

# Party campaigns matter, including for those on the extremist fringe

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*It is widely accepted that the manner in which a party campaigns will shape its overall performance. Yet [Matthew Goodwin](#) observes that this has failed to translate into detailed research on party campaigning by parties on the radical and extremist fringe. In a recent project which focused on the 2010 general election campaign by the extreme right British National Party (BNP), he and David Cutts sought to address this gap by examining the electoral impact of this effort at a breakthrough. The project and findings challenge some commonly held wisdom about the campaign, and point to a useful avenue for future research on the radical right in Europe*



Among academics who study elections and political parties, most accept that the way a party campaigns can have important effects on its overall performance. As scholars such as [Ron Johnston](#) and [Charles Pattie](#) have argued (and shown), amidst the decline of partisanship, the increased volatility and hesitancy of voters, and the professionalization of parties, campaigns at election time can assume a vital role in getting voters out of armchairs, and into voting.

But for various reasons, this research on campaigning effects has not diffused into the study of parties on the radical and extremist fringe. Instead, citizens who support the likes of Geert Wilders, Marine Le Pen or Nick Griffin are often presented as passive beings, who suddenly switch allegiance from the mainstream to the margins in response to concerns over competing in a global economy, immigration or the performance of mainstream elites. While these wider trends are seen as important 'push' factors, few investigate how, come election day, campaigns run by radical right parties seek to 'pull' voters into the polling booth, and indeed whether these campaigns actually make a difference to their electoral performance. Sure, those who study the radical right routinely stress the importance of agency, giving a nod to the important role of [ideology](#), [leadership](#), [organization](#) and [activists](#). But when we really put the literature under the microscope, how much detailed research on party campaigns is there?

Clearly, some will trace this gap to the difficulties of gathering reliable data on what [Charlot](#) described as the 'secret garden' of party life. For those who study the extremes, the pillars of party campaigns that are routinely explored in research on mainstream parties – such as membership, rates of activism, spending data and the targeting of seats – remain very much in the shadows. But in my [own experience](#), through detailed and often painstaking analysis of documents, interviews and data submitted to official bodies, it is possible to paint an accurate picture of what these parties 'do' at the neighbourhood level.

In an [article](#) published by the [European Political Science Review](#) (and which is currently free to [download](#)), we drew on these and other data to examine the effects of the 2010 general election campaign by the British National Party (BNP). Seeking to enter Westminster, the BNP devoted significant effort to the contest, fielding over 330 candidates and adopting a targeted campaign (which you can read about [here](#)). But to what effect?

To explore this question we drew on a range of data from the British Election Study, which probes party-voter contact, and a war-chest of data on BNP finances, membership and local electoral support for the BNP and Labour (thanks to Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher). Aside from testing some broader theoretical models, we also wanted to see whether academics such as [Cas Mudde](#) were right in arguing that 'local implantation' is important to explaining how radical right parties -like all types of parties- rally support.

What did we find? Using Tobit regression analysis (see the [paper](#) for full info), we first of all confirmed what we previously found with [Robert Ford](#). In its quest for an elusive breakthrough, in 2010 the BNP performed strongest in working-class areas, which depend more heavily on the (stagnating) manufacturing sector, where average levels of

education are low and there are large Muslim communities. No real surprises.

But beyond these standard measures, and more to the point, we also found that support for the BNP **was** significantly higher in areas where the party had actually campaigned. Even after we took account of prior support for the BNP, where the party campaigned more intensely, where it had more members and where it had established a track record of local electoral success, the party reaped greater electoral dividends. While earlier [focus groups](#) indicated that the BNP's embrace of community politics had been important to its electoral growth, even suggesting that in some local wards voters experienced more face-to-face contact with BNP activists than with those from the main parties, our results provide broader evidence that the strategy was having positive electoral effects.

We also found evidence in support of the 'Labour disaffection' argument, which posits that the limited rise of the BNP owed much to disillusionment within the Labour heartlands. This was perhaps best reflected in the detailed [qualitative study](#) by Stuart Wilks-Heeg who pointed to the way in which, in areas where the BNP initially emerged, party competition at the grassroots was either stagnant, or virtually non-existent. Consistent with this picture, in 2010 the BNP polled strongest in areas where Labour had controlled local politics since the early 1970s. But on the other hand, and given recent [debate](#) over the rise of the UK Independence Party, it is interesting to note that where support for UKIP was strong, the BNP struggled to make headway.

Turning to the individual level, there is no question that the BNP (again) rallied voters who were chiefly concerned about immigration. Those who ranked immigration as the most important issue facing the country were five times more likely to support the BNP, than other parties. These voters were also less trusting of politicians and less likely to express support for European integration. But importantly, and even after we control for these attitudes and the campaigns of other parties, we found that the BNP campaign still mattered. Citizens who had been exposed to the BNP campaign were still significantly more likely to vote for the party.

In conclusion, our initial motivation to undertake the study stemmed less from an interest with the BNP than to examine whether wider findings on campaigning effects also apply to parties at the extremes. Like other types of parties, our findings suggest that when extreme right activists build local support, nurture their memberships and target resources, they can positively impact on their overall result. This throws doubt on the claim made by some that what these parties do at the grassroots is largely irrelevant for explaining their electoral performance.

But also, in Britain the BNP's 2010 campaign was framed as a failure, which owed much to Nick Griffin's failure to cause an upset in the outer-east London seat of Barking. In itself, this result prompted a grassroots rebellion inside the party, prompting many experienced organizers to abandon the BNP for rival parties, or leave politics altogether. Yet in objective reality, at the last general election the extreme right actually more than doubled its number of voters (to over 564,000), increased its share of the national vote (to 1.9%), increased its share of the vote in seats that were contested in 2005 (again, by 1.9%), and met the 5% hurdle in over 70 seats (as compared to only seven in 2001). Moreover, despite the party's more recent [electoral collapse](#), our findings suggest that the party's embrace of pavement politics, and its decision to invest in the grassroots base, appeared to be working.

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

## About the Author

**Matthew Goodwin** is Associate Professor at the School of Politics and International Relations at the University of Nottingham, and Associate Fellow at Chatham House. He is the author of numerous books, articles and research reports on electoral behaviour and extremism. Currently, he is completing an ESRC Knowledge Exchange grant and is a regular tweeter ([@GoodwinMJ](#)).