

To what extent is anti-immigration sentiment in the UK the reason for UKIP's rise in popularity?

Right-wing populism is manifesting itself in Western democracies at an astonishing rate, with parties such as the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), the Danish People's Party and One Nation in Australia gaining popularity. The literature offers up a number of explanations for this recent shift in the political sphere, the one I believe to be the most convincing being anti-immigration sentiment in these countries. Rising immigration creates economic and cultural distress among natives, which often manifests as feelings of threat. This study focuses on the rise of UKIP in the run up to the 2016 EU referendum, where the party gained increasing attention and managed to shift opinions of the electorate, resulting in a 52% Leave majority. Historically in the UK, political parties appeal to specific demographics within society. They know who their supporters are and use their manifestos and campaigns to appeal to these people, trying to ensure their votes.

In this essay I will explore the extent to which different characteristics of voters in the UK are the reason for the rise in support of UKIP and the result of the 2016 EU referendum. I hypothesise that anti-immigration sentiment is the primary reason and predict it will have the most statistical power out of a number of characteristics. The use of a statistical analysis will allow for a quantitative understanding to be reached, allowing for conclusions to be drawn from studies that are representative of the UK as a whole.

The remainder of this paper will go as follows: I will review the current literature on the main themes that emerge relating to the research question. Continuing with a statistical analysis, I will analyse the extent to which opinions on immigration contribute to UKIP support and the characteristics that are present in Leave voters. The findings show that those who voted for UKIP in the 2015 general election believe immigration to be the most important issue in the UK. They also show that the characteristics taken from the literature all significantly impact the choice to vote to Leave the EU, especially anti-immigration opinions.

Literature review

There are several main themes that emerge from the literature: social identity and intergroup threat theory; the rise of right-wing populist parties; and characteristics of UKIP voters.

Social identity theory, and more specifically intergroup threat theory, are extensive themes in the literature. These theories explain the mechanisms behind social group membership and offer explanations for the way individuals act within and between groups. Social identity theory is the phenomenon under which people categorise themselves into groups based on their values and beliefs (McLeod, 2023). Members of social groups typically believe that members of other groups should conform to similar values as themselves (Mughan & Paxton, 2006). If not, this leads to hostility towards the out-group (others), and positive feelings towards the in-group (themselves) (Renström, et al., 2023). In the context of American politics, which has similar immigration attitudes and politics to the UK, social identity theory can be used to explain the reason for negative immigration attitudes (Mangum & Block, 2018). Feelings towards immigrants can be predicted by how much they decide to adopt American culture and blend into society. Those who fail to do this are branded as being part of the out-group and a threat towards natives. The recent increased immigration levels has resulted in increased feelings of threat towards 'social harmony' (Mangum & Block, 2018, p. 4). The impact of perceived threats on intergroup dynamics is further explained by intergroup threat theory, an expansion of social identity theory (Renström, et al., 2023). This explains why perceived economic and cultural threats towards the in-group (natives) can manifest as hostility towards the out-group (immigrants).

The literature surrounding the recent rise in support of right-wing populism both within and outside of the UK is large. Despite this, authors come to similar conclusions, many agreeing that the primary explanations for the increase in support being the economic and cultural concerns that arise with immigration (Dennison & Andrew, 2018). There is rising concern that immigrants will take jobs from natives and put pressure on the welfare state (Abrams & Travaglino, 2018), will not embrace the culture of their new country (Mughan & Paxton, 2006) and will continue to live as they did before migrating. Culturally, it is not immigration itself that is seen as threatening, but 'failure to assimilate' (Mughan & Paxton, 2006, p. 343). These behaviours can present as threats towards natives, causing hostility towards newcomers. This research is applicable to specifically the UK, which as immigration levels continue to rise is becoming more multicultural. Right-wing populist parties identify these feelings of instability amongst voters and use it to their advantage to gain support.

Another explanation for the rise in populist parties is citizens no longer feeling represented by traditional political parties (Sandrin, 2020). This can make voters easy targets for right-wing parties such as UKIP to create a narrative of 'us versus them' (Sandrin, 2020, p. 232). This further enables

parties to gain support from unsatisfied Conservative and Labour supporters, who feel as though they have been cast aside, suggesting that there may be other reasons for UKIP's success. However, this explanation can be thought of in the context of immigration, as there is evidence that the electorate believe traditional parties are not well equipped to tackle the continually rising immigration levels (Evans & Mellon, 2019). The majority of the literature proposes that the success of UKIP relies heavily on the anti-immigration sentiment in the UK, where they were thought to be the most successful at reducing immigration levels, compared to the Conservative and Labour parties (Evans & Mellon, 2019). In Australia, parties also mobilise dissatisfaction with the current government, and perceived threats from immigration (Mughan and Paxton). The electorate's fear of the consequences of immigration is utilised to gain popularity and votes. This is done by identifying behaviours of immigrants, and perpetuating that these will be harmful to society (Mughan & Paxton, 2006). Unlike right-wing populist parties in other nations, UKIP is not a 'catch-all' party (Goodwin, p. 3), they appeal to a specific demographic of voter. They gain support by mobilising the already present divides in society, widening them, and providing a solution for the dissatisfied in their manifesto.

Finally, another prominent theme in the literature is the demographic of UKIP supporters. A common identification of a supporter of UKIP is someone who feels left behind by the current government and society, (Abrams & Travaglini 2018; Sandrin 2020; Goodwin), as mentioned above. These people are typically older, less educated and working class (Goodwin; Fieldhouse, et al., 2019), who used to be the majority in British society, but between the 1960s and 2000s have become the minority, as blue-collar work decreased. As a result, they feel unseen, like their values have been pushed to the side by traditional parties (Goodwin). Those with higher cognitive ability were less likely to support UKIP and vote to leave the EU, as they are less likely to believe false information spread by a political party seeking votes (Baker & Dawson, 2023). Alongside these characteristics, a strong sense of national identity can determine an individual's attitudes towards immigration and UKIP. Those who have stronger feelings of 'Englishness' (McAndrew, et al., 2017, p. 19) are more likely to vote Leave than their Scottish and Welsh counterparts. They may feel it necessary to protect the ingroup benefits that come with being English, for example sovereignty. This behaviour can be explained by 'cultural homogenization' (Sandrin, 2020, p. 231) emerging in the UK as a result of heightened immigration. This homogenization is the product of the introduction of new cultural groups to society and can strengthen national identities as dominant groups may react in defence to this, feeling as though the additional cultures pose a

threat to their own. It may push voters towards parties that promise to fix these problems, for example this is a large part of UKIP's manifesto (Wadsworth, et al., 2016) .

Hypothesis and method

Due to the salience of anti-immigration sentiment in Britain, it is expected that those who voted for UKIP in the 2015 general election will think immigration is the most important issue present in the UK (hypothesis 1). As this is the general election closest to the EU referendum, political opinions were unlikely to have significantly changed, so it can be assumed those who supported UKIP in 2015, also did in 2016. It is important to note that in this statistical analysis, the terms 'UKIP supporter', and 'Brexit supporter' are used interchangeably. I decided this to be a suitable approach as these terms are highly correlated and from the literature, a UKIP supporter will support Brexit, due to the prominence of European independence in the party's manifesto. This is an assumption that allows the most sufficient data to be used and allows for sound conclusions to be made.

Hypothesis 2a concerns immigration attitudes as a variable of interest for explaining referendum voting behaviour. I predict this will be positively correlated with supporting UKIP, due to the salience of immigration as a political issue in the UK, particularly in the lead up to the referendum, which UKIP took advantage of to gain support. Other explanatory variables such as national identity will also be positively correlated, as those with higher feelings of Englishness are characterised as UKIP voters (hypothesis 2b). It will be more likely for an individual to vote Leave if they are working class (hypothesis 2c), and less for those with more education (hypothesis 2d) as these are included in the demographic of typical UKIP supporters. Age will be positively correlated as it is older voters that are expected to support UKIP (hypothesis 2e), as will levels of dissatisfaction with UK democracy as those who feel unsatisfied with traditional parties are more likely to support UKIP and vote to leave the EU (hypotheses 2f). These hypotheses were chosen based off key selected from the literature.

A statistical analysis will be used, with cross-sectional data from the 2015 British Election Survey (BES). I chose to use cross-sectional data, rather than panel data, as I am studying relationships at a specific point in time, rather than over a longer period. This dataset also includes variables that are more relevant to my research question. I believe this to be a suitable dataset as it is the closest election study to the 2016 EU referendum, when UKIP was extremely prevalent in British politics. For this reason, it includes data that is particularly applicable to this study. This data is

representative of Britain, as it includes data from Scotland and Wales, as well as England. This in addition to the large sample size will produce more precise estimates with greater statistical power.

Initially I will analyse which parties those who believe immigration to be the most important issue in Britain are inclined to vote for, providing evidence for hypothesis 1. Then I will move onto hypothesis 2, analysing characteristics and factors that impact an individual's vote choice, using a logistic regression. I use individual's EU referendum vote as a proxy for UKIP support, due to this being the primary value of the party. This proxy allows use of the entire sample size, not restricting findings to exclusively UKIP voters which is a relatively small sample size. I coded 'EU vote' as a dummy variable, equal to one if the respondent voted to Leave the EU and zero if otherwise. Due to the binary nature of the dependent variable and numerical classification of the data set, a logistic regression is possible. The independent variables are selected due to their significance in the literature. I have chosen the variable 'Too many immigrants let into this country,' as the variable of interest, to measure negative opinions towards immigration. It is coded as a dummy variable, equal to one if the respondent answered 'Yes, too many' and zero if otherwise. This is a suitable and straightforward measure of respondents' attitudes towards immigration and adds magnitude to the regression equation, as it indicates the direction of these opinions. I created a dummy variable for social class, equal to one if the respondent is working class, and zero if otherwise. To measure satisfaction with the current government, I used the variable 'Politicians ignore the issues I care about', ideally there would be a more specific measure in the data set, but this is not the case. Age and education levels are also used in the regression.

Findings

Table 1: Most important issue among 2015 general election UKIP voters

Most important issue category	Freq.	Percent
Unemployment	4	2.20
NHS	16	8.79
Immigration	117	64.29
Economy general	14	7.69
Politics-neg	1	0.55
Housing	6	3.30
Poverty, living standards	3	1.65
Services-spending	5	2.75
Social inequalities	1	0.55
Education	1	0.55
Europe	4	2.20
Terrorism	5	2.75
Consumer debt	2	1.10

Pensions	3	1.65
Total	182	100.00

Table 1 contains the most important issue from the restricted dataset of those who voted for UKIP in the 2015 general election. The data provides sufficient evidence for hypothesis 1, showing that 64.29% of those who voted for UKIP think immigration is the most important issue in the UK. This is a much higher percentage than any of the other issues, a finding that is consistent with the literature on UKIP attracting supporters for whom immigration is a particularly salient issue. It also provides sufficient evidence for hypothesis 1. Despite these findings, it does not provide any insight to the magnitude or direction of these feelings towards immigration, they could be either positive or negative. It also does it take any other characteristics into account.

To provide a more nuanced analysis and reach conclusive results, I have run a logistic regression of the unrestricted sample using the same BES data set as above. I regressed the binary variable ‘EU Vote’ on immigration opinion and a number of other characteristics outlined in the hypotheses above.

Table 2: Logistic regression of Brexit Vote on UKIP voter characteristics

Brexit Vote	Coef.	St. Err.	t-value	p-value	[95% Conf	Interval]	Sig
Immigration opinion	1.709	.189	9.06	0	1.339	2.078	***
Age	.009	.004	2.35	.019	.001	.016	**
Social class	.325	.151	2.16	.031	.03	.62	**
Englishness	.328	.061	5.38	0	.208	.447	***
Education	-.067	.016	-4.14	0	-.098	-.035	***
Dissatisfaction	.301	.061	4.91	0	.181	.421	***
Constant	-3.698	.459	-8.05	0	-4.597	-2.798	***
Mean dependent var	0.401		SD dependent var		0.490		
Pseudo r-squared	0.176		Number of obs		1273		
Chi-square	301.736		Prob > chi2		0.000		
Akaike crit. (AIC)	1426.398		Bayesian crit. (BIC)		1462.442		

*** $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, * $p < .1$

The results from the regression are shown in **table 2**. As it can be seen from the coefficient, the effect of negative immigration opinions on Brexit vote is large and statistically significant. This finding is consistent with hypothesis 2a, in which I predicted that the effect would be positive and act as a strong predictor of vote choice. From the variables included in the regression, it appears to be the most sufficient predictor of Brexit Vote choice, further providing evidence for the hypothesis. Englishness as an indicator of national identity is positively correlated with the dependent variable and significantly significant, as is social class, suggesting that those who are

working class and have a strong sense of national identity, especially Englishness, are good indicators of an individual's Brexit preference. Education appears to negatively affect vote choice, consistent with the literature that those with more education are less likely to support UKIP and support leaving the EU. The coefficient on Age is small but statistically significant at the 5% level, suggesting those who are older are more likely to support UKIP. Finally, the dissatisfaction coefficient is positive and significant, this finding corroborates the literature on UKIP being supported by and targeting those who feel dissatisfied with the current government and not sufficiently represented by traditional parties.

Conclusion

The findings from this research paper show that the rise in right wing populism in the United Kingdom, in the form of support for the Brexit campaign, can be attributed to anti-immigration sentiment, along with other characteristics that are prominent in the literature. Expanding on the impact of a perceived threat and social identity theory, this study provides further insight into the qualities of a UKIP supporter, Euroscepticism and other demographic disparities that are present in the UK. This result provides policymakers with more nuance, allowing them to make more effective and informed decisions regarding UK immigration policy.

Despite the significant findings that support my hypotheses, there are limits within this study. Primarily, the regression analysis contained only 1,273 observations, which is not particularly representative of the UK population and could reduce the statistical power of the findings. Improvements could be made by using a larger dataset, which would reduce the chance of bias and lead to more robust results. Using the terms 'Brexit supporter' and 'UKIP supporter' interchangeably is another possible weakness of the study, as not all those who voted Leave support UKIP. This could lead to results that are not accurate. With a larger sample size and more nuanced variables, this issue could be fixed.

The findings from this study could be developed further by exploring how intersections between characteristics, such as race and gender, impact Brexit opinions. There could also be further research conducted on the impact of the media on national elections, looking further into how political parties appeal to these demographics through different strategies.

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