The Influence of Right Wing Politics in Britain During the 2009 European Elections

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KRITI BAMI, MAY 15 2012

The European elections of 2009 showed the outcome of a significant increase of right wing politics throughout Europe. This paper will argue that this increase was a consequence of both contextual political factors and contextual social factors which led to a loss of British identity. Recognising that there was an overall shift across Europe to parties on the right of the political spectrum, this paper will go on to focus on the United Kingdom and factors underlining the rise of the United Kingdom Independence Party and the British National Party within the 2009 European elections, notably the lack of British identity and anti-immigration stances, and Euroscepticism amongst the public. Most importantly, however, the context surrounding the European elections of 2009 was one of economic discontent and political scandals in the forms of the ongoing recessions and the expenses crisis, and the major driving force behind increased voting for right wing parties was a discontent with the mainstream parties, including the ruling Labour party. It will also be noted that although these are all valid factors for the rise of right wing politics within the UK, only 35 percent of the eligible public chose to exercise the right to vote, and therefore the aspect of political apathy is also an imperative reason as to the perceived increase of support for the right.

Traditional theories for why extreme right wing parties do well in elections vary. A strong emphasis is placed on the role that ideological affinities with extreme right policies has as a predictor of support for the parties (Van der Brug 2003, Eatwell 1998, Van der Brug et al 2005). These indicators include factors such as hostile attitudes towards immigration, racism, Euroscepticism and homophobia. Whilst this goes some way to explaining why people vote for extreme right policies, it does not explain why after the 2009 elections there was an increase in the number of seats held by these parties in the European Parliament. Voting for the extreme right has also been identified as being a by-product of the dissatisfaction of citizens with the mainstream parties of the time, and unhappiness with the political system on a more general level (Lubbers et al, 2002). Thus, support for these parties also has its basis in the highlighting of deficiencies within the mainstream parties and institutions of the time, rather than a necessary attraction of the parties' policies (Van der Brug et al, 2005: 541). This stems from political reasons as there is a general level of distrust and dissatisfaction with the major parties (Lubbers et al 2002, Van der Eijk et al 1996). Social unrest at the times of the elections, and contextual issues, are also at work, however, when explaining the rise of these parties, particularly within the United Kingdom.

Contextual European issues surrounding the 2009 elections

The European Parliament is one of the world's most powerful legislative bodies and is directly elected by citizens. The Parliament has the power to reject, amend and veto legislation in an area which is larger than the Unites States of America and is comprised of a number of individual member states each with their own national sovereignty. Giving power to a body which is directly elected was considered as a way of curing the democratic deficit or the perceived inability of European citizens to influence European decision making (Lindseth, 1999: 673). In reality, however, commentators have argued that European elections are merely a way of the public expressing their opinion of the local government, with national politics being the basis of voting for MEPs (Hix, 2008: 82, Marsh, 1999: 606). European Parliament elections are, therefore, almost a referendum on a country's domestic government, and stronger signs of this are shown in countries which have a history of alternating government (Schleicher, YEAR: 128) European elections provide European citizens with the opportunity to vote in a more Eurosceptic manner than their

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ruling government's party if their preferences lie that way (Clarks and Rohrschneider 2009, Hobalt et al 2009). After World War Two, citizens within the European Union were seen as having a "permitting consensus" towards the Union (Inglehart, 1971: 169) and there were no strong opinions towards it. However, in recent years, Europeans have become more Eurosceptic and are willing to align themselves with parties that follow this view in order to criticise their government's support of the institution.

In reality, European elections are not seen as an important part in most countries' political domain, and in 2009, with substantial doubt around whether there was a future for EU institutional reform and in the middle of an economic downturn, it is clear that the elections were not on most voters immediate agenda. Turn-out hit an all time low, with a mere 43% of the European electorate exercising their voting rights (European Election Results, 2009, online), and even this is inflated as it includes statistics from countries such as Belgium which implements mandatory voting, as well as countries in which local elections were held simultaneously. Additionally, it appears that political leaders in Europe were not taking the European elections seriously, and in many countries, featured candidates ranged from unexceptional party politicians to national celebrities (Charlemagne, 2009) candidates included a House Of Savoy prince, a talk show host from Lithuania, a racing car driver from Finland and Rome's answer to Paris Hilton (Totaro, 2009, online). In Italy, Berlusconi's selection of candidates for the People of Liberty party ranged from a beauty pageant winner to a former reality television star.

To explain the discrepancy between the perceived importance of European elections and their actual importance, European elections have been analysed as being "Second Order", meaning that they are viewed as less important than first-order elections by voters, parties and the media (Reif and Schmitt, 1980: 2). National elections have been seen as the main priority, and they are considered to be "first-order"; local elections, regional elections and European elections are seen as being "second-order". Characteristics often exhibited by second order elections include a low turn-out, a tendency for voters to vote for protest and periphery parties and a lower number of votes for mainstream parties in the national elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980: 21) Empirical evidence had been seen prior to 2009 to determine that they were all second order elections, and the 2009 election also exhibited these characteristics. Thus, European elections have always been seen as a way of punishing or rewarding the current governing parties. The context surrounding the 2009 election, was one in which the electorate were disdained with the current leaders, and thus the rise of the right can be attributed in part to this political phenomenon.

Other contextual issues at play surrounding these elections were the recessions of the late 2000s. These signalled the most severe economic downturn in a generation, with the credit crunch proving to be at its most serious since the 1920s. There was also a threat looming for a crisis of capitalism (Hayton, 2010, p27), and it is this threat as well as political scandals that dominated headlines around the time of the 2009 European elections. The United Kingdom was particularly hit by the economic recessions of the late 2000s, and at the same time, there was the expenses scandal, where MPs were seen to be using their expenses allowance to fund personal purchases. The news agenda within the UK around the time of the European elections was dominated by these two major issues, and there was widespread expectations that the ruling Labour party would suffer a backlash as voters being disgruntled and disillusioned (Hayton, 2010: 27). In Italy, the Prime Minister's extramarital affairs and problems with corruption were the issues surrounding the election campaigns (The New EP, 2009, online) and European issues were barely noted in comparison to domestic issues in a number of European countries (van Kessel, 2009, online).

With this bizarre mix of social and political factors across Europe shaping the context of the 2009 elections, it is with little wonder that the lack of interest and low turnouts at the elections led the way for nationalistic, xenophobic and strange fringes of politics within Europe to win seats. A broad shift to the right was seen within Europe, and it is with particular focus that this paper will go on to discuss the United Kingdom, and the ways in which the public electorate voted in a way that favoured parties with a Eurosceptic agenda. Noting the low turnout of 35 percent of the UK voting public (Hix, 2008: 80) it is clear that this swing was not necessarily indicative of the general UK population. However, further analysis will take place merely with reference to the voting population.

The 2009 elections in the UK in context

The 2009 European elections saw the rise of right wing parties in most European states. In Britain, there was a

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notable change in numbers of seats for right wing parties as demonstrated by table 1. Noteworthy outcomes from this election included the substantial drop in seats for the Labour party, who were the ruling domestic party at the time of the election and the rise of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) who finished in second place in a major election for the first time in British history. Additionally, this was the first time that a party holding government within the UK (Labour) had received more votes in a national election than a party which held

Table 1

Party Number of seats won in 2004 election Number of seats won in 2009 election Change in number of seats Conservatives 27 26 -1 UKIP 12 13 +1 Labour 19 13 -6 Liberal Democrats 12 11 -1 Green 2 2 0 BNP 0 2 +2

(Source: European Election Results, European Parliament, 2009)

no seats within the House of Commons (UKIP). Other important changes demonstrated by this election include the rise of the BNP, who won two seats in the 2009 European elections, and the rise of the Scottish National Party (SNP), who were the winners of the largest share of the votes in the European election in Scotland, at an election which saw the first Labour loss in Wales since 1918.

A major reason that Britain saw this increase of parties sitting to the right of centre is that throughout the start of the twenty-first century, there has been a diminishing idea of the sense of Britishness, with there no longer being a clear idea about who the British are, where they are or what they are. With the demise of Britain as a great power in the world and shifting world power trends, the British identity has been tarnished. This identity crisis is a social phenomenon, although the uprising of discontent within British society has been as a result of political factors. Wright and Gamble (2000) discuss the idea that the traditional support systems which define Britishness have been weakened, and polls show that most people think that in fifty years time, the monarchy will no longer exist. This has clear consequences for the idea of Britishness, which need to be reflected when voting in European elections. Right wing politics has a tendency to stress the importance of national identity, and voting to regain a sense of Britishness is one of the reasons that there has been a shift towards such politics within the UK. As will be shown, in the 2009 elections, this was an important psyche that right wing parties were able to use to generate support amongst the voting public.

Globalising trends, coupled with the supranational nature of European institutions and the impact of increased immigration have led to the fading of class politics (Wright and Gamble, 2000:2), an idea which traditionally dominated British politics. As a result, a discrepancy between traditional voting patterns and the blurring of British class politics has meant that working classes now no longer associate themselves with leftist parties, and feel no necessary political allegiance to them that stems from the sense of being a British working class member. As will now be demonstrated, there is empirical evidence to show swings towards the right, particularly within the working class of the UK.

The rise of United Kingdom Independence Party and the British National Party

Without any MPs sitting in the House of Commons, both UKIP and the BNP were able to avoid the expenses scandal that were rife at the time of the 2009 elections, as well as being able to avoid taking responsibility for the state of the economy. Both parties have an anti-European stance, and UKIP argues that the EU is "a political project designed to take control of all the main functions of national governments" (UKIP, 2005: 1) and that the institution is one which stands in the way of a dynamic economy, economic prosperity, "proper democracy", and removes the sense of national identities and belonging (UKIP, 2005: 12). The BNP also took a Eurosceptic stance, and called for a complete withdrawal from the EU, as it will "bring about the eventual liquidation of Britain as a nation and a people." (BNP, 2005: 5) Tapping into the aforementioned growing social belief that there is no longer a sense of British identity, UKIP and the BNP were able to attract voters through aligning the EU with this psyche. Niger Farage, leader of UKIP, stated empirically that his party's performance at the 2004 European elections, which saw substantial increases in the UKIP vote, was no coincidence, and had the 2009 campaign focussed more on its Eurosceptic stance, rather than domestic political issues, it would have done even better (BBC News, 2009). Empirically,

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however, the number of aggregate UKIP voters fell, and a higher share of votes was only noted at the 2009 elections due to the lower voter turnout (Hayton, 2010: 30). Thus, political apathy is a clear reason that the party performed better at this election. UKIP and the BNP also took the stance of framing the economic crises of the late 2000s as a failure of the current political establishment, and used the dire economic situations to sway voters towards the right wing vote. Historically, at times of recession, the right has a tendency to do better than the left, and this was reflected across Europe as centre left parties suffered at the hands of the right and centre right.

A YouGov poll taken around the time of the 2009 election sought to compile data about voter demographics and key issue concerns surrounding the election, in order to determine who votes for different parties and the reasons behind their cote. Taken from an internet survey a week before the elections, a much larger sample size was able to be taken (Hill et al, 2007) and create a nationally representative result of adults who had eligibility to vote at the time (Moore, 2009, online). The data was weighted in order to fit the profiles of those eligible to vote within the UK, and was adjusted to include those without internet access, as well as classing people into categories of age, gender, social class, region, party identity and preferred newspaper. The poll identified 965 supporters of the BNP out of a possible 32, 368 respondents (Moore, 2009, online), which translates into a 2.98% of the electorate supporting the party, which is the highest sample of BNP voters to have ever been recognised in an investigation of this kind.

According to this data, support in particular for the BNP is drawn from males, the working class, those who do not feel secure in their finances, and those living in more industrial regions of England. Additionally, BNP voters are less likely to work in the public sector. (YouGov, 2009, online) The poll identifies that support is drawn from those who are traditionally Labour supporters, and almost half of BNP voters claimed in the data that the house that they had grown up in identified with Labour. (YouGov, 2009, online) The social phenomenon discussed earlier regarding globalisation and an inability for parties to identify with a particular class has empirically fed into the idea that these social groups are able to defect from voting for the parties that they traditionally identify with. Additionally, the idea that Labour was the ruling party at the time of these elections, and these voters still felt that they were not financially secure, potentially drove their desire to defect against Labour in this election. BNP voters were also found to be more likely to be politically active than other voters (YouGov, 2009, online), and coupled with the fact that there was widespread political apathy across the United Kingdom at the time of election, the effects of support for the party were also inflated because of this. Here, it is not clear exactly which of these reasons has a more powerful effect on the voting public, but it is evident that a mixture of social degeneration and political dissatisfaction are at play.

The BNP and UKIP at these elections were able to move beyond the racist support that is traditionally the basis of their vote, and have been able to mobilise a broader constituency of people who are both anti-immigration and anti-establishmentarian (Cuts et all, 2011: 419). Within the manifesto of the BNP which was put forward to the elections in 2009, however, there were clear indicative comments which highlighted the fact that at its core, the BNP still had underlying aspects of racism. Classical racism of this sort has become more socially unacceptable within mainstream Britain, and particularly in British politics, and popular support for this discrimination is rapidly declining, in particular amongst the younger generations who have grown up in an ethnically diverse society, which exhibits lower levels of racial prejudice (Ford, 2008: 610). This shows that in the future, the BNP are unlikely to be able to expand, and their support base will remain with the older generations as was discovered by the YouGov reports outlined above. Thus, the success of 2009 must have been the external factors that influenced these particular elections, and this can highlight political apathy, political disillusionment and an unclear notion of Britishness as the key issues behind their electoral success.

Conclusions

The data shows that in the 2009 elections, there was a significant increase in support for parties that identify with being on the right of centre in the United Kingdom; particular increases in support were shown for the United Kingdom Independence Party and the British National Party, both of whom follow a Eurosceptic ideology and call for the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union. It has been shown that previously, European elections have been described as "second-order", not being as important as national elections, and that the voting public often use European elections to make a political comment on the governing party of the time. Economic turmoil and the expenses scandal surrounding the 2009 elections were in part the reason why there was an increase in the

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number of seats won by right wing parties, as the public were showing their disdain and dissatisfaction with the major political parties. Furthermore, the social phenomenon that saw Britain losing its sense of identity around the time of the election, due to globalising trends, was able to be used by parties on the right. UKIP and the BNP both took the platform that the European Union was to blame for the lack of social cohesion within the United Kingdom, and thus were able to use social trends in order to gain political favour. Despite there being a mix of social and political factors attributing to the increase of seats gained by right wing parties in the 2009 elections, voter turnout was significantly low. This political apathy is one of the major reasons of the success of these parties, as statistically their voters are more politically active, and therefore, the 35% voter turnout seen in the United Kingdom distorted the results to show an unprecedented favour of this political agenda, which is probably the major reason that contributes to the increase in proportion of votes given to parties on the right.

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