

Why do Tories Defect to UKIP? A Research Note

The rise of the populist radical right throughout Europe continues to preoccupy political scientists, journalists and politicians (see Bale, 2012 and Mudde, 2013 for recent reviews of the literature and see Rooduijn et al., 2012 for a stimulating recent contribution). The strength and significance of populist radical right parties may be rising across Europe as the result of what some see as an inevitable shift to ‘cultural’ as opposed to ‘class’ voting (Kriesi et al., 2008; see also Van der Brug and van Spanje, 2009 and Rydgren, 2012) but it varies considerably between countries, depending on both supply-side and demand-side conditions (see Mudde, 2007 and Norris, 2005). However, where they become a big presence, such parties present a threat to ‘mainstream’, often older parties: they compete with them for votes, while the need to respond to that threat potentially promotes both inter-party conflict and intra-party strife as policy is adjusted in response to the populist fringe.

Recent academic work, as well as elections and survey research, now suggests that Great Britain, and especially England, is by no means immune to this phenomenon, with the rise of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) ensuring that, at least for the moment, the centre-right Conservative Party – one of the world’s oldest and most successful political formations – is (or at least feels itself to be) under pressure (see, for example, Ford, Goodwin and Cutts, 2012, and Lynch, Whitaker and Loomes, 2012). As things stand, that pressure is more indirect than **in**direct, in the sense that UKIP is not so much likely to actually take seats from the Conservatives as cause them instead to lose them to Labour or the Liberal Democrats by attracting voters who would, in the absence of what they consider a credible populist radical right candidate, probably have voted Tory. However, given how close the next

general election looks likely to be, that indirect effect could mean the difference between staying in government and ending up back in opposition, particularly if UKIP manages, as many predict it will, to, say, double the 3.1% vote share it achieved in 2010.

There are several reasons why, more generally, the radical right poses particular problems for centre-right parties [right across Europe](#). The latter often have close ties to a business sector that favours relatively open borders, as well as, in the case of Christian Democrats, ties to religiously-motivated institutions which favour a charitable approach to newcomers. Unless they are willing to cut these ties, centre-right parties inevitably find it difficult to offer more than a watered-down version of the restrictive, nationalist and culturally-conservative policies which many of their voters naturally prefer (see Bale, 2008) and which they, too, seem to favour when in government (Akkerman, 2012). –Centre-right parties also have to worry about alienating the more liberal, well-educated and well-heeled middle class component of their electoral coalition. –Potentially, these limitations on their ability to deliver measures truly ‘blue in tooth and claw’ could be damaging to their electoral prospects. They may, for example, constrain their potential appeal to less prosperous and less well-educated people who might otherwise be tempted away from the centre left by culturally conservative and nationalist policies (Rydgren, 2007). Just as importantly, and perhaps more even so, those who normally vote for the mainstream centre-right – especially those alienated by rapid social [and cultural rather than simply economic](#) change – might be tempted to join other voters [\(many of them the kind of ‘left authoritarians’ who in times past might have swollen the ranks of social democratic and labour parties\)](#) in ‘defecting’ to the populist radical right (see Van der Brug et al.,

2005, [Rydgren, 2012](#))—and, for the UK specifically, see John and Margetts, 2009). Even if those who defect do so initially only to register a protest vote, a sizeable proportion of these lost sheep may never return to the fold.

Centre-right parties, then, traditionally manage to make a convincing (and historically electorally fruitful) cross-class, traditional, authoritarian, and nationalist appeal, but – theoretically at least – they are electorally vulnerable to the populist radical right in the sense that the ideological gap between ‘their’ voters and the latter is already small. It is also a gap over which those voters may be sorely tempted to leap should they begin to suspect that ‘their’ party is softening its stance, possibly in order to get into government or as the result of the compromises that governing itself makes inevitable. And they may be all the more likely to take that leap if they can vote for populist radical right party that is not ‘toxic’ in the sense of being seen – normally because of its racist past and its association with a violent, neo-nazi sub-culture – as ~~within rather than~~ beyond the pale by ‘respectable’ people.

All the above applies to the British Conservative Party and UKIP, which is why we choose it for this brief case study. However, rather than explore the potential and the reasons for defection from the Conservatives to UKIP from the perspective of ‘ordinary voters’, as other scholars have [done](#) and will continue to do ~~so~~ (see Ford and Goodwin, 2014), we have chosen to make our short case study even more critical by focusing on Conservative Party *members*. On the one hand, one ~~could~~[might](#) argue that they might be ideologically more inclined to UKIP than Conservative *voters* since, at least according to common wisdom, they are more ‘right-wing’ (May 1973). On the other, we (and their leaders) might expect their loyalty to their party to mean

they are more immune than others of like-mind to the charms of the populist radical right. If it turns out that this is not the case – in other words, that a significant minority of them could be persuaded to vote for UKIP – then the Conservatives really do need to start worrying: put bluntly, if they can't even keep hold of the most loyal of the loyal how can they expect to keep hold of even more volatile, far less tribal, Tories out there in the electorate?

Furthermore, if it transpires that a significant proportion of grassroots Tories might be tempted to vote for, if not actually to join, another party, this would also have considerable comparative implications. For one thing, as we have already suggested, the problems posed by UKIP for the the Conservatives are akin to those posed to other European centre-right parties by populist radical right challengers: there is no *prima facie* reason to think that if large numbers of the Tory rank and file are considering switching their vote to UKIP that the same does not apply to, say, members of the ÖVP in Austria (who might switch to the FPÖ), or of the Dutch VVD and CDA (who might vote for the PVV), or of Denmark's Venstre (who might cast their ballot for the DF), or of KOK in Finland (who might be tempted by the True Finns), or even of the French UMP (who might plump for Marine Le Pen's FN).

Should this be the case, it would also question a commonly-held assumption about party members more generally. Notwithstanding some landmark and ~~a couple of~~ ~~some~~ more recent studies of rank-and-file members (Seyd and Whiteley, 1992, Gallagher and Marsh, 2002 and van Haute, 2011), and despite growing interest in intra-party democracy (see Cross and Katz, 2013), we actually still know relatively little about such people. However, there is one thing we think we have always

known, namely that they represent a virtually guaranteed group of votes for the parties to which they belong. Should this turn out not to be the case it would not only be interesting in and of itself but might prompt scholars to undertake further research in order to test how much the extent and the causes of any 'promiscuity' varyies between parties. -Moreover, we would also need to reassess what being a member actually means to that increasingly tiny minority of the population (van Biezen et al, 2012) who join political parties.

Who might defect from Tories to UKIP?

In the wake of UKIP's successes at the county council elections of May 2013, expectations of further progress at the European Parliamentary elections scheduled for June 2014 are high. If the party's support does indeed grow further then it is likely that its appeal will become more socially and politically diverse. Even so, and notwithstanding repeated claims by UKIP politicians that it is not merely a receptacle for disgruntled Tories, there is no doubt that the Conservatives remain the mainstream party most likely to suffer at the hands of UKIP. It is estimated that 60% of their declared supporters in early 2013 had voted for the Conservatives in the general election of May 2010, whereas only 15% had supported the Liberal Democrats, and just 7% had opted for Labour (Kellner 2013). In the context of what may well be another close general election in 2015, fought on constituency boundaries that will do the Conservatives no favours, the prospect of being denied crucial victories in marginal constituencies by a haemorrhaging of support to UKIP is surely worrying. But who among their adherents are most likely to defect? Our survey of Conservative party members – the people we would normally expect to be *least* likely to desert the party – may well be instructive in this respect.

▲ This was an internet survey conducted by YouGov between 31 May and 11 June 2013 in which we surveyed 852 Conservative Party members; this figure is sufficient for a 95 per cent confidence level and a 4 per cent confidence interval. Note that the results reported here are not weighted in any way. We decided to work with the raw data for two reasons: first, there are no known true population parameters that could be used for the Conservative Party membership's current demographic profile; second, a previous YouGov survey of the party's members conducted at the time of the last leadership election (in December 2005) produced an extremely accurate prediction of the final result on the basis of raw data (ie, to within one percentage point of the actual result). Attempts to weight that data on that occasion made no appreciable difference to the outcome. In this respect, we follow previous practice regarding recent academic surveys of the Conservative Party membership (see Childs & Webb 2012).ⁱ

In this survey current Conservative members were asked how likely they would be to vote for other parties at a general election on a scale running from 0 (never) to 10 (very likely); the mean score for UKIP was 5, compared to 2.1 for the Liberal Democrats and 1.6 for Labour, which immediately illustrates the relative attraction of UKIP for Conservatives. If we sub-divide this scale into three broad categories - unlikely to vote UKIP (0-3), possible UKIP voters (4-6), and likely UKIP voters (7-10) - we find that virtually identical numbers (28.8% and 28.9%) fall into the latter two categories, which in itself is sobering news for the party: these people, after all, are paid-up party members, rather than just casual sympathizers or those people who voted Tory in 2010; apparently, 58% of them by no means rule out voting for UKIP.

What characterises these Conservative members who are most likely to defect to UKIP (ie, the 28.9% who register between 7 and 10 on the scale)? Table 1 reveals a number of interesting features:

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

They are more likely to support attempts to reduce immigration from non-EU countries; they are much more likely to support EU withdrawal were a referendum to be held immediately; they are far more likely to insist on leaving the EU even if the government were able to negotiate a significant repatriation of sovereign powers to the UK before any referendum were held; –they are less likely to feel that David Cameron is doing a good job as Prime Minister; while they are not so very different to those least likely to defect in terms of where they would place themselves on a general left-right scale (8.85 to 8.12), they regard Cameron as significantly further to their left than do the least-likely defectors (at 6.31 compared to 7.48). Interestingly, in fact, they see themselves as closer to UKIP than to their own leader – unlike those members least likely to defect: the perception gap between those members most likely to defect to UKIP and Cameron is 2.54 on our scale, whereas it is just 0.40 to between them and UKIP; by contrast, the most loyal party members only see themselves as 0.64 to the right of Cameron on the scale, but 0.99 to the left of UKIP.

In fact, we can say a little more about left-right politics and the potential for UKIP. Our data has a detailed series of questions designed to measure how left or right-wing people are on matters of distributional politics and another series of questions

designed to tap how culturally liberal or authoritarian they are. Responses to these questions can be combined to form well-established additive scales that give a much more valid and reliable measure of respondents' ideological characteristics (Heath et al 1994).ⁱⁱ When we do this, the findings are interesting: they reveal that those most likely to vote UKIP are actually significantly to the left of those least likely to vote UKIP, but they are also significantly more socially authoritarian. Thus it would seem to be their cultural conservatism rather than their distributional politics which inclines them towards UKIP. This helps us to unpack the common wisdom that those seriously considering voting for UKIP see themselves as well to the 'right' of David Cameron: actually, they see him as too liberal socially or culturally rather than economically.

We can investigate and confirm more systematically the impressions gained from these bivariate explorations by modelling the inclination to vote for UKIP among Conservative party members. Table 2 reports the results of an ordinary least squares analysis, deploying the scale that measures the likelihood of a UKIP vote as the dependent variable. The list of independent variables includes attitudes towards immigration policy, the coalition with the Liberal Democrats, a referendum on British exit from the EU, perceived respect for the membership by the party leadership, the left-right and liberty-authority scales, and the main demographic factors. In addition, we include measures of the perceived left-right gap between the respondent and David Cameron, and the respondent and UKIP. Note that the left-right and liberty-authority scales have been adjusted slightly from the standard ones reported in Table 1. In addition to the 5 items that constituted the original left-right scale (see note 2) we have added responses to the questions on the government's deficit-reduction strategy and policy of reducing the top rate of income tax (both central features of the coalition

government's distributional politics) from 50p to 45p in the pound; this produces an alpha reliability coefficient of .818. To the original 6 items constituting the liberty-authority scale we have added the further question about support for the government's legislation on gay marriage (a clear marker of attitude towards culturally liberal values for contemporary Conservatives), producing an alpha coefficient of .709.ⁱⁱⁱ All other variables are coded as reported in the notes to Table 2.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Table 2 reports the results of three models: the first is a basic social background model employing only demographic factors as independent variables; the second also takes into account broad ideological predispositions (ie, the left-right and liberty-authority scales); and the third is a full model which further incorporates the effects of pertinent current issue, party and leadership evaluations. Standard diagnostic tests for multicollinearity and autocorrelation confirm that there are no problems of this nature with any of the models.^{iv} These models reveal a number of things. ~~The model reported in Table 2 reveals a number of things. Overall, it accounts for 26.5% of the variance in the dependent variable. The tolerance statistics indicate that there are no issues of multicollinearity while the Durbin-Watson statistic confirms that autocorrelation is not a problem in the model.~~ Our main interest lies in the relative influence of the independent variables, and the first point of note is that demographic factors have little bearing on whether Conservative members are likely to consider voting seriously for UKIP; none of these social background coefficients achieve statistical significance in any of the models. only educational background makes a significant impact (at the 5% level), as those with higher qualifications are generally more likely to consider

~~defecting to UKIP—a slightly surprising finding in view of the evidence on graduate preferences reported in Table 1.~~ However, the more substantively interesting findings concern the various attitudinal measures and ideological scales. In both models 2 and 3 the ideological scales are highly significant and signed as we would expect given what we found about the descriptive statistics reported in Table 1; respondents are more likely to entertain the idea of defecting to UKIP if they are relatively left-wing on distributional politics, but socially authoritarian. In model 2 the liberty-authority dimension of belief appears to be more important than the left-right dimension, but the relative influence of these two scales is reversed in the full model, which is most likely because some of the attitudinal factors in model 3 also tap the liberty-authority dimension, and thereby wash out some of the impact of this scale. Most of the issue and leadership evaluations are significant, although there are a couple of exceptions. Attitude towards the coalition government has no significant impact, and neither does The exception is the perceived gap between the respondent and UKIP in terms of left-right ideology. This is hardly surprising, however, given how close respondents generally see themselves as being to UKIP; the mean perceived position of respondents on this 11-point scale is 8.37, while that of UKIP is just 9.15. By contrast, the perceived gap between the left-right position of David Cameron and his party members *is* significant and positive, and produces the biggest standardized regression coefficient in the model: in other words, the bigger the perceived gap between a party member and the leader, the more likely he or she will express a willingness to defect to UKIP. In similar vein, the less that respondents feel the leadership respects the members, the more likely they are to entertain the idea of voting for UKIP. Further, the more that a respondent inclines to the view that a minority Conservative administration, or an immediate second general election, would have been preferable

to the coalition with the Liberal Democrats in May 2010, the more likely he or she is to seriously consider voting for UKIP. Not surprisingly, we also find that support for efforts to curb immigration and EU withdrawal are significant drivers of sympathy for UKIP among Tories. ~~Finally, the model confirms the findings from the bivariate analysis in Table 1 regarding the connection with the detailed left-right and liberty-authority scales: those most open to the idea of voting for UKIP in the future tend to be more centrist on distributional politics but more socially authoritarian.~~

Conclusion

This analysis shows a startlingly widespread willingness among current Conservative party members to countenance voting for UKIP at future general elections. Those most likely to do so are cultural conservatives, but they are not overly right-wing on the distributional dimension of politics. –They are particularly concerned about immigration and the EU. –Perhaps most alarmingly for the party, they do not feel valued or respected by their own leadership, while they ~~resent the coalition, and even~~ regard David Cameron – their own party leader and the country’s Prime Minister - as ideologically more remote from them than UKIP. The only comfort will be that not all of these concerns – most obviously the one about feeling disrespected by the leadership – will apply to Tory voters as much as they do to Tory voters. On the other hand, if a significant number of Tory voters share much in common ideologically with Tory members but, unlike them, have no institutionalised bonds of loyalty holding them back, then that may be cold comfort indeed.

We cannot, of course use our data to confirm the widespread assumption that centre-right parties are more vulnerable to voter defection to the populist radical right than

are other parties: given election studies in countries like Austria and France, for example, which suggest high levels of support for such parties among [culturally rather than necessarily economically anxious](#) 'blue-collar' workers, it may well be the case that centre-left parties cannot rest easily either. But ~~we can confirm that, at least in this particular case~~ [our results at the very least suggest, that](#) centre right parties [across Europe might](#) have something to worry about too. Our data also support the idea that the ideological and policy appeal of the populist radical right, at least for those who normally vote for the *centre-right*, is [\(as is the case for 'left authoritarians'\)](#) predominantly cultural rather than economic. As such, it is highly awkward. Since the proportion of voters who are culturally conservative is likely to shrink over time given increased levels of immigration, mixed marriage (or cohabitation) and greater access to higher education, matching the offer made by the populist radical right may not be a particularly smart move in the long term. And even in the short term, it may not be such a great idea either: firstly, it may put off well-heeled, well-educated, ~~socially~~ liberal voters who are a key component of the centre-right's electoral coalition; secondly, for some of the same reasons, but also much more hard-headed ~~reasons~~, it may alienate some of the centre-right's business backers [\(especially with regard to the radical right's Europhobia\)](#); and, thirdly, the populist radical right, as long as it remains in opposition rather than government, can always respond to any matching of its offer by simply upping the ante. That might not worry some ordinary members of the Conservative Party [and their equivalents in other countries](#) but it might cause problems for a leadership with ambitions to win and hold onto national office.

More generally, our findings do indeed suggest that we need to do more work on, and perhaps, revise some of our assumptions about party members both in Britain and in other European countries. It may well turn out that ideology trumps institutional loyalty and socialisation. One would expect mMembers to ~~may well~~ have more intense, extreme and inflexible preferences than less committed voters. The latter are famously growing more footloose: in an era of valence politics, more and more of them will switch if parties fail to meet their (largely material) needs. But mMembers' needs may ~~be~~ more ideological than voters'; ~~but if~~ if they are not met either, they may be no less footloose ~~should they feel that there are credible and more attractive alternatives to opt for.~~ Moreover, this may not ~~only~~ pose ~~only~~ an electoral problem for the parties concerned, but a strategic problem ~~as well~~ – and on two fronts. Firstly, ~~any such defections~~ ~~lack of loyalty~~ may end up diminishing ~~the~~ organisational resources available, ~~in the form of~~ ~~be it~~ membership dues left to lapse or ~~simply~~ ~~less~~ ~~reduced~~ willingness to get out and about in order mobilise less committed supporters in the electorate. Secondly, if voting for another party leads ~~to~~ some members to actually join it too, this may provide challenger parties with a stream of experienced activists who will boost their already highly effective insurgent campaigns.

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~~ⁱ ——— This was an internet survey conducted by YouGov between 31 May and 11 June 2013 in which we surveyed 852 Conservative Party members; this figure is sufficient for a 95 per cent confidence level and a 4 per cent confidence interval. Note that the results reported here are not weighted in any way. We decided to work with the raw data for two reasons: first, there are no known population parameters that could be used for the Conservative Party membership's current demographic profile; second, a previous YouGov survey of the party's members conducted at the time of the last leadership election (in December 2005) produced extremely accurate prediction of the final result on the basis of raw data (ie, to within one percentage point of the actual result). Attempts to weight that data on that occasion made no appreciable difference to the outcome. In this respect, we follow previous practice regarding recent academic surveys of the Conservative Party membership (see Childs & Webb 2012). We are grateful to the McDougall Trust and Queen Mary University London for funding this survey, and to YouGov for their role in facilitating it.~~

ⁱⁱ The individual items on which these scales are based are as follows: *Left-right scale indicators*: Please tell us whether you agree or disagree with the following statements: Government should redistribute income from the better-off to those who are less well off; Big business benefits owners at the expense of workers; Ordinary people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth; There is one law for the rich and one for the poor'

Management will always try to get the better of employees if it gets the chance. *Liberty-authority scale indicators*: Young people today don't have enough respect for traditional values; People who break the law should be given stiffer sentences; For some crimes the death penalty is the most appropriate sentence; Schools should teach children to obey authority; The law should always be obeyed, even if a particular law is wrong; Censorship of films and magazines is necessary to uphold moral standards. Respondents could select from the following options in answering each of these questions: (1) Strongly agree; (2) Tend to agree; (3) Neither agree nor disagree; (4) Tend to disagree; (5) Strongly disagree; (6) Don't know. Don't knows are excluded from analysis, and all left-right item responses are coded so that 1 is the most left-wing option, and 5 the most right-wing option, while all liberty-authority item responses are coded so that 1 is the most socially or culturally authoritarian option and 5 the most socially or culturally liberal option. Cronbach's alpha for the left-right scale = .845 and for the liberty-authority scale = .710, indicating that both comfortably meet conventional standards of scale reliability.

- iii The extra questions were worded as follows: Do you support or oppose the following policies and decisions by the government? The introduction of legislation allowing for gay marriage; Attempts to reduce the national debt and deficit; The reduction of the top rate of tax from 50p to 45p in the pound. Responses were selected from: (1) Strongly support; (2) Tend to support; (3) Neither support nor oppose; (4) Tend to oppose; (5) Strongly oppose; (6) Don't know. Don't knows are excluded from analysis, and both left-right item responses coded so that 1 is the most left-wing option, and 5 the most right-wing option, while the gay marriage question responses are coded so that 1 is the most socially or culturally authoritarian option and 5 the most socially or culturally liberal option.

- iv [Details available on request from the authors.](#)