

The rise and rise of the outsider election

*What will the 2014 European
election mean for British politics?*

British
Future...

I. Understanding European Elections

The European elections will be one of the biggest political events of 2014. Though these elections will see millions of people go to the polls right across the continent, the European elections will once again be primarily understood, as they always are in each country, as a series of national political contests.

In British politics, the main question will be what the results mean for the next general election, to take place within a year. Party leaders, their local candidates, media commentators and election experts will pore over the results and see if they can work out who may be headed for triumph or disaster at the main event in May 2015.

The problem is that European elections are an extremely weak guide to general election performance. For starters, since 1999 they've had different electoral systems: first-past-the-post for the general election and proportional representation for European elections. Over those last 15 years European elections have become less and less like the general elections that follow them.

Why are the two elections so different?

Firstly, the voters are different. As many as half of the May 2015 general election voters won't have voted in the European elections. Fifteen million general election voters will be missing.

The much smaller and narrower European electorate will have a considerably older, whiter and much more vocally Eurosceptic profile than the voters of 2015. (Another ten million or so will sit out the general election too). As the US Republicans found in 2010 and 2012, a winning message which resonates with the narrower electorate in a mid-term contest could leave a party dangerously adrift when a broader cross-section of a changing society does turn up to choose a government.

Secondly, those who do turn up often vote differently in European elections.

About a quarter of those who do vote are likely to choose different parties in 2014 and 2015 – because voters are much more open to voting for smaller parties in European than general elections. The election never mattered enough to most voters for arguments about 'wasted voters' to land, and the introduction of PR for European elections since 1999 means that smaller parties have a good chance to win seats.

Thirdly, British politics now has very different party systems for different elections, including a Brussels party system and a Westminster party system.

European elections no longer follow a traditional ‘mid-term election’ pattern of government retreat and opposition advance. Instead, the consistent pattern since the European elections switched to PR is for all of the big three Westminster ‘insider parties’ to lose ground at the same time, while ‘outsider parties’ who have no Commons representation at all do much better than in any other electoral contest.

Most of these differences in voting (and non-voting) behaviour reflect the fact that most voters don’t know or care much about the EU. The exception is the Eurosceptics: these voters care a great deal. For them, the once-in-five-years chance to give Brussels a kick is their World Cup final – which is why UKIP voters say they look forward to this election more than they do the world’s biggest sporting event. For most other people the European election is more like the Eurovision song contest.

The strong performance of outsider parties is a striking indicator of political dissatisfaction – particularly given that many of the one-in-three who vote are among the most engaged citizens, compared to those who stay at home. The European elections also trigger a Eurosceptic reaction. The strong showing by Eurosceptic parties demonstrates a highly motivated Euroscepticism among those who feel most strongly about the EU. However, it is worth noting that this is a minority group, whose views are amplified by a low turnout election. The majority of British voters are EU-agnostic – both uncertain about the benefits and unpersuaded about the case for leaving, with a majority preference to stay in the EU but to push for reforms to its powers. This agnostic majority are under-represented in the European election turnout, while the 1 in 3 who are firm opponents of British membership are over-represented.

The consequence is that European elections have become a much worse indicator for predicting future general election performance.

Clearly, anybody making projections from European to general elections needs to take care – and to avoid simplistic and misleading comparisons. But it would be unrealistic to try to stop the political parties making claims and counter-claims, or suggest that commentators and bloggers desist from crystal ball-gazing.

A more constructive approach would be to try to facilitate more informed and valid comparisons. So this paper examines the previous pattern of European and general election results to explore what we can and can’t learn about national politics from the European elections. Clearly, past results are no guarantee of future performance – and records are there to be broken. But what this approach can contribute is a useful guide to analysis and commentary during and after the elections, helping to test competing claims and counter-claims about what the European election of 2014 tells us about the general election of 2015.

In particular, it is useful to set out, before the votes are cast, some clear indicative benchmarks as to what type of results look ‘par for the course’ for European elections – what we should expect to see, based on past results. This should enable us to differentiate between aspects of mid-term political turbulence that can be reasonably expected, versus the kind of result that would substantiate claims of a game-changing moment, one which could herald a major political earthquake at the 2015 general election.

A ‘par for the course’ European election would see the Conservative and Labour parties between them secure just under half of the votes, as happened in 2004 and 2009.

Governing parties have, since 1999, scored 13% lower in European elections than in the next general election. This benchmark suggests that David Cameron needs to win 23% of the European election votes to appear on course to recover his 2010 general election vote of 36%. A score below 20% would be grounds for pessimism, as the Conservatives would then need to achieve a greater recovery than previous governing parties have achieved.

If Ed Miliband matches David Cameron’s 2009 European election score of 28%, he could well be on track for a 35% share which would probably see him into Downing Street, possibly leading a coalition or minority government. But a European election score below 25% would be a weak result for Labour.

“A ‘par for the course’ European election would see the Conservative and Labour parties between them secure just under half of the votes, as happened in 2004 and 2009.”

UKIP has done very well in European elections, and has a particularly big opportunity in 2014, with the LibDems part of the Coalition government and hence likely to win a smaller share of the vote, and the BNP likely to confirm its disappearance from the national political stage.

UKIP leader Nigel Farage has said that he believes his party can and will win the European elections. UKIP are certainly well placed to perform well in the European elections: they could win around 4.5 million votes in 2014. But they may well lose three million of those votes by 2015, if they fail to break the pattern whereby most European election voters desert UKIP for another party once Britain is choosing a government.

The bookmakers suggest UKIP are now the favourites to win the European elections, which would be a major achievement for an outsider party. Yet they suggest too that there is a two-in-three chance that UKIP will win no Commons seats at all in 2015. The irony is that the European Union has created an election which is a perfect platform for anti-European campaigning; but that UKIP has so far been unable to persuade voters to allow them to bring their Eurosceptic insurgency home from Brussels to the national parliament.

2. How many will vote?

The missing fifteen million

At each European election, the European Parliament has had more powers than before, yet turnout across the continent has fallen every time.

The UK has always had among the lowest turnout of any member state in European elections. Average EU turnout however has fallen with every election, and several of the Eastern Bloc countries which acceded before 2004 now have turnout lower than Britain's. This appears to have stabilised at around one in three eligible voters taking part, having fallen as low as one in four in 1999. There are hopes of bucking the trend with a modest rise in turnout in 2014 - the local elections being held on the same day may help - but close to half of the general election 2015 voters will be missing on 22 May 2014.

There are important concerns too about national election turnout, particularly about first time voter participation rates, but general elections look in rude democratic health when compared to European elections. Since 1989 there have been 10-18 million more voters in each general election than in the preceding European election.

A sensible central estimate would be to again expect around 15 million more voters to take part in May 2015 than in May 2014.

How European and general election turnout compares (number of voters)¹

Euro Election Year (General Election Year)	Number of European Election voters	Number of General Election voters	Extra voters at the general election
1989 (1992)	15,896,078	33,614,074	+17.7m
1994 (1997)	15,852,589	31,286,284	+15.4m
1999 (2001)	10,681,082	26,368,204	+15.7m
2004 (2005)	17,578,224	27,148,510	+9.6m
2009 (2010)	15,561,216	29,687,604	+14.1m

How European and general election turnout compares (as percentage)

Euro Election Year (General Election Year)	European Election turnout (%)	Next General Election turnout (%)	Turnout increase (%)
1989 (1992)	36.8	77.7	+ 40.9
1994 (1997)	36.5	71.4	+ 34.9
1999 (2001)	24.0	59.4	+ 35.4
2004 (2005)	38.5	61.3	+ 22.8
2009 (2010)	34.5	65.0	+ 30.5

Of course, the voters who vote in both low and high-participation elections will have a different profile from those who take part only in general elections.

The difference in turnout reflects sociological factors: older, white and more affluent voters are particularly likely to vote and to believe that voting is a civic duty, leading them consistently to vote in each election.

There is also a motivational aspect. The European theme of the elections means that those voters who care most about Europe are more motivated to take part: this applies to a small niche of committed EU-enthusiasts and a considerably larger group of those with strong anti-European views. Most voters don't care much about the EU – with the exception of those who'd like to leave it.

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The European electorate could be larger: as of 2011 approximately 1.2 million EU citizens living in the UK are eligible to vote in European but not general elections.² The Electoral Commission estimates a registration rate of 56% but participation is considerably lower than for UK citizens. Groups like New Europeans are putting more civic effort into registration drives, to persuade EU citizens they have an important stake in European issues, since those who benefit from EU free movement could be directly affected if the UK were to leave the EU.

While the European election will not settle this question, it may prove a significant skirmish in the wider argument. Were British membership to one day be decided by an in/out EU referendum, EU citizens would not be able to participate in that vote. Of course, EU citizens have a range of political views: a small New Europeans poll of Polish migrants in the UK, for instance, found that one in ten would vote UKIP.

The turnout figures clearly show that the European elections remain a remote, little understood and little valued election for most people. Despite attempts by MEPs and candidates to communicate how the European Parliament makes decisions which affect things voters care about, its work remains a mystery to most. The most recent reforms are unlikely to make a significant difference. The overall political composition of the Parliament will determine the leadership and direction of the European Commission, but few people will have any idea about the identity of the candidates, still less the platforms of the pan-EU party groupings.

So the European elections remain very much ‘second order elections’ – the term that political scientists use to describe elections where voters are mostly thinking about something other than the candidates or institution on the ballot paper in front of them. Instead, many are using local and European elections to send a message about national politics or the government of the day.

While this feature of European elections is well known, what has not been noticed is how European elections increasingly differ from other ‘second order’ elections, in a way that has been given less attention than it merits.

3. How Britain votes differently on Europe

The advent of the ‘Outsider Election’

European election results have changed dramatically since 1999. They no longer match our expectations of how ‘mid-term’ elections tend to work. It is now routinely the case that all three major Westminster parties - the ‘insiders’ - tend to shed support at European elections, registering a lower share of the vote than at either the previous or the next general election, whether they are in government or opposition. Instead of a swing between the big parties, the shift is from ‘insider’ to ‘outsider’ parties, with parties who have no seats at all in the House of Commons doing much better in the European Elections than in any other national political contest.

European Elections are still often – mistakenly - thought of in the same way as mid-term elections. That classic pattern, familiar from local elections and by-elections, is one of government retreat and opposition advance, with incumbent governments hoping to bounce back by the time that the general election becomes a choice of who should govern. European elections since 1999 have ceased to follow this more traditional mid-term pattern. Instead, they have had a distinctive and much more splintered and fragmented vote.

Earlier European elections used to look much more like ‘mid-terms’. But they have ceased to do so after the introduction of Proportional Representation in 1999.

For example, the 1989 European election looked mostly like a classic mid-term election, similar to the traditional pattern in local elections. There was a 7.5% swing from the previous general election from government to opposition, so Neil Kinnock’s Labour Party defeated Margaret Thatcher’s Conservatives by 37% to 35%, though John Major came back to win the 1992 general election.

The 1994 European elections saw a 5.5% swing from government to opposition and, this time, the Major government made up little ground, losing the general election heavily to Tony Blair.³

How the European elections changed since the switch to PR

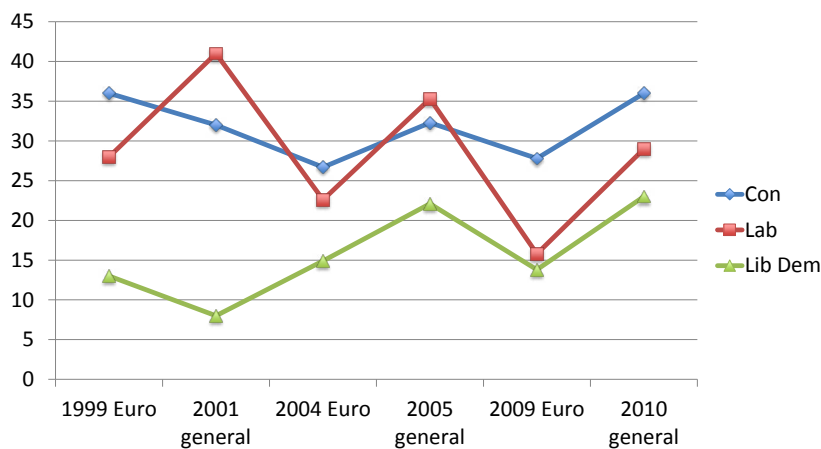
- All of the big three Westminster parties receive a lower share than at either the previous or the next general election, whether they are in government or opposition.
- The main governing party receives a 13% lower share of the vote than at the subsequent general election.
- The Conservative and Labour parties between them routinely receive a two-party share well below 50% of the European Election votes cast. In general elections, however, they have maintained a two-thirds share of all votes cast.
- Parties without representation in the House of Commons have averaged a joint share of 24% of the European Election vote since 1999, but only 4% of the general election vote.
- Despite the pool of voters doubling, the number of people voting for ‘outsider’ parties has, in each of the last three instances, collapsed between the European and general election, for example from 4.7 million in 2009 to 1.8 million in 2010.

As a result, the European elections now have their own quite distinct ‘Brussels’ party system – but they have become an ever poorer indicator of the general elections which follow.

In eight out of nine cases since 1999, the Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties, whether in government or in opposition, have all received a lower share of the vote at the European election than at either the previous or the next general election. The governing party does fall back, but so do their major party opponents. The main gainers are ‘outsider’ parties with no seats in the House of Commons.

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“Insider” parties’ vote share (%) in European and general elections 1999-2010



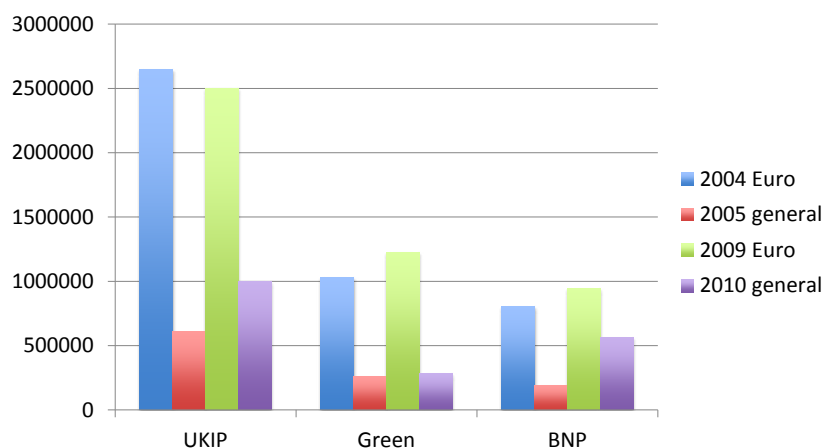
The sole exception to major party retreat in the European election rather underpins the rule. William Hague’s Conservatives did a bit *better* in the 1999 European election – winning 34% and a lead of ten points - than the 1997 or 2001 general elections where a 31% share saw a landslide defeat. The Conservatives emphasised strong Eurosceptic themes in both elections: a message which proved much better suited to the narrower European electorate of ten million than to the general election context, when 26 million voters turned up. This was an example of an insider party adopting an outsider party strategy – and getting an outsider party result of European election success but general election failure.

Outsider parties – those which did not hold any House of Commons seats at all – have consistently performed better in the European elections than in any other election. This vote share has then, in each successive general election, fallen away drastically as their number of votes falls while the overall turnout increases, inflicting a ‘double hit’ on the outsider parties.

The outsider parties lost the support of three million voters in the one year from the last European in 2009 and 2010 general election. Since the pool of voters had doubled, this collapse in support is very striking, as even the raw number of individual votes fell by two-thirds, and the share of the vote much further still.

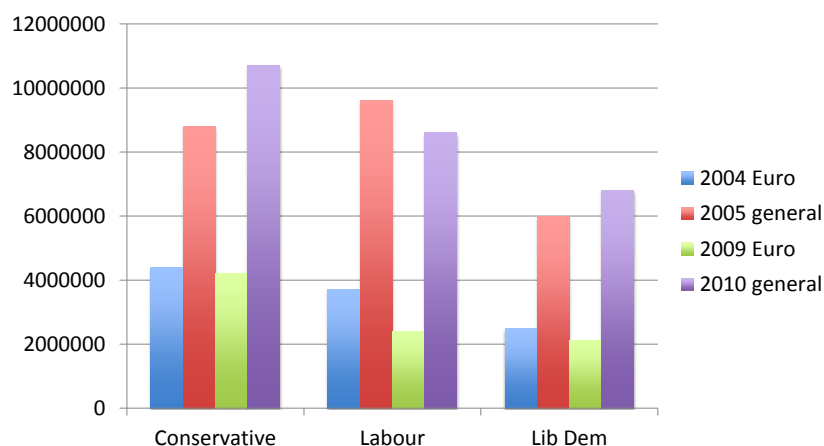
“The vote share [of outsider parties] has, in each successive general election, fallen away drastically as their number of votes falls while the overall turnout increases, inflicting a ‘double hit’ on the outsider parties.”

Votes for outsider parties 2004/5 and 2009/10



By contrast, the larger, 'insider' parties gained five to six million voters each from the European to the general election: in 2010, they won eighteen million more votes between them than they had achieved just a year earlier. Around three million voters switched back to an insider party, in addition to the millions more who turn up to vote in the election which matters more to them.

Votes for insider parties 2004/5 and 2009/10



Under the previous first-past-the-post electoral system, there were some unusual results of this kind: back in 1989, the Green Party won 15% of the vote at the European election as almost 2.3 million people voted Green, but only 170,000 were still with the party at the general election, where the party was back to a more familiar 0.5% of the national vote. This type of 'outsider' party performance is no longer a rare occurrence, but has become something of a norm in European elections.

Scotland is slightly different, as it has four major parties. 22% of Scottish voters voted for a party outside the main four Scottish parties in the 2009 European election, while 2% did so in the general election and 11% did so in the list section of the Scottish election.

The three big Westminster parties all perform better or at least similarly in general elections in Scotland; and the SNP does better in European elections than general elections (where the first-past-the-post system and focus on who will govern Britain squeezes their vote) but it takes a lower share of the vote than in Scottish Parliament elections.

Wales also has four major parties but has seen a stronger ‘outsider’ performance than in Scotland. Northern Irish voters are the least likely to vote differently in European and general elections, where the parties seeking to form a British government are mostly not on offer to Northern Irish voters and party loyalties remain more deeply entrenched.

4. Why are European elections so different?

A different electoral system

The PR electoral system gives smaller parties a better chance. However, the form of regional PR list used also distances candidates from voters, meaning that the election has little or no local presence, beyond the fairly limited national media coverage of such a low-profile election.

A low priority election for most...

The European election is the election which voters value least, and take their vote least seriously. As Lord Ashcroft has written in his study of attitudes to Europe: *“Voters readily distinguish between elections that matter and those that matter less. In our research people compared European elections to the Eurovision Song Contest; some cheerfully said that voting UKIP in these elections was just a way to ‘give Europe a slap’”*.⁴

...but a high priority election for some

Many of the differences between European and general elections come about because most voters don't understand or care much about the European elections. But there is a significant minority of voters to whom the European elections matter a great deal: those who are most Eurosceptic. For the most committed anti-Europeans the European Elections are not to be compared to the Eurovision song contest. Rather, the European elections really are their World Cup final.

The Eurosceptic World Cup final

In Ipsos MORI's State of the Nation poll for British Future, voters were asked to rank the importance of several national events in 2014. Of the eight events listed, the European elections ranked in last place. The budget was the top choice, with the football World Cup coming second overall, particularly in England.

UKIP voters took a different view. Twice as many of them identified the European elections as an important 2014 event for them personally as chose the World Cup.

For UKIP voters, the chance to send Brussels an uncompromising message matters much more than England's unlikely hopes of World Cup glory. For the broader public, 2014 is more about football than European politics. Come 2015, however, they will pay more attention to national affairs once they are asked to choose a government.

5. Why does UKIP do so well in European elections?

How different turnout and different electorate ought to give Farage his first victory

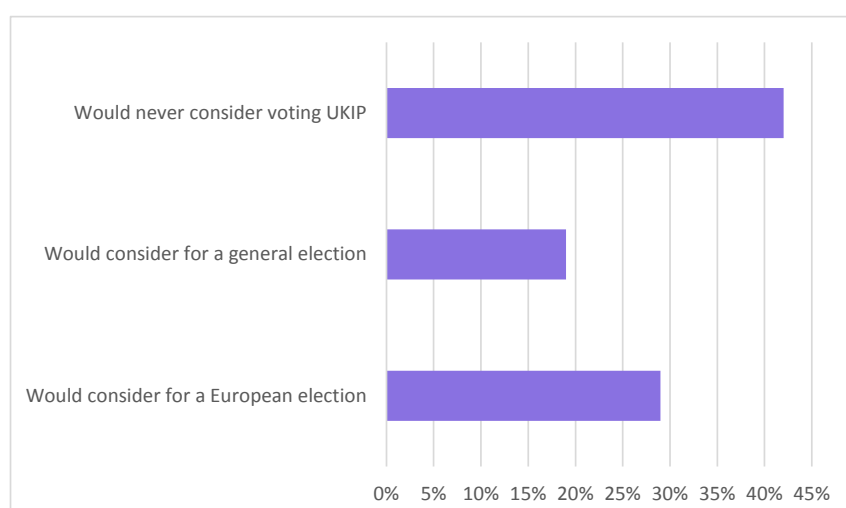
UKIP has a spectacular record of success in European elections, which it hopes to build on in 2014 by coming in first place. There is plenty of evidence that UKIP can expect a strong showing in May 2014.

Why is this? For a start, their voters are more likely to turn out. UKIP activists and committed voters prioritise the European elections, seeing it as a high stakes contest. They therefore make up a bigger share of a smaller electorate.

Less committed voters are also more prepared to vote UKIP at a European election than a national election. Some voters who will support other parties in 2015 are prepared to cast a 'protest' vote.

The party is much better placed to convert 'considerers' to voters at a European election than at a general election.

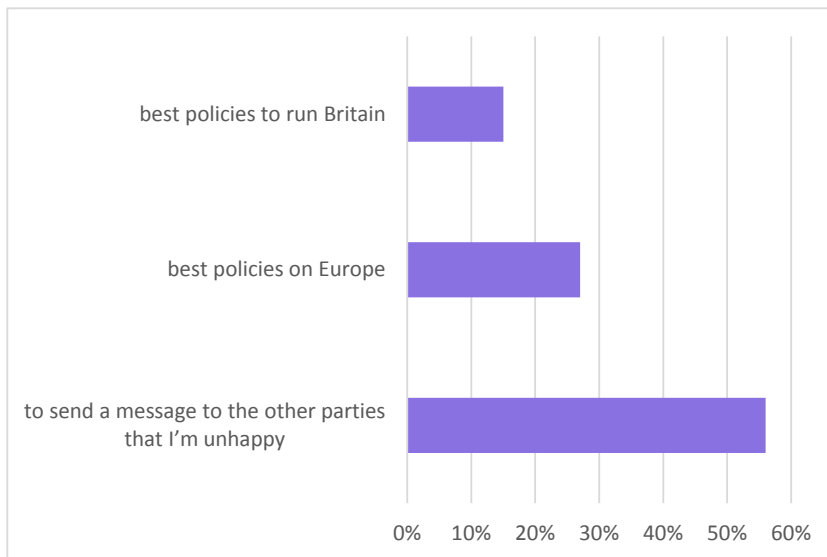
Would you ever consider voting UKIP?



Ipsos-Mori for British Future

In addition, many of those who vote UKIP in a European election will do so to send a message to the other parties that they are unhappy.

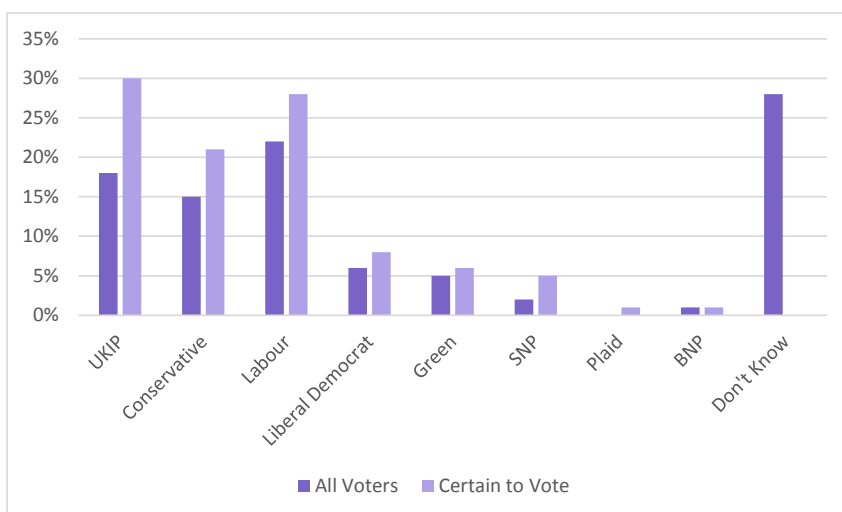
Main reason for voting UKIP in European elections



Ipsos-Mori for British Future

A March 2014 ComRes poll saw UKIP in first place in European election voting intentions, despite having less support among the electorate generally. UKIP went into first place once the pollster adjusted for the likelihood to vote, including the 38% who said they were certain to vote, since this reflects the scale of likely turnout.

How the difference in turnout could lead to a UKIP European election victory⁵



ComRes, March 2014

6. From 2014 to 2015: Setting European election benchmarks for general election performance

It is difficult to extrapolate from European to general election results. European elections have become less and less like the general elections which follow them, given the very different rates and patterns of voting at the two elections. But the pattern of previous results can allow some benchmarks to be set for the competing parties.

The Conservatives

“A benchmark 2014 score for the Conservatives would be 23% of the European election vote.”

Conservatives worry as to whether the party could come third in a European election and still go on to win a general election a year later. This would be unprecedented, but this is not least because only one governing party has ever finished third before. The past pattern of European election results means there is no reason at all to think that this would be impossible.

A better test of Conservative performance would be vote share. The main governing party has increased its share of the vote by 13% between the European election and the next general election, since the switch to PR in 1999.

This suggests that a benchmark 2014 score for the Conservatives would be 23% of the European election vote. The past history of European elections suggests that would leave them broadly on course to recover their 36% 2010 general election vote share.

If the Conservatives want to be on track for closer to 40% of the general election vote, a 2014 European vote share into the mid-20s or higher would offer stronger grounds for confidence.

A 2014 score of 20% or under would suggest that they will need to make up much more ground than previous governments to get back to a winning position. While Gordon Brown, for example, did emulate the scale of recovery achieved by previous governing parties in 2010, when he did 13% better than his 2009 European election share, this was only sufficient to bring him back from 16% to 29%.

Labour

If Ed Miliband matches David Cameron's 2009 European election score of 28%, that could be enough to suggest that Labour could achieve a 35% general election share. This share of the 2015 vote might well be enough to take the Labour leader into 10 Downing Street, perhaps also leading either a coalition or minority government. While that could arguably be presented as an acceptable result, it may also suggest that a 35% strategy could be the limit of the party's general election aspirations, so that the main chance of entering Number 10 would be through the back door.

A share below 28% or heading down towards 25% would certainly be a poor result for Labour – suggesting that the party was in a weak position ahead of the General election.

Labour party strategists would be considerably more comfortable if the party could hit a 30% benchmark in 2014. Labour will not want to concede first place in the European elections to UKIP ahead of the general election campaign. These elections do provide perfect conditions for the Eurosceptic outsider party, but the symbolic differences between first and second place, even by a narrow margin, will probably matter a great deal in terms of media profile for both the main opposition party and the outsider challenger, who will both want to claim momentum by finishing first.

“It would surprise many people to discover that even scoring just 30% would in fact be the highest major party vote share at the European elections for fifteen years, reflecting the stark differences between the pattern of European and General election results.”

However, our historic analysis shows that the big three parties will each tend to underperform against their previous and next general election vote. Labour's 2010 general election share of 29% was particularly low, and so failing to match that would not be great for the party's morale - just as David Cameron's 2009 share of 28%, being lower than the party's 2005 election vote, was not considered particularly impressive.

However, this also reflects the broad tendency to underestimate the scale of difference between the general and European elections. Our expectations are 'primed' by the ratings regularly achieved by the parties in the opinion polls – and so a 30% share for a major party sounds rather low. It would therefore surprise many people to discover that even scoring just 30% would in fact be the highest major party vote share at the European elections for 15 years, reflecting the stark differences between the pattern of European and General election results.

The Liberal Democrats

The Liberal Democrats should expect to have a poor European election result in 2014. This is not just because the party is now part of the governing coalition, and has had an opinion poll rating around half of its 2010 election score. Even in opposition, the Liberal Democrats have always performed much worse in European than general elections.

This is mostly because the party performs much worse in all PR elections than it does in either local elections or Westminster elections, as is also the case in elections in Scotland, Wales and London. Lib Dem electoral support has particularly been built up by the local presence of councillors and MPs – factors which play a much smaller role in elections involving PR lists. The party faces many more competitors as an alternative to the major parties, and appears to be treated by many voters as too much of an ‘insider’ party in these circumstances.

The party can therefore expect its 2014 support to suffer for two reasons – with a ‘governing party effect’ exacerbating its usual under-performance. The party has averaged just 13-14% in the last three European elections. Since governing parties tend to shed about a third of their vote, the LibDems might well expect to receive a vote share below 10% in 2014.

To mitigate these effects, the party is making an explicitly pro-European pitch as the ‘party of in’. The strategic thinking is that the European Union is not particularly popular, but that it is more popular than the Liberal Democrats, who would hope to pick up support from the 1 in 4 voters who are committed to staying in the European Union.

“Since governing parties tend to shed about a third of their vote, the LibDems might well expect to receive a vote share below 10% in 2014.”

The party will argue that relatively few conclusions can be drawn from the party’s European election performance for its general election prospects. This is largely because the outcome of the general election for the party will depend rather less on its national vote share in 2015, and much more on the party’s local performance in the seats which it already holds, particularly the 40 or so seats which the party believes it has most hope of defending successfully. For that reason, it is the 2014 local elections rather than the European elections which will offer most clues to the party’s prospects. The same is true for UKIP.

UKIP

UKIP has a very good chance of winning the European elections – but will face a much greater challenge to translate this into general election success.

If they win the election, it will mostly be because this is a low stakes election with low turnout, in which their supporters are considerably more motivated to vote than most other voters, though they will also benefit from the support of a significant slice of voters who are willing to ‘send a message’ with a 2014 UKIP vote but who expect to vote for somebody else in 2015.

Past form suggests they might expect to get one sixth of their 2014 vote share in 2015. Even if they outperform recent history, they will struggle to win any House of Commons seats.

UKIP has a very good chance of winning 25% to 30% of the European election vote particularly, as we have seen, because of the difference in turnout, though also because some voters will choose the party in 2014 but not 2015.

That could well mean that they win 2.75 million to 4.5 million votes in May 2014. While UKIP can naturally expect to receive a much higher share of the vote in 2014 than 2015, both past electoral history and current polling suggests they are also likely to win fewer votes in 2015 than 2014.

In the 2010 general election, UKIP retained only 37% of their votes from the European election just one year earlier. If they do not increase their retention rate, then even a winning European election performance will leave them on 5-6% of the general election vote.

Three future scenarios for UKIP

These projections for votes and vote share use a working assumption of a European election turnout of 15 million and a General Election turnout of 30 million, to model some indicative results. While the exact numbers would differ, the assumptions would hold so long as General Election turnout continues to be approximately double that of the European elections.

They are not to suggest, of course, that UKIP will attract no new voters at all in 2015 – this is merely a model that reflects the pattern of outsider parties losing votes at general elections. These projections looks at what would happen if an ‘outsider’ party retreats in a similar way to past performance, and what would happen if it matched or out-performed that benchmark.

1. History repeating itself

In this scenario, UKIP wins the European election and repeats past performance by only retaining 37% of its European voters in the general election.

This will be closest to how UKIP will perform if past performance proves the most accurate indicator to future results. It would be a very disappointing result for the party.

Euro election vote share	Euro election votes (appr.)	Projected general election votes	Projected general election share
25%	3.75m	1.5m	5%
30%	4.5m	1.8m	6%

2. Strong advance

In this scenario UKIP improves on past performance and holds on to 66% of European election voters in the general election.

This could be possible, though it would require a significant and sustained UKIP advance. Their hopes of achieving this type of result reflect the growing media profile and, especially, local presence of the party. But it is unlikely that these factors can outweigh the differences between European and Westminster elections.

Euro election vote share	Euro election votes (appr.)	Projected general election votes	Projected general election share
25%	3.75m	2.5m	8%
30%	4.5m	3m	10%

3. UKIP rewrites the rulebook

In this least likely scenario, UKIP as many general election votes as it did European election votes.

To achieve this, UKIP would need to improve its general election share from 2010 by around 250%. That would be a spectacular success: parties without any House of Commons seats have not come close to achieving this in the past.

Euro election vote share	Euro election votes (appr.)	Projected general election votes	Projected general election share
25%	3.75m	3.75m	12.5%
30%	4.5m	4.5m	15%

This is a very unlikely scenario: it requires UKIP to hold on to many of those voters who explicitly express a protest motivation – just over half of those planning to cast a 2014 UKIP vote – or to replace them with voters willing to vote for a Eurosceptic party in a general election, despite not having had sufficient motivation to turn up and vote UKIP in a European-themed election.

Even winning almost all of the voters who would consider voting UKIP in a general election could well leave the party without any seats in the House of Commons, because its vote is fairly evenly spread geographically.

The key to UKIP's prospects in a general election is whether its local electoral performance gives it a chance of winning one or two House of Commons seats. The bookmakers remain sceptical, with UKIP quoted as odds-on (8/15) to win no seats in 2015.

An “earthquake” scenario would see UKIP come much closer to retaining their European election share in a general election.

There is little or no chance of this happening, given what voters say about their motives for voting UKIP in European elections, and given that a significant proportion will only consider voting UKIP at the European level. It is highly unlikely that the party can pick up rather than lose votes between 2014 and 2015, given all of the challenges which face outsider parties in a general election.

After victory? The challenge for UKIP

For UKIP to influence the formation of the next government, by winning seats in the House of Commons, they would need to make a spectacular breakthrough. A party with over 29 seats – more than the combined total of Northern Irish and ‘other’ parties – can play a dramatic and decisive role in a hung parliament, or in coalition negotiations. That is surely beyond even the dreams of the party’s leaders and strategists. In fact, there is little realistic prospect of UKIP having more MPs in the next Parliament than the Welsh nationalists (who currently hold 3 seats), still less the DUP (currently on 8 seats). Even if they were to enter the Commons, UKIP is extremely unlikely to feature in any Coalition negotiations with the major parties in 2015.

A breakthrough to win their first Commons seat would be of symbolic importance, in terms of the party’s public and media profile. However, as with the Green Party breakthrough with one seat in 2010, it is not clear how far winning one or two seats would put the party in a different position. UKIP already has a considerable media profile on the basis of Nigel Farage’s personality and their role in the European Parliament. Perhaps the main reason why winning one House of Commons seat is an important 2015 test for UKIP is that their current profile may diminish sharply otherwise, especially if Nigel Farage keeps his promise to resign if they do not achieve a Commons breakthrough.

The main influence that UKIP might have on the 2015 general election, therefore, may not be whose seats they take but whose votes. Assumptions that UKIP voters are all disgruntled Conservatives have been significantly undermined by academic research suggesting that UKIP would take votes much more equally from the major parties than is often assumed.

As Rob Ford and Matthew Goodwin, authors of the first major study into the party and its support, have written: ‘That Ukip’s core voters are middle-class Tories animated by the single-issue of Europe is the biggest myth in Westminster. In fact, Ukip is the most working-class-dominated party since Michael Foot’s Labour in 1983. They struggle financially, worry about the future, and loathe the political class, not just Cameron and the Conservatives’.⁶

UKIP may retain a high profile in the event of a referendum on EU membership around 2017, as David Cameron has proposed. However, a referendum could also prove to be a double-edged sword for the party. It is not clear what the strategy, or indeed the purpose, of UKIP would be after an in/out referendum, win or lose.

7. Beyond the election: challenges for politicians and political parties

7.1. Think about the entire electorate

If UKIP follows the form book and wins the European election, Labour and the Conservatives - and indeed incumbent Lib Dem MPs too - will naturally want to identify which UKIP voters they could sensibly attempt to attract back with a mainstream political offer. But they will need to be sharply conscious of the potential limits of such a strategy.

New, detailed research by the academics Rob Ford and Matthew Goodwin shows that UKIP is not a broadly based “catch all” party with support across the population. Its support is concentrated among Britain’s most anxious minority: older, less educated and predominantly white voters who feel most unsettled and ‘left behind’ by the cultural and economic changes of the last 30 to 50 years. Only a small proportion of these voters will be within reach of any ‘insider’ party. Mainstream parties will need to be mindful that efforts to reach them could repel voters that they need in order to win key marginal seats, and to build majority coalitions across the country.

For the Conservatives, there are risks of repelling four key potential ‘joiner’ groups among whom the party needs to improve its appeal to have a shot at a majority government. These are women, younger and first time voters, Lib Dem voters who are sympathetic to the Coalition and David Cameron, and ethnic minority voters with a socio-economic and values profile which would otherwise correlate strongly to voting Conservative, but where the party image presents a considerable barrier. British Future has conducted more detailed analysis of how a Tory appeal to this last group – bridging the “Ethnic Gap” and increasing its support among minorities – could help it secure a parliamentary majority in 2015, in its report “From minority vote to majority challenge”.⁷

For the Labour party, a significant section of the UKIP support - white, working class men, often in the north of England - might be considered ‘traditional’ Labour supporters and hence open to being drawn back into the fold. Yet there are risks in formulating a policy offer to appeal to this group: turning off younger and

more educated voters, repelling the large proportion of 2010 Lib Dems who are thinking of voting Labour, and turning off younger ethnic minority voters. This last group makes up a larger share of new cohorts, and are much more inclined to want to shop around politically than their parents or grandparents were, being increasingly likely to resent the idea that their votes can be taken for granted.

While the Liberal Democrats retain a distinctively more liberal profile in terms of their national support, the party has a fairly similar challenge to the Labour party in the seats that it holds, or where it is competitive in the general election. Where Lib Dem MPs and candidates are seeking to win 40% to 50% of their constituency vote, they must reach beyond the one-in-four people who are most solidly liberal on identity, immigration and cultural diversity, and Europe, by being able to connect with the more anxious median voter too. The most committed UKIP supporters, however, are likely to remain out of reach.

7.2. The ‘insider’ party challenge: can mainstream parties engage anxieties but avoid impossible promises?

The rise of ‘outsider’ parties can be seen as a natural development that is part of our democratic system. Where insider parties have failed to address the anxieties of sections of the population – namely on Europe and immigration – an outsider party has evolved to give voice to their concerns.

The insider parties therefore have a democratic responsibility – as well as a politically-expedient imperative – to listen and respond to the challenge of voters who went to the polls in May 2014 to “send a message to the main political parties”. Ipsos MORI research published in January 2014 showed that 56% of UKIP voters chose the party for just this reason.

Politicians from the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties need to engage majority anxieties on issues of immigration, integration and identity. But their efforts will not always be enough for the most ‘left behind’ and more deeply anxious minority.

In particular, mainstream parties can connect only to those ‘outsider’ voters who are in the market for workable answers from governing parties. It would prove dangerous, purely as a matter of calculated electoral self-interest (beyond other constraints of either principle or practical feasibility) for the major parties to chase those outsider voters who cannot compromise at all, or who simply

do not recognise that there are also other views and interests in these social and political debates about identity, Europe and immigration, as well as their own.

About half of those expressing support for UKIP in general election opinion polls may fall into this category and remain broadly unreachable by the mainstream parties. Indeed, 47% of UKIP supporters say they would never vote Conservative and 63% say that they would never vote Labour. This unreachability also plays out in their views on particular issues. About one in five of the electorate give immigration 0 out of 10 – very negative – when asked what impact it has had on Britain. This rises to 40% of UKIP voters. This group will always be disappointed or angered by any real-world policy which acknowledges that Britain needs controlled and managed immigration, and offers constructive ways to make immigration work that fall short of pulling up the drawbridge.

The views of the softer half of the UKIP vote have considerably more in common with the views of voters of the other parties. The mainstream parties must therefore address what has always been the central challenge of democratic politics: the accommodation of different interests and values. They cannot appeal entirely to either the ‘left behind’ group, nor can they prioritise only the more liberal future generations – whose voice may be diluted, in any event, by lower participation. Rather, they need to build broad electoral coalitions across these social groups, engaging with the anxieties that most people feel about the pace of change and how to manage it.

Mainstream parties will need to identify constructive, workable and fair solutions around which most of those who are anxious about change can converge, keeping most liberals on board but also realising that it is the nature of politics that they can never please everybody.

8. Interpreting the election: Three tests for analysts and commentators

8.1. *The big headline: a first-ever 'outsider' victory?*

Recent history shows that European elections over the last 15 years have increasingly become 'the outsider election'. It would, nevertheless, still be a novel development for UKIP to complete the trend and, by winning the 2014 European election, be the first 'outsider' party to top the polls at a national political contest.

By contrast, a strong second place for UKIP would be nothing new, repeating their 2009 result and underperforming against the European election polls. While the party is building membership and activism, this would be a setback for the party. Those commentators who have suggested that 2014 will mark 'peak UKIP' would surely find themselves winning the argument about the likely future trajectory of the party.

Our analysis of the European elections over the last fifteen years supports the theory that UKIP really ought to be able to win in May 2014, particularly due to the impact of different turnouts in European elections. But this does not settle the question of whether the party will peak at this stage - and one day look back on May 2014 as the high watermark of a failed insurgency - or can kick on to change British politics in 2015 and beyond.

Two further indicators offer a better guide to that question, and we examine them here.

8.2. Sneaking up on the inside: watch the two-party share

The two-party share of the European election vote for the Conservative and Labour Parties is probably the best indicator of whether this is a standard European election.

The joint Conservative and Labour share of the European Election vote was 44% in 2009 and 48% in 2004. If the joint Conservative and Labour share in 2014 is 45% or higher, then there is a strong case that this looks like a fairly standard European election, rather than a game-changing one. The electoral history suggests that, in this event, overwhelmingly the most likely 2015 outcome would be for the two big parties to return to a 66-70% joint vote share, jockeying for first place in the popular vote, as they contest the 80 or so key marginal seats that will determine who governs.

If the two biggest Westminster parties achieve a similar overall level of support at the European election as they have enjoyed for a decade, then even an outsider party victory would suggest UKIP has risen from second to first by maximising their share of 'outsider' votes, more than by taking vote share from the largest parties.

Nigel Farage's party has an added 'outsider' advantage in 2014, with the Lib Dems having become a governing party, while the BNP has imploded and collapsed. The Greens offer an 'outsider' option but mainly for segments of the electorate who are least likely to be UKIP: young, metropolitan, liberal-minded graduates. UKIP in 2014 faces less competition than ever before for voters seeking an anti-politics option at the ballot box.

While individual votes will have switched in all directions (Conservative, Labour and LibDem to UKIP; Lib Dem to Labour, Conservative to Labour and so on), this would suggest an 'outsider' party going from second to first place largely by gaining a much stronger share of the 'outsider' vote. It would therefore take a very significant break with the established pattern of European and general election results for those 'outsider' gains in both votes and vote share not to be very significantly reversed in the 'insider' general election of 2015.

8.3. *Check the turnout: how the demographics and views of voters and non-voters compare*

Any inquest into the European elections needs an exit poll which covers the views of the 15 million who didn't turn up, as well as the 15 million who did.

The key question is how similar or different those who voted in May 2014 are from those who stayed at home this time, but will come to the polling station in May 2015 to vote in a general election. If the demographics of the European election look similar, broader conclusions may be drawn. But much more caution is required if there is a distinctive demography – in terms of age, class or ethnicity, for example – to the European electorate.

Otherwise, commentators might fail to observe that approaches which could successfully engage people who have just voted UKIP – such as a commitment to campaign for a no vote in an EU referendum – would prove electorally damaging with people who didn't vote in the 2014 European election.

9. Appendix

9.1 Data tables from graphs - Chapter 3

“Insider” parties’ vote share (%) in European and general elections 1999-2010

	Con	Lab	Lib Dem
1999 Euro	36	28	13
2001 general	32	41	8
2005 Euro	26.7	22.6	14.9
2005 general	32.3	35.3	22.1
2009 Euro	27.8	15.8	13.8
2010 general	36	29	23

“Outsider” parties’ vote share (%) in European and general elections 1999-2010

	UKIP	Green	BNP
1999 Euro	7	6.3	1.1
2001 general	1.5	0.6	0.2
2005 Euro	16.1	6.3	4.9
2005 general	2.2	1	0.7
2009 Euro	16.6	8.1	6.3
2010 general	3.1	0.9	1.9

Votes for outsider parties 2004/5 and 2009/10

	2004 Euro	2005 general	2009 Euro	2010 general
UKIP	2650768	605973	2498226	998546
Green	1033093	257695	1223303	285616
BNP	808200	192746	943598	564331

Votes for insider parties 2004/5 and 2009/10

	2004 Euro	2005 general	2009 Euro	2010 general
Conservative	4400000	8800000	4200000	10700000
Labour	3700000	9600000	2400000	8600000
Lib Dem	2500000	6000000	2100000	6800000

9.2 Data tables from graphs - Chapter 6

Would you ever consider voting UKIP?

Would consider for a European election	29%
Would consider for a general election	19%
Would never consider voting UKIP	42%

Ipsos MORI for British Future

Main reason for voting UKIP in European elections

to send a message to the other parties that I'm unhappy	56%
best policies on Europe	27%
best policies to run Britain	15%

Ipsos MORI for British Future

How the difference in turnout could lead to a UKIP European election victory

European Voting Intention	All Voters	Certain to Vote
UKIP	18%	30%
Conservative	15%	21%
Labour	22%	28%
Liberal Democrat	6%	8%
Green	5%	6%
SNP	2%	5%
Plaid	0%	1%
BNP	1%	1%
Don't Know	28%	0%

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9.3 Endnotes

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British Future is an independent, non-partisan thinktank engaging people's hopes and fears about integration and migration, opportunity and identity, so that we share a confident and welcoming Britain, inclusive and fair to all.

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