Findings from the IPSOS Mori surveys conducted between 2002 and 2006 indicate that BNP voters were mostly white males, middle-aged, members of the working class and integrated in the private sector.[88] The distinct socio-economic profile of the BNP's electorate was confirmed by further research employing regression models of a YouGov online national panel conducted a week before the 2009 European Parliament election, which suggested that economic pessimism was an important driver of the BNP's support.[89] Analysis of data from the 2002 and 2003 local elections highlighted the BNP's stronger electoral penetration in economically deprived urban areas with a large ethnic minority population and poor levels of housing.[90] At the 2010 general election, the BNP's electoral support strongly correlated with urban working-class areas with a higher rate of manual workers, council tenants, people with no educational qualifications and no car.[91]

Further research from a BNP membership list leaked in November 2008 containing 13,009 individuals suggested that small employers and self-

85 Cutts, Ford and Goodwin, 'Anti-immigrant, politically disaffected or still racist after all?', 421.

86 Eatwell, 'Responses to the extreme right in Britain'.

87 As mentioned in the literature, a recurrent problem of research on support for ERPs is that public surveys include an insufficient number of extreme-right voters to permit reliable analysis. Consequently, this section draws on a systematic review of secondary literature on this topic.

88 Matthew J. Goodwin, Robert Ford, Bobby Duffy and Rea Robey, 'Who votes extreme-right in twenty-first-century Britain? The social bases of support for the National Front and British National Party', in Eatwell and Goodwin (eds), *The New Extremism in 21st Century Britain*, 191–210.

89 The research drawing on the YouGov online poll indicates 985 self-identified BNP supporters from a pool of 32,268 respondents. See Cutts, Ford and Goodwin, 'Anti-immigrant, politically disaffected or still racist after all?', 423.

90 See Benjamin Bowyer, 'Local context and extreme right support in England: the British National Party in the 2002 and 2003 local elections', *Electoral Studies*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2008, 611–20.

91 David Denver, 'The results: how Britain voted', *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol. 63, no. 4, 2010, 588–606 (601).

employed individuals were the sectors most represented in this ERP.[92] Unemployment was found to be a weak predictor of BNP membership in contrast to overcrowded housing.[93] The BNP's support seemed to be stronger among the most economic insecure classes within the complex social structure of British society.[94] In terms of geographical distribution, there was a substantial shift of support for the BNP from London to northern regions from the 1990s and throughout the 2000s, in both national and local elections, particularly in Labour strongholds.[95] Research on the BNP's electoral inroads at the local level highlighted the fact that the five areas where the British ERP elected four or more councillors by 2006 (Burnley, Barking and Dagenham, Stoke, Sandwell and Epping Forest) were strongly similar, in that the Labour vote in all of them had experienced decline or collapse (see Table 1). While four of these areas were traditional Labour strongholds, the mainstream opposition parties remained unable to capitalize on Labour's collapse (apart from gains made by Liberal Democrats in Burnley).[96] Furthermore, BNP members were more likely to reside in Labour constituencies, while the association with the Conservative vote was residual.[97]

The BNP's membership was found to be greater in towns where a large non-white population and a white working-class population lived in highly segregated neighbourhoods. This reduced the chances of contact between inhabitants of different ethnic backgrounds, which enhanced the perception of threat.[98] In the context of overcrowded housing, it was easy to portray the Labour council as favouring ethnic communities, thus boosting the BNP's membership and confirming the legitimacy of its electoral strategy.[99] By the early 2010s, Nigel Copsey concluded, 'not only are BNP voters more likely to reside in Labour constituencies, but so are BNP members', demonstrating a strong link between the BNP's electoral support and the centre-left party's strongholds.[100]

92 Michael Biggs and Steven Knauss, 'Explaining membership in the British National Party: a multilevel analysis of contact and threat', *European Sociological Review*, vol. 28, no. 5, 2012, 633–46.

93 Ibid.

94 Tim Bale, 'Cinderella and her ugly sisters: the mainstream and extreme right in Europe's bipolarising party systems', *West European Politics*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2003, 67–90.

95 Goodwin, Ford, Duffy and Robey, 'Who votes extreme-right in twenty-first-century Britain?'.

96 The demise of local political activity and the BNP's electoral concentration in localities with strong racial segregation enhanced the legitimacy of the BNP's political campaign. Nevertheless, the diminished potential of inter-bloc mobility across centre-left core voters helps to explain the failure of opposition parties to benefit from increasing alienation from the Labour Party. See Wilks-Heeg, 'The canary in a coalmine?'.

97 Biggs and Knauss, 'Explaining membership in the British National Party', 633.

98 Ibid.

99 Ibid.

100 Copsey, 'Sustaining a mortal blow?', 29.

Table 1 Number of Labour city councillors in five English local councils with largest BNP groupings in the mid-2000s, 1999–2012

| | 1999 | 2003 | 2007 | 2012 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Barking and Dagenham | 46 | 42 | 38 | 51 |
| Burnley | 30 | 27 | 17 | 26 |
| Epping Forest | 14 | 9 | 1 | 1 |
| Sandwell | 58 | 55 | 51 | 60 |
| Stoke | 48 | 27 | 24 | 34 |

Source: Adapted from Wilks-Heeg, 'The canary in a coalmine?', 392, and local authorities' websites.



At the attitudinal level, hostility towards immigration was an important ideological characteristic of the BNP electorate.[101] This was initially observed after 77 per cent of the BNP's voters ranked immigration as their top priority in a nationwide 2004 European election exit poll.[102] Research on an online survey before the 2009 European ballot found that hostility to immigration was the strongest predictor of support for the BNP, while voters who supported a halt to further immigration without exhibiting hostility to it were less prone to vote for this ERP.[103] It concluded that, although racial intolerance suffered a general decline, most support for the BNP came from a shrinking minority of voters with racist attitudes.[104] The BNP's anti-immigration discourse together with its strong pariah status helps to explain its subsequent failure to move beyond the fringe of biased voters or to capitalize on the widespread public concern with this issue.[105] Nevertheless, considering opposition to immigration as the only issue driving BNP's electoral support would lead to the flawed conclusion that ERPs were single-issue parties.[106]

Alongside hostility to immigration, there is evidence to suggest that the BNP benefitted from a protest vote throughout the 2000s.[107] Qualitative analysis in Burnley and reports in the media in both the early and late 2000s noted that former Labour supporters accused the party of being the 'Tory party in disguise', and justified support for the BNP as a protest vote against the Labour government.[108] Surveys conducted in Barking and Dagenham after the 2006 local elections confirmed widespread political disgruntlement,

101 Goodwin, Ford, Duffy and Robey, 'Who votes extreme-right in twenty-first-century Britain?'.

102 John and Margetts, 'The latent support for the extreme right in British politics'.

103 Cutts, Ford and Goodwin, 'Anti-immigrant, politically disaffected or still racist after all?'.

104 Ibid.

105 Ibid.

106 Cantle, 'The far right'.

107 Renton, 'Examining the success of the British National Party, 1999–2003'.

108 Martin Wainwright, 'Election 2010: Burnley, the town of the protest vote', audio report, 5 May 2010, available on the *Guardian* website at www.theguardian.com/politics/audio/2010/may/05/burnley-election-2010 (viewed 3 April 2015).

as half of the BNP's local supporters admitted being driven by the desire to protest against the political establishment rather than by ideological affinity with the BNP.[109] At the macro-level, the British ERP's electoral expansion from 2002 onwards can be associated with the growing public perception of New Labour's ideological realignment after the first term in office, with the BNP's breakthrough in 2009 coinciding with Labour's worst electoral result in the post-war period.[110] Finally, the political alienation identified at the local level was confirmed by research from the national online panel conducted in 2009: voters who showed higher levels of disaffection with mainstream politics had a stronger propensity to support the BNP than other respondents.[111]

In short, the socio-economic profile of BNP supporters and members suggests that the party's cultural xenophobia and nationalist corporatism resonated with a particular section of the British electorate, particularly segments of the white working class and *petit-bourgeoisie* who were geographically concentrated in some of Labour's northern strongholds. Since hostility to immigration was considered the strongest predictor of a BNP vote, the politicization of immigration during the 2000s enhanced the legitimacy of the British ERP's discourse. The attitudinal profile of BNP's voters suggests that the party's electoral expansion was also enhanced by the protest vote that emerged from a pool of voters disaffected with the Labour government in its own heartlands. Consequently, the BNP's electoral coalition was formed by a particular and contracting section of the British electorate rather than being widely disseminated across the country. Within such a structure of political opportunities throughout the 2000s, the BNP's constituency was sufficient to make electoral gains in second-order ballots in highly concentrated geographical areas. The fragility of its electoral successes, however, became evident after the closure of the favourable window of opportunity of the early 2010s.

## The end of a window of opportunity

The favourable structure of political opportunities enjoyed by the BNP in the 2000s started to change dramatically in the late 2000s after the emergence of three new factors: the eruption of a financial crisis, the accompanying (temporary) downgrading of the political importance of immigration, and the outcome of the 2010 general election. The financial crisis in the late 2000s was followed by a decline in the politicization of immigration, which reduced the appeal of the BNP's anti-immigration discourse (see Figure 2).[112] The negative

109 Goodwin, Ford, Duffy and Robey, 'Who votes extreme-right in twenty-first-century Britain?'.

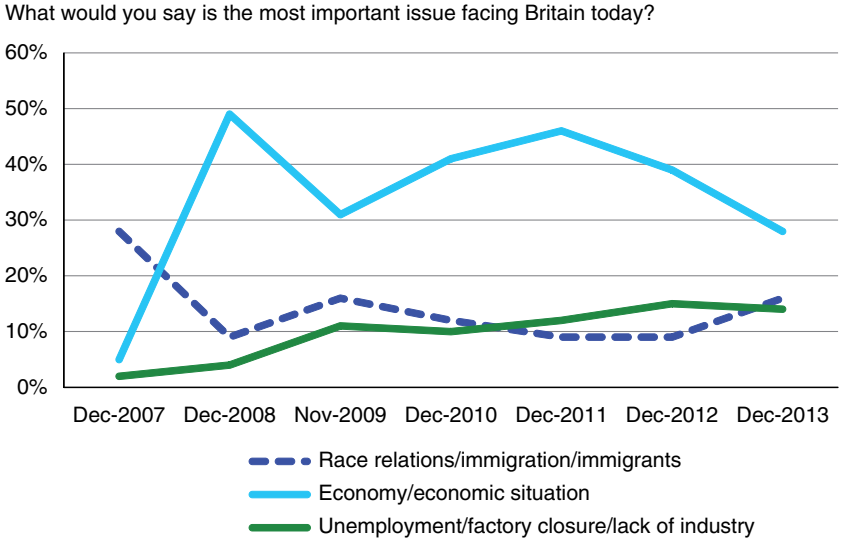
110 Curtice, 'Elections and public opinion'; 'Labour slumps to historic defeat', *BBC News*, 8 June 2009, available on http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/8088133.stm (viewed 3 April 2015).

111 Cutts, Ford and Goodwin, 'Anti-immigrant, politically disaffected or still racist after all?', 432.

112 Carvalho, Eatwell and Wunderlich, 'The politicisation of immigration in Britain'.

effects on the labour market also failed to benefit the BNP, since unemployment was found to be a weak predictor of support for the party.[113]

**Figure 2** Importance of economy, unemployment and immigration to the British electorate, 2007–13




Source: Adapted from Ipsos MORI Aggregate Issues Index data.

Moreover, the formation of a coalition government by the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats in 2010 had important implications for party competition in Britain. First, the coalition government's programme included a tough stance on immigration through the imposition of caps on in-flows, which contributed to the lower salience of immigration among the population at large.[114] Second, the BNP failed to capitalize on the political disgruntlement caused by the Conservative Party's apparent shift to the centre because the party's electoral appeal failed to resonate with centre-right voters. And, third, the formation of the coalition government facilitated the return of the Labour Party to a centre-left position closer to its Keynesian legacy, leaving it the only major progressive party in British politics after the Liberal Democrats' shift towards the centre.[115] The government agenda of cuts to public services in the 'age of austerity' boosted Labour in opposition, based on its past social democratic credentials. The criticism by the centre-left party's new leader, Ed Miliband, of the previous government's

113 Biggs and Knauss, 'Explaining membership in the British National Party'.

114 John Benyon, 'The Con-Lib agenda for home affairs', in Simon Lee and Matt Beech (eds), *The Cameron-Clegg Government: Coalition Politics in an Age of Austerity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2011), 134–52.

115 Kevin Hickson, 'The end of New Labour? The future for the Labour Party', in Lee and Beech (eds), *The Cameron-Clegg Government*, 251–67.

underestimation of the impact of EU immigration in the mid-2000s sought to appease disaffected voters most concerned with this particular social phenomenon.[116] The widening of political polarization on the economy alongside a tougher stance on immigration enhanced the Labour Party's recovery of those previously disaffected voters who had shifted their support to the BNP, and the mobilization of centre-left voters in the party's strongholds, where the British ERP's electoral penetration had been strongest in the 2000s (see Table 1). Therefore, the BNP faced a double challenge, from the Labour Party's resurgence as a centre-left party with a tougher stance on immigration, on the one hand, and, on the other, growing competition on the right in the form of UKIP, the UK Independence Party.

With regard to the BNP's window of political opportunity in the 2000s, intense public distrust in politics was the only factor that persisted into the early 2010s.[117] In February 2013 a survey found that only 13 per cent of respondents trusted politicians, down from 21 per cent in 2012.[118] However, the BNP would have difficulty benefitting from this tendency given its pariah status, Griffin's strategic errors and the resurgence of endemic intra-party conflicts. In 2010 the BNP's electoral campaign failed to resonate with the electorate, and the party's performance was hampered by the leadership's strategic mistakes.[119] A year later, Griffin faced a formal leadership challenge from Richard Edmonds: it failed, but was followed by a wave of defections.[120] Further divisions threatened to split the BNP's narrow constituency after Andrew Brons resigned from the party and set up a splinter far-right organization called the British Democratic Party.[121] As a consequence of the interplay between the closure of the strategic opening observed in the 2000s and the BNP's own behaviour, the party's electoral representation declined severely in the early 2010s (see Figure 1).

Electoral results in the 2011 and 2012 local elections were very disappointing, leading to predictions that the BNP was finished as an electoral force (see Figure 1).[122] Analyses suggested that the BNP was now suffering from a

116 Patrick Wintour and Alexandra Topping, 'Change rules on migrant workers, says Ed Miliband', *Guardian*, 21 June 2012.

117 Intense public concern with immigration resurfaced in late 2013 (see Figure 2).

118 Denis Campbell, 'Trust in politicians hits an all-time low', *Observer*, 27 September 2013.

119 The BNP campaigned on withdrawal from Afghanistan, control of immigration and opposition to the global warming 'conspiracy'; see Copsey, 'Sustaining a mortal blow?'.

120 Matthew Taylor, 'BNP leader Nick Griffin isolated after election disasters', *Guardian*, 20 May 2011.

121 Matthew Collins, 'Neo-Nazi former BNP members launch new far-right party', *New Statesman*, 8 February 2013.

122 Matthew Goodwin, 'The BNP is finished as an electoral force', *Comment Is Free* (online), 4 May 2012, available on the *Guardian* website at www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/may/04/bnp-local-elections-electoral-force-finished (viewed 3 April 2015).

resurgent Labour vote in areas where support for the centre-left party had dropped in the 2000s (see Table 1).[123] Notwithstanding increasing access to mainstream media, the BNP's electoral results in the 2012 London Assembly and mayoral elections showed a clear decline, from the 130,714 votes won in 2008 to the 47, 024 votes of 2012, resulting in the loss of the BNP's single seat on the Assembly.[124] According to the BNP spokesman Simon Darby, his party expected to deliver 'one or two surprises' in the 2013 local elections and predicted a weak performance by UKIP, not least because UKIP's leader Nigel Farage claimed to be 'carrying the torch of Thatcherism', at the time of Margaret Thatcher's death earlier that month.[125] The BNP failed to win a single seat, after standing 99 candidates, or to secure its single county council seat in Lancashire, whereas UKIP polled 22 per cent of the vote and achieved a net gain of 139 council seats.[126]

While UKIP's electoral expansion progressed in the post-2010 context, electoral support for the BNP plummeted in the same period. In the aftermath of the local ballot, the ERP's website posted a document entitled 'Rebuilding the Ethnic British Race', urging members to 'aim [for] between 3 and 4 children each if not more' to counter large non-British families settled in the United Kingdom.[127] This message reveals the ambiguity of the BNP's ideological profile that conflates ethnicity with racialism, and remains unable to drop the ideological traits of past neo-fascist parties and adopt a 'postmodern' ERP model. In the context of a resurgent centre-left party in opposition, the BNP's electoral coalition will be reduced to those voters most hostile to immigration and unable to repeat the electoral accomplishments of the 2000s, leading to intense demoralization. Considering the interplay between the agency of the BNP's leadership and the unfavourable structure of political opportunities, the party's electoral fortunes look, once again, to be very bleak in the coming years.[128]

123 *Far Right Electoral and Other Activity: The Challenge for Community Cohesion* (Coventry: Institute of Community Cohesion 2011).

124 Feargal McGuinness and Jeremy Hardacre, *London Elections 2012*, House of Commons Research Paper 12/28, 22 May 2012, 8, available on *www.parliament.uk* at www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/RP12-28.pdf (viewed 9 April 2015).

125 'Local elections 2013: BNP predicts "one or two surprises"', *BBC News*, 30 April 2013, available on www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-22352928 (viewed 3 April 2015).

126 Nicholas Duckworth, *Local Elections 2013*, House of Commons Research Paper 13/30, 22 May 2013, available on *www.parliament.uk* at www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/RP13-30.pdf (viewed 7 April 2015).

127 NorthernScot, 'Rebuilding the ethnic British race', 3 May 2013, available on the *British National Party* website at www.bnp.org.uk/news/national/rebuilding-ethnic-british-race (viewed 3 April 2015).

128 Copsey, 'Sustaining a mortal blow?'.

## The rise and fall of the BNP

This article has argued that the BNP's electoral expansion in the 2000s was boosted by a favourable window of opportunity that enabled the party to overcome its endogenous faults and the structural constraints of the British party system. These favourable conditions were the outcome of weakening political polarization, high levels of political distrust and the intense politicization of the issue of immigration. Notwithstanding Nick Griffin's strategy of moderation and the shift towards cultural xenophobia, the BNP's economic programme continued to resemble a neo-fascist party's and only resonated with a fringe and contracting constituency of the British electorate. Reflecting the interplay between the strategic opening and the BNP's electoral appeal, the party's political coalition was composed of the white working class and *petit-bourgeoisie* with strong authoritarian attitudes and disaffected from mainstream politics. The presence of a protest vote among the BNP's electorate demonstrated that it was not a single-issue party.

The BNP's electoral coalition supported its electoral accomplishments in highly concentrated areas of Labour strongholds in second-order-ballots that took place in the 2000s. Nevertheless, the contingency of these BNP successes became evident after the closure of the strategic opening in the late 2000s. While intense levels of political distrust were still observed in the following decade, the British political context failed to support the expansion of the BNP's ideological project after the emergence of an economic crisis and the (temporary) loss of salience of the immigration issue that came with it, as well as the formation of a coalition government that allowed for the subsequent return of the Labour Party to a centre-left position, closer to its Keynesian legacy. This change enabled the Labour Party to attract disaffected voters across its centre-left party strongholds, where the BNP penetration had been strongest. The downturn in the BNP's structure of political opportunities was aggravated by the party's endogenous faults, including the return of intra-party conflicts and a continuous inability to detach itself from its past neo-fascist model at the ideological level.

In consequence of the closure of the window of opportunity and the agency of the BNP leadership, the electoral success of the party quickly faded in the early 2010s. Griffin's chances of reversing the electoral decline seem to be contingent on an eventual shift in the British party system (like the return of the Labour Party to government followed by lower levels of political polarization) or in the BNP's ideological formula (the adoption of a 'postmodern' ERP model). Such developments seem unlikely in the short term. This investigation highlights the importance of New Labour's centripetal shift to the enhancement of the BNP's prospects in the 2000s. The party's downturn in the early 2010s demonstrates how an ERP may fail to capitalize on core right-wing voter dissatisfaction caused by the Conservative's shift to the centre. ERP literature ought to acknowledge that the positions

of centre-left parties can have the same importance in paving the way for the emergence of ERPs as those of the mainstream right, depending on the electoral formula adopted by the ERP. Further research can examine to what extent this trend can be observed beyond the British political context of the 2000s.

**João Carvalho** is a postdoctoral researcher at the Centre for Research and Studies in Sociology at the Lisbon University Institute in Portugal. He is the author of *Impact of Extreme Right Parties on Immigration Policy: Comparing Britain, France and Italy* (Routledge 2013). Email joao.miguel.carvalho@iscte.pt