

# The political opportunity space has widened since David Cameron set out to ‘detoxify’ the Tories, aiding the rise of UKIP

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*A theoretical model formulated by **Renee Buhr** examines the opportunity space provided to extremist parties in gaining votes. In 2005, The Conservative Party’s decision to back away from a stridently anti-integration and right-wing position may have opened a space for UKIP to exploit, and the party has done so successfully. Does this mean that the Conservative Party needs to move rightward to stem UKIP’s rise? It is a question with no simple answer, but at least the UK’s electoral system prevents parties on the far end of the political spectrum from gaining national-level legislative office.*



In [an article published in 2012](#) in *Government and Opposition*, I examined the linkages between increased public animosity toward the EU integration project and the increase in voting for anti-integration parties – particularly those classified as radical right and far left – in national-level legislative elections in EU member states from 1992-2005. I found that in many cases extremist parties benefited electorally from opposition to deeper integration, but that their pathway to success depended upon an opening in the political opportunity space.

Where voters became more Eurosceptic, and mainstream parties converged on a pro-integration consensus, extremist parties stood to gain some votes. However, where mainstream parties diverged – where at least one mainstream party took an anti-integration position – extremist parties were unlikely to see any gains. In the paper, these conditions – based on arguments found in the literature on Euroscepticism and radical right party performance such as David Art’s [Inside the Radical Right](#) and Cas Mudde’s [Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe](#) – were incorporated into a holistic theoretical model and tested against the electoral results of fourteen EU member states. The United Kingdom provided some of the most interesting results, particularly in terms of the positions on integration adopted by the mainstream parties and the dynamics between two avowedly Eurosceptic parties: one a radical right party (the British National Party) and one a single-issue Eurosceptic party (the United Kingdom Independence Party.)



Taking advantage of the opening in the political opportunity space

In the years 1992-2005, the United Kingdom was a “textbook” case of an occupied opportunity space. The high level

of Euroscepticism in the UK – evident in *Eurobarometer* survey results and particularly high in the 2001 elections – would be a boon to a political party with an anti-integration message. However, the anti-integration BNP and UKIP gained little ground given the Conservatives’ control of the right-wing and anti-integration space. The Conservatives maintained a staunchly Eurosceptic position during these years. In 1997 and 2001 the party even flirted with some issues usually “owned” by the radical right. The Conservative manifestos in these years adopted strident anti-integration language (one referred to the Amsterdam IGC as an attempt to form a European “superstate”) and included chapters discussing immigration and asylum issues in a distinctly negative light.

Thinking as a rational voter, one can see why a voter who placed themselves toward the far-right and anti-integration position would choose to vote for a mainstream right party that comes close to their preferences and has a real chance of winning. The alternative was to vote for a radical right party or single-issue party with no opportunity to win (at least in terms of seats in Parliament) in a forbidding first-past-the-post electoral system. Why “waste” your vote?

The political opportunity space has changed a bit since 2005, however. Under David Cameron’s leadership the Conservative Party shifted away somewhat from the far right in its rhetoric regarding immigration and Euroscepticism. The 2005 Conservative party manifesto made it clear that the UK would engage with the EU on its own terms, but the tone of the manifesto was less contentious and references to immigration and asylum seekers took a more moderate tone. The 2010 Conservative Party manifesto backs off even more on the EU and immigration, instead choosing to focus on the Labour government and government bureaucrats as the source of social and economic ills in Britain.

This change in the political opportunity space muddies the waters regarding UKIP’s electoral potential. In the years covered in the research project, UKIP’s electoral performance was lackluster but demonstrated steady if small gains (0.3% of the national vote in 1997, 1.5% in 2001, and 2.2% in 2005.) In the 2010 election UKIP continued this trend, gaining 3.1% of the national legislative vote. The slow uptick in UKIP’s vote share has brought more attention to the party and the party’s fourth-place finish in 2010 has been trumpeted by party leaders as evidence that the party is on the rise.

The gains made by UKIP may be attributable to some causes explained in the theoretical model. The Conservative Party’s decision to back away from a stridently anti-integration and right-wing position may have opened a space for UKIP to exploit. It could be that for 3.1% of British voters, the Tories have simply moved too far away from their preferred positions on integration and the right side of the political spectrum.

However, it appears that there is something more at play here than simply the correct positioning in the anti-integration and right-wing space; if that was all that mattered, then it would be hard to explain why UKIP has gained more than the BNP. Two explanations may be useful here. The first is that UKIP has adopted a broader “package” of anti-integration policies that includes unemployment, housing, and social services issues and links them to integration. This package has proven successful for radical right parties on the continent, while a more limited single-issue appeal that speaks only to the EU directly is often less successful. In short, UKIP adopted a comprehensive policy package that has elsewhere proven effective.

UKIP’s efforts to avoid a “racist” label may also explain some of their success relative to the BNP. Right-wing parties with “culturalist” appeals often outperform classically racist ones. Culturalist appeals, while ethno-nationalist in nature, are expressed in terms of incompatibility of the national culture with the culture of immigrants and are sometimes viewed as more socially acceptable than openly racist ones. (For some discussion on the racist/culturalist distinction, see [here](#).) UKIP’s 2010 manifesto and current web content on immigration appear to demonstrate some “culturalist” tendencies. The BNP on the other hand has earned a reputation as a classically racist party, particularly during the leadership of John Tyndall. Under Tyndall the party’s constitution and manifestos were openly in favor of preferential treatment for those the party deemed ethnically British (defined as the “indigenous Caucasian” population in party documents) and inequality and/or expulsion of those deemed non-European. The BNP’s racist reputation has followed it since. Thus, the voter who is displeased with the center-ward

move of the Conservative Party may be reluctant to vote for a party deemed racist, but may find UKIP to be an acceptable choice.

Does this mean that the Conservative Party needs to move rightward? Recent reporting on the efforts of those labeled Tory “rebels” seems to indicate that the Conservative party is wrestling internally with this very question.

The theoretical model indicates that in these matters, the mainstream parties have the upper hand. If the Conservatives are genuinely worried at the loss of 3.1% of the national vote, then a move rightward and toward a more explicitly anti-integration position may be useful. However, one must also take a step back and consider: how much should the Conservatives concern themselves with 3.1% of the vote? How seriously should we take Farage’s assertions regarding UKIP’s ascendance? How many centrist voters are the Conservatives willing and able to lose, if it comes to that?

This is the difficulty with taking the theoretical model to its logical conclusion; it is one thing to argue that a closed opportunity space works against extremist parties, but another entirely to argue that mainstream parties should embrace extremist positions in order to hold that portion of the electorate. It is a question with no simple answer, but at least for now the British electoral system prevents parties on the far end of the political spectrum, whether UKIP or BNP, from gaining national-level legislative office and this affords the mainstream parties with some room to iron out their internal policy differences.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting. Image credit: Euro Realist Newsletter CC BY 2.0.*

### **About the Author**

**Renee Buhr** is an Assistant Professor of Political Science and the Director of International Studies at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota. Her research interests include nationalism and the impact of European Union integration on national identity and political party performance. She has published papers in these areas of interest in *Government and Opposition*, *Nationalities Papers* and the *Journal of Baltic Studies* and is co-editor of a forthcoming monograph from Vyttautas Magnus University Press.

