Transcript

UKIP, the Radical Right and the European Parliament Elections

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Sarah Montague:

Ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon. Lovely to be here. My name is Sarah Montague. I normally present the Today Programme on Radio 4, so I hope you know the voice if not the face. This is normally way past my bedtime, but I couldn't resist the invitation to chair a topic like this: UKIP, the radical right and the European Parliament elections. We have very much the man of the moment here to listen to and to ask questions of, in a little bit. We're going to talk about that for the next hour.

Just a bit of housekeeping before we kick off, Chatham House Rules do not apply here – this is on the record. It's being live-streamed on the web. You can comment or ask questions via Twitter – ask questions using #AskCH. I'll keep a bit of an eye on that, but really actually the old-fashioned thing of putting your hand up is going to be far superior – I'm more likely to keep an eye on that. But if you want to make a comment or ask a question, do use that #AskCH or indeed #CHEvents. Apparently you can email questions – I'm guessing this is for you who are with the live-streaming – questions@chathamhouse.org, for comments (I'm not following that, that's for sure).

Let me introduce our speakers, who we're going to be hearing from in the next hour. First of all: Joe Twyman. Joe is our polling man. He's director of polling research at YouGov and we're going to hear from him in a few minutes. Dr Matthew Goodwin is associate fellow of Europe at Chatham House. He's just written a book, which I'm sure you've read about over the last week or so, *Revolt on the Right: Explaining Support for the Radical Right in Britain*. Nigel Farage, as you all know, is the leader of UKIP. Laura Sandys is a Conservative MP and convenor of European Mainstream, a pro-European Conservative – must be rather jealous of the publicity that Nigel Farage gets for his position.

We're going to hear from each of them for, please, no more than seven or eight minutes, less if possible. Then we'll open the floor for questions. Can we start with the polling, please? Joe Twyman, if you want to kick things off for us.

Joe Twyman:

Thank you. I'm going to talk very briefly about the public opinion context of what we're talking about today. Of course, perhaps the most important issue is what is usually characterized as the rise of UKIP – and here it is, here is the rise of UKIP that we've seen over the last few years. This goes back all the way to 2004. You can see there are blips along the way, associated with European elections mainly, but in recent years the rise has become quite extraordinary: a rise from the low single figures to, in our most recent polling, between 10 and 12 per cent. When you look at things only over the last couple of years, you can see that on our daily polling at YouGov this really has increased.

So in the Westminster context, yes, there has certainly been a rise in UKIP. In Europe, the situation is similar. This was the result of the European election back in 2009 and this is our most recent polling result from the *Sunday Times* yesterday. If you look at those certain to vote, UKIP's rise is even higher. We indeed expect that the most likely outcome of the European elections is that UKIP will win the most votes.

It's not, of course, just in Britain that this is an issue. We've seen across Europe, anti-European or Euro-sceptic parties growing in their support. There are a number of reasons suggested for why this is the case. I'll let you into a small secret: people generally don't understand the technicalities of Europe. A bit of advice there for anyone wanting political strategy. They don't really understand the technicalities of Europe – instead, they are interested in the broad narratives. At YouGov we've investigated the broad narratives across six different northern European countries, across a host of issues. 'I understand why the European Union exists' – a majority of people, 63 per cent in Britain, agree with that. But when you look at other things, other broad narratives – 'Your country gets a good deal from being a member of the European Union' – well, no country has a majority that think that. Indeed, 'All things considered, the European Union is a good thing' – again, 38 per cent of people agree with that; 30 per cent of people disagree in Britain. A majority of no country thinks that. When we ask if life in the country surveyed would be better if it were not a member of the European Union, [there is] a relatively even spread result.

Europe has not won the argument among its members. Perhaps part of the problem is this overwhelming belief that Europe needs significant reform. So you might conclude, even when you ask whether a particular country will be a member of the European Union 20 years from now – even when you ask that, you see that actually there is a general belief that people do expect their

country to stay. You might think, well, it's all about Europe - but I would suggest probably not, and we're going to talk about that in more detail. This is the historical data on whether people approve or disapprove of EU membership. You'll notice it goes up and down, and when you compare that to UKIP's rise you'll see that actually in most recent years it's broadly gone in the opposite direction. Europe itself, when you ask what's the most important issue facing the country, you can see it down at the bottom – really never resonates particularly highly.

So the question is: what is it that's driving this? Matt and his co-author Rob look at this in more detail in their book and I hope we'll talk about it today. But for me, it's to do with the three Ds. I think that UKIP has been particularly effective at mopping up and gearing up support from people who are dissatisfied; from people who are distrusting; and from people who are disapproving. These are the people who feel that things are moving on and they haven't offered consent for that - people who feel left behind by the process. And yes, it is often fair to characterize them as Euro-sceptic, but the important bit of that is the sceptic part, rather than the Euro part.

I'm going to hand over to Matt now, who's going to talk about this in more detail.

Matthew Goodwin:

Thank you very much. What I'm going to do over the next 8 minutes is summarize what Rob Ford and I have found in this book. We start by telling you why we wrote the book in the first place. UKIP is an exciting political party and it's an exciting force and it's dominating our headlines, but it's incredibly misunderstood as a political party. We think we know what is behind UKIP. We are told constantly that this is primarily a revolt among middle-class Euro-sceptic conservatives, that this is about single-issue voters - it's about disgruntled Tories out in the countryside complaining about the European Union and distant Eurocrats in Brussels and Strasbourg. We're told that actually if we just give these UKIP voters what they want – a referendum on Britain's EU membership, or perhaps, lower immigration through a net migration cap – then UKIP will go away.

So Rob and I sat down last summer and we just wanted to look at the data. We started from this observation that actually everything that was written about UKIP is written in terms of the day-to-day conflicts in the Westminster village. This is about David Cameron and his support for equal marriage, or his embrace of climate change, or this is about what's happened since 2010.

We looked at data on UKIP support from 2004 to 2014, so a good ten-year sweep. But more than that, we looked at survey data in terms of British public opinion and social change going back to the 1960s. So our starting point here is that we're looking at UKIP in terms of how British society has changed over the long term. That's when you begin to realize that the reality is very different.

Nigel Farage and UKIP are actually tapping into who you might crudely term 'the left behind': working class, low-educated, financially struggling. Mainly white old men who look out at Britain and, to be honest, look at a country that they neither recognize, nor feel that they want to be a part of. They're not just animated by the single issue of Europe. These are voters who care intensely about a broader array of domestic concerns: immigration, the perceived unresponsiveness of Westminster elites. That's one reason why Joe's chart has that nice disconnect between Europe as an important issue and levels of support for UKIP.

So we have tracked these long-term trends and that shows us quite convincingly that actually UKIP's revolt on the right has been a long time coming and it has a long way to go. UKIP are really feeding off a very deep social division in our society. In that respect it's useful to think of them not as a political party, but to think of UKIP instead as a symptom. They're telling us something about social divisions and value change in Britain. On the one hand, those with the skills, the education and the qualifications to adapt and survive amidst the global post-industrial economy – who got hit by the crisis but more or less had the skills to survive and move on – versus the left behind, who have a very different outlook, who not only got hit by Britain's economic transformation over the past three decades but then got hit the hardest by the financial crisis and austerity.

So UKIP are winning over more than one in ten Britons, but they're not the Britons that we think they are and are told so often who they are. In terms of their attitudes, these are voters who feel intensely distrustful of Westminster politics. They are very disconnected from our Westminster elite and incredibly anxious over immigration. If you like, their action in politics is ruled more by their heart than their head. This is why I'm very sceptical of the notion that we can win them back by promising a referendum on Europe or by pledging caps on immigration, because these voters are already so distrustful. We seem to be promising them action in areas where we actually have little control. I suppose it's easy for the academic to say, but we've not necessarily been as honest and open with voters as perhaps we should have been in recent years, and UKIP are perhaps thriving off that.

But the interesting thing, beyond all that long-term social and value change that we chart in the book – the interesting thing actually about UKIP, from our perspective, is more about the questions they raise for Labour than the Conservatives. Right now today, UKIP are drawing most of their support from disillusioned Conservatives, but that wasn't always the case. We show that before 2010, more of UKIP's support came from disillusioned Labour voters. The point is that as an outsider populist party, they can thrive under very different political circumstances. Think about it like this: where would these voters be going if UKIP did not exist? These are financially struggling, pessimistic, very disadvantaged Britons. Would they stay within the Conservatives? Arguably they should be going to Labour. Instead there's a sort of irony or paradox in UKIP's support here: that these are voters who have felt distinctly left behind by social change and feel cut out of our political conversation. And, instead of moving behind a social democrat party, they're moving behind a radical right party that, to be completely frank, isn't perhaps pushing as hard a protectionist line as, say, centre-left parties have.

As we saw in France over the last two days, when you can combine or tap into public opposition to immigration and economic insecurity, you can make a lot of gains in areas that are dominated by centre-left parties - which is why Rob and I have been looking closely at the areas where UKIP tend to perform particularly well, or areas that have large concentrations of UKIP-friendly voters. We find that 19 of the 20 most UKIP-friendly seats in the country are held by Labour. So while the debate at the moment is framed very much in terms of what UKIP means for David Cameron and the Conservatives, if we take a step back and look at this through a long-term lens of value and social changes in Britain - that have cut off the 'left behind' electorate from our professional, middle-class, cosmopolitan, metropolitan elite that dominates our politics and media - we can begin to understand why some of the areas in the country that are most receptive to Nigel Farage and UKIP are actually not in Conservative hands, they're in the hands of the Labour Party. That's why we argue that after 2015 there are some big questions that may well face Ed Miliband that David Cameron is currently sweating over.

So what do we do? Luckily, as academics, we don't need to worry about what you do in response to a party like UKIP, right? We're not really interested in the political consequences; we're just interested in understanding. But we would have a couple of pieces of advice for all parties. First, you've got to recognize that the conventional wisdom here about UKIP is way off the mark. Are we going to have a serious conversation and debate about why these 'left behind' voters are moving behind UKIP? Or are we going to cling to this

notion, this sort of outdated and wrong assertion, that UKIP voters are just simply disillusioned Conservatives? Are we going to look at this debate just in terms of what it means for 2015, or are we going to look at this debate in terms of what it's telling us about the current direction and divisions within British society? So my starting point for any strategist would be: look past 2015. Go back to the 1970s, trace this stuff over years, because this revolt has been a long time coming. With or without UKIP, it has a long way to go.

I think, secondly, if these voters are telling us anything on these issues, they're telling us that it's not just about economics. It's not just about financial contributions or migration or economic membership. We saw this in round one of the Clegg-Farage debate. Nick Clegg was very adamant on making the statistical case for EU membership. These voters hold a very different set of values from the professional middle-class majority. They feel completely out of touch from the Westminster elite, and they feel completely left behind. So how can we actually forge a genuine connection with their concerns over threats to the national community, as they see it, and threats to national identity that are not just about financial contributions, of what they see around them? That's where I would start.

Sarah Montague:

Thank you very much. Nigel Farage, your turn. Are you just a party for white old men?

Nigel Farage:

No. Actually, I think what's interesting is the breadth of our support. The fact is we've gone up in the polls rapidly and what we're doing is we happen to be doing particularly well with that segment of the population. It doesn't mean we're not picking up votes across the board. Political parties, like companies, evolve. They change over time.

But I'll begin by saying it's a good book. It's the first analysis that I've read of UKIP that actually gets the history pretty much right and chronicles the ups and downs. My only upset with the book – although it's a good picture on the front of me in full campaigning mode – is I'd been out campaigning in Eastleigh all day that day and I really wish you hadn't chosen a picture that made me look a bit like Robert Kilroy-Silk, in terms of colour. What a fake tan! That wasn't fake, I promise you.

What the book says is what I've been trying to tell people in the commentariat for a very long time, but I've just been completely wasting my breath. I used to think the problem was that the three political parties had all merged into one. They were all differing brands of social democracy, so there's no point talking to them, but actually we might get somewhere with the newspapers and the commentators and the blogs – and actually they're even more impervious to genuine fact and to understand [the] change that is going on in this country. This book helps to set the record straight. To read some of our Conservative, Cameron-supporting newspapers, you really would think that absolutely every voter for UKIP is a retired half-colonel living on the edge of Salisbury Plain, who only perks up after the first Pink Gin of the day, desperate to bring back the birch, and absolutely hates Europe and hasn't been there since 1945. Well, it's true, we're not doing badly with that market – but there aren't many of them.

I've been arguing – it's been clear, I think, for just over two years now to us in UKIP that our real potential is defined not by people's political background but by their class. It's just as simple as that. Paul Nuttall and I have known this and the party has changed. We started off as a party that really for most of the first 15 years was a party that campaigned on constitutional issues. I'm not backing away from those constitutional issues. I still actually think that living in a parliamentary democracy is better than being a member of the European Union. I still favour independence. I still think we would be better to forge our own trade deals across the rest of the world rather than rely on a Dutch bureaucrat who we can't vote for, and we can't remove. None of that has changed and we will go on making those arguments.

But what has changed is the language we use, the approach we use and the campaigning methods we use. Since I came back as leader for the second time in November 2010, after my brief period out of office and light aircraft incidents and all the rest of it – since I came back for the second time, I've been absolutely determined to try to talk to people in language that they actually understand. I think we've done that. We've had the opportunity in by-election after by-election in those big northern towns and cities to be able to find out what works and to engage.

I think there were [are] three real reasons why UKIP is doing well. I think the first is that we've made some pretty big calls and they've been proven, in the minds of many people, to be right. I'm talking particularly about what happened in 2004, with what I thought at the time was just madness - to unconditionally open up the labour market to people from countries very much poorer than us. We're not protectionist – we want free trade. In fact, we think

the EU is inhibiting in terms of what we can do globally. But we finished up with massive over-supply in our unskilled and semi-skilled labour market and an immigration policy that neither has control over quantity or quality. I think people know we've said that. A lot of people know we've said that, know we've predicted it, and that is a feather in our cap, as it were.

Secondly, on the euro, where we predicted doom and said that anyone that supports it must be an idiot. Well, look at the Mediterranean and make your own minds up. So that's the first reason UKIP is doing well. We seem to have been ahead of the game and been right about things.

The second reason we're doing well is I think the disenchantment with the three established political parties is far greater actually than anybody, perhaps even this book, yet understands. There are just countless millions of people out there who have no interest in ever voting Labour or Conservative or perhaps now even Liberal Democrat again. So a very large number of people floating around the system, many of whom have quite wilfully given up voting over the last couple of decades, looking for somewhere to go and I think looking for a politics that actually says something. One of the commonest responses I get out campaigning on the street from people is: well, Nigel, I don't agree with everything you say but at least I understand what you stand for. At least I know where you are on issues. So I think that second reason is absolute disenchantment with the professional, career political class. This idea – and Matthew mentioned it – this idea that all the Conservative Party or the Labour Party have to do is tweak this, or tweak that and all the voters will go back to them is absolute nonsense. They have completely lost faith. If Cameron said: 'I'm holding a referendum' next Thursday and you polled UKIP voters, I reckon 65 per cent would say: 'no chance'. They just don't believe what they're being told anymore.

I think the third reason that we're doing well is partly what I said in my introduction, the way we campaign, but it's the fact that people don't vote for UKIP because they want to leave the European Union – they vote for UKIP understanding and knowing that's our position. That is the prerequisite. They're voting UKIP because they see us addressing and talking about issues that are a real concern to them, immigration being the top of the list. Clegg can come out with whatever statistical figures he wants to come out with on Wednesday this week. This isn't about whether we have a couple of pips more in GDP. This is about a fundamental change that has happened to our communities, to our societies, and to the prospects of many of our young people - and a feeling that something horribly[e] has gone wrong. So they are the reasons, I think, that UKIP is connecting and doing well.

Laura Sandys:

Thank you. I always come across Nigel in Kent. We are both sort of from Kent. My constituency had an interesting experience in the county elections. We lost all our county councillors to UKIP county councillors. I worked very closely with them in trying to address local issues, etc. So I have a lot of respect for people who vote UKIP. That doesn't mean to say that I believe that the solutions or the approach is an approach that actually is A) sustainable, or B) actually really delivers. I totally agree about the three Ds, Joe, because I think the aspect of disaffection, of disappointment, the sense of distrust, is absolutely there. But, in many ways, the UKIP appeal is also about a psychological and a values-driven appeal.

I think that I would criticize in many ways the traditional political parties for being transactional. I think Nigel said something very interesting a couple of weeks ago: that it didn't matter that GDP didn't go up. I think that we, the moderates – and I would call myself an extreme moderate, actually a fanatical centrist – I believe very strongly that it's down to us to make the case and not to allow simplistic – and you can accuse the traditional parties of presenting simplistic solutions to complex issues. I think we do it far too often. But then when we start to look at what UKIP is promising, then I think we start to get beyond simplistic and into very top-line, actually undeliverable politics.

So we've got, sort of, with UKIP the politics of the totem. The EU – is it about the EU? We've already discussed that. Actually it's about lack of control. It's about people feeling they're not in control of their future. The solution there is not the EU, the solution is a wide range of policies – actually, some that reside very much in the Conservative Party – on absolutely turbo-charging localism.

The second thing is migration and immigration. Nigel does flip-flop a little bit here because sometimes we're talking about quality, sometimes we're talking about quantity. Sometimes we're talking about EU, sometimes we're talking about beyond the EU. I'm not sure I'm absolutely clear on the real details of what the migration policy is. But actually it's not about migration per se, the anxiety of my constituents. It's about cost of living. It's about finding out why everything in my pocket goes less far than it did before. The financial crisis has certainly thrown everyone's sense of surety and sense of endgame. So I think we've got a big issue around understanding that emotional fear. You know as well as I do, Nigel, that in my constituency it's people who have just retired, who felt they had a certainty into the future which has now been shaken.

You also talk about Putin, which I was absolutely surprised by. But there again we have this strong nationalistic leader who is there to fight the good fight. To be frank, he is not wildly popular in Russia, and having worked in the Caucasus I think that allying yourself with Putin is a little bit –

Nigel Farage:

[off-mike; indiscernible]

Laura Sandys:

No, but it's about the values that you say are being presented. I would say that actually there is a defeatism in the narrative of UKIP. The defeatism does actually permeate people's psychological approach to politics. That defeatism then pervades itself into the traditional parties. These parties cannot deliver.

I absolutely take responsibility, for it is for us to make that case. I think we need to shine [a] bright light and a strong sense of optimism to combat that defeatism. I think we need to be absolutely clear that there is an endgame – the endgame is about a strong and bigger Britain. It is not about simplistic and very shallow policies that will not deliver for the people that you say that you want to serve.

Sarah Montague:

Thanks very much. Let's get some questions going. While I'm keeping an eye out, I do just want to ask: you jumped on the Putin thing, and it may not be relevant for this particular thing, but you obviously didn't like it. Do you regret saying it?

Nigel Farage:

I said it just after Parliament had voted not to go to war in Syria, thank God. I think that one or two of the things that Putin said did actually change the debate in this country. I did make it perfectly clear I don't like –

Sarah Montague:

Would you not say it now? You're saying you said it back then.

Nigel Farage:

It depends what you mean by – I said I don't like him, I wouldn't trust him, wouldn't want to live in his country, but compared to the kids that run foreign policy in this country, I've got more respect for him than our lot, yes.

Sarah Montague:

Okay.