Defeat of the People's Army? The 2015 British general election and the UK Independence Party (UKIP)

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ABSTRACT

The 2015 general election in Britain saw a major attempt by a relatively new party - the UK Independence Party (UKIP)- to secure elected representation. While UKIP received nearly four million votes, the party left the 2015 general election with just one Member of Parliament. Our evidence, drawn from analysis of British Election survey data and in-depth qualitative interviews with activists, suggests that UKIP's campaign was a major factor in its inability to translate widespread support into elected representation. While the party pursued a targeted campaign, this had only a modest impact on its own vote. UKIP's lack of resources, inexperience and inability to operationalize highly effective, targeted local campaigns severely hamstrung the party and prevented it from converting support into MPs at Westminster.

1. Introduction

One of the enduring realities of political life in a single member plurality system is that third parties are highly susceptible to being 'squeezed' by established parties (Duverger, 1964; Butler, 1963; Lijphart, 1984; Riker, 1982). Under such a system, challenger parties often only make incremental progress by exploiting context specific factors and favourable electoral situations (Curtice and Steed, 1982). As past research on British politics has shown, a key part of this progression is often to target resources efficiently to avoid a geographical spread of electoral support and limit the number of wasted votes. This is often achieved by establishing recognition and perceptions of electoral credibility at the local level, through concerted and continuous activism (Cutts, 2006, 2014). The rise of the Liberal Democrats, prior to the party joining a governing coalition after the 2010 general election, demonstrates how a highly targeted and focussed campaign strategy can offset perceptions of a 'credibility gap', providing third parties with a platform for electoral success (Russell and Fieldhouse, 2005; Fieldhouse and Cutts, 2009a,b; Whiteley et al., 2006).

Following the 2010 general election, however, the Liberal Democrats experienced a substantial decline in support. During the first seven months of coalition government, their average level of support in opinion polls slumped from 23 per cent to 8 per cent (Cutts and Russell, 2015). By the spring of 2013, the third party mantle in England and Wales was assumed by the UK Independence Party (UKIP). Led by Nigel Farage, who framed his revolt as a 'People's Army', the populist radical right party was soon the third most popular party in the polls and then won the 2014 European Parliament elections, polling 27.5 per cent of the vote. Shortly afterwards, UKIP attracted two defecting Conservative Party MPs who at parliamentary by-elections in Clacton and Rochester and Strood were subsequently re-elected as UKIP MPs. Ahead of the 2015 general election, UKIP specifically sought to emulate the intensive campaign model of the Liberal Democrats, predicting that a targeted seat campaign would help it secure at least forty seats in the House of Commons.

UKIP's electoral performance at the 2015 general election was certainly impressive. The party won more than 3.8 million votes or 12.8 per cent of the vote. It polled at least 10 per cent of the vote in 450 seats and over 30 per cent in eight of them, delivering the most impressive result for an independent new party since the rise of the Labour Party in the 1920s. However, in terms of elected representation, UKIP's campaign was a failure. While UKIP finished second

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in 120 constituencies— 114 of which were in England— the party left the general election with just one MP, representing the constituency of Clacton in Essex that had already been won at a parliamentary by-election during the autumn of 2014.[1] How effective, then, was this election campaign and might it help to explain UKIP's lack of success at the 2015 general election?

In this article, we analyse data from the 2015 British Election Study (BES) alongside in-depth qualitative interviews with UKIP activists to explore the effects of UKIP's campaign. We argue that, shaped by its origins as a non-electoral pressure group, UKIP's campaign was consistently undermined by a lack of resource, professionalism and experience. Though Farage would prove to be an electoral asset, his party's supply-side weaknesses restricted its ability to convert sympathizers in the face of the other parties' more professional and intensive campaigns. Our data reveal two key findings that support this assertion. First, when we compare patterns campaign contact across parties, we find that, with the exception of its primary target seats, UKIP's campaign contact was both less frequently and less nuanced than the campaign efforts of its primary competitors. Second, we find that UKIP's campaign contact was less likely to translate in to support for the party. Taken together, these two findings support the idea that UKIP's campaign weakness undermined the party's electoral success in 2015. Consequently, UKIP was unable to capitalize fully on earlier gains at second-order local and European Parliament elections. In our conclusions, we re-state the importance of intensive local campaigning for third parties in majoritarian systems and stress how activism is similarly vital for radical right parties if they are to breakthrough ceiling effects and convert potential support into votes at the ballot box, and ultimately seats in Parliament.

2. Campaigns and electoral support

For more than thirty years, the literature on party campaigns has been awash with studies that refute the claim that local campaigns yield only negligible effects on electoral performance (Butler and Kavanagh, 1992, 1997). There is now a large body of research that shows how campaigns can assume a decisive role in affecting electoral outcomes. The more effort that is expended on an election campaign the greater the electoral return (Pattie and Johnston, 2009; Fieldhouse and Cutts, 2009a,b; Fisher and Denver, 2008). While campaigning techniques for the targeting of voters have become more sophisticated (Johnston et al., 2012; Fisher et al., 2011a,b), traditional offline methods such as doorstep canvassing, leafleting and holding public meetings remain central to party efforts to socialise and mobilise voters. The changing nature of constituency campaigns is most evident in the way in which they are increasingly coordinated from the centre, often in collaboration with the local party (Fisher and Denver, 2008; Fisher et al., 2011a,b). Rather than restrict this activity to the immediate campaign period of an election, local parties, especially in marginal constituencies, are often active locally in the four to six month period before the official campaign begins (Johnston et al., 2012). Some are active throughout the entire electoral cycle in a quest to establish and maintain support until polling day (Cutts, 2006; Cutts et al., 2012). Intensive local campaigns have also been shown to produce broader 'spillover effects' (Cutts and Webber, 2010) and to be more effective depending on whether a party has relied more on personalised methods to contact voters than impersonal tools. In summary, parties have become more professional and rational in

how they target resources to achieve maximum electoral returns.

These effects underscore the importance of campaigns for third and challenger parties, especially those that have to overcome the psychological and mechanical hurdles that exist in a simple plurality system (Duverger, 1964; Norris, 1997). Such parties are especially dependent on campaigns to cultivate the concentrated support that is required to overcome first-past-the-post, establish a profile and personal vote for their lesser known candidates, and sustain contact with voters that is required to project an image of electoral credibility (Russell and Fieldhouse, 2005; Cutts, 2014). Grassroots campaigns also help to recruit local activists, strengthening party infrastructure and enabling parties to target their local resources more effectively. For these reasons, campaigns are also especially important for radical right parties that are often stigmatized in society and have to overcome entrenched social norms that discourage citizens from supporting parties that are associated with racism or xenophobia (Blinder et al., 2013; Klandermans and Mayer, 2005). Forging and sustaining close relations with voters could help more ideologically radical parties counter these effects, extending their appeal beyond political protestors. Yet while such observations underscore the importance of a targeted and intensive strategy that identifies and mobilizes sympathizers while avoiding supporters of other parties, there is also a noticeable lack of research on the effects of smaller and radical right party campaigns at national elections.

3. Electoral context of the 2015 British general election

The 2015 general election was held after five years of coalition government, a period that also saw a rapid decline in public support for the Liberal Democrats, the junior coalition partner. The general election, widely predicted to produce another hung parliament, was also held amid an issue agenda that was favourable to the insurgent radical right UKIP. Like other populist radical right parties (Rydgren, 2012), UKIP attracted rising support from working-class or self-employed white men who had few qualifications and felt intensely anxious about immigration, disapproved of Britain's EU membership and felt dissatisfied with established parties (Ford and Goodwin, 2014; Ford and Goodwin, 2015). Its support was strongest in more economically deprived and predominantly white communities in Eastern England where average levels of education are low (see Fig. 1). Rising levels of net migration into Britain combined with the failure of David Cameron's Conservative government to fulfil its pledge of reducing annual net migration to the 'tens of thousands', and a lingering financial crisis, put the economy and immigration as the two most salient issues.[2]

Aiming to build on its past success at second-order local and European Parliament elections, and the capture of two parliamentary constituencies in the autumn of 2014, UKIP announced that at the 2015 general election it would adopt a target seat strategy. Internally the party had decided to concentrate its scarce resources in thirty-two 'key seats'. The target strategy was influenced by the Liberal Democrats, although unlike the traditional third party UKIP had originated as a non-electoral pressure group. In path dependent fashion, UKIP's origins meant that the party had little experience of electoral politics, constituency campaigns or success in a majoritarian system. Between its formation in 1993 and 2010 the party had focused almost exclusively on second-order European Parliament elections, never polling above 3.1 per cent of the national vote at general elections. During the same period, UKIP contested thirty-five parliamentary by-elections but averaged only

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[1] UKIP finished second in 120 seats, 76 of which were won by the Conservative Party and 44 by the Labour Party. 114 of these seats were in England and six were in Wales.

[2] In the Ipsos-MORI Issues Tracker, for example, immigration was consistently ranked as the second most important issue among voters in January—May 2015.