Explaining Membership in the British National Party: A Multilevel Analysis of Contact and Threat

Michael Biggs

Steven Knauss

Department of Sociology
University of Oxford
Manor Road
Oxford OX1 3UQ
www.sociology.ox.ac.uk/swp.html
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Michael Biggs
Department of Sociology, University of Oxford; michael.biggs@sociology.ox.ac.uk

Steven Knauss
Department of Sociology, Binghamton University; knauss.steve@gmail.com

Support for the British National Party (BNP) has grown exponentially in the last decade. Using a leaked membership list, we locate over 12,000 members and match them with Census data on more than 200,000 neighbourhoods in England, Wales, and Scotland. Two established theories of ethnic hostility—contact and threat—provide opposing hypotheses about the effect of the proportion of minorities. These hypotheses are tested with a multilevel analysis of variation in the probability of a white British adult belonging to the BNP. The probability is lower in neighbourhoods with a substantial proportion of nonwhites. The probability is higher, by contrast, in cities with a larger proportion of nonwhites, but only where they are also highly segregated. These findings show how contact and threat can be disentangled by considering different spatial scales, and also suggest an important interaction between the two: lack of contact exacerbates perceived threat.

Why do some people in the majority denigrate or dislike minorities defined by ethnicity, race, religion, or foreign birth? Why in some does this animosity dominate other political issues, leading them to vote for—or even join—parties of the extreme right? According to an enduring sociological theory, this depends on the majority’s perception of threat from the minority. This threat is partly a function of the individual’s social position: hostility is more likely to be felt by those who bring few skills or credentials to the labour market and who have low status in the social hierarchy. In addition, threat is a function of the size of the minority: hostility is more likely to be felt by those living in an area where the minority proportion is high. The opposite prediction, however, can be derived from a theory which is strongly supported by social psychology. At its simplest, contact theory holds that prejudice is reduced by social interaction. By implication, those people living in an area where the minority proportion is high are more likely to have regular social interaction with people in the minority, and are therefore less likely to feel hostility. In short, two established theories
make opposing predictions for the relationship between the minority proportion and hostility felt by the majority: contact implies that it is negative, threat specifies that it is positive.

Multilevel studies of the extreme right in Europe in recent decades confirm threat theory in predicting the individual characteristics of supporters, such as low education. Findings for the contextual effect of the minority proportion, by contrast, are ambiguous. Some studies find a positive effect of minority proportion within nation-state or city, as predicted by threat (Quillian 1995; Lubbers and Scheepers 2001; Ford and Goodwin 2010). Others find the relationship to be non-monotonic (Nathalie, Phalet, and Swyngedouw 2009), to depend on complex interactions with other contextual factors (Arzheimer 2009), or to be positive at the city level but negative within smaller areas (Bowyer 2008). The latter finding holds out the promise of resolving the apparent theoretical contradiction: contact should dominate over shorter distances, where there can be tangible face-to-face interaction between majority and minority, whereas threat should dominate over greater distances.

Our paper tests the contrasting predictions of threat and contact theories, by conducting a multilevel analysis of membership of the British National Party (BNP). The extreme right in the United Kingdom has long appeared exceptionally weak, in comparison with elsewhere in Europe. It is regularly omitted from cross-national analyses of extreme-right parties (e.g., Arzheimer 2009; Ivarsflaten 2008; Klandermans and Mayer (eds) 2006; Knigge 1998), or treated as a case of absence in cross-national comparison (Ignazi 2006; Norris 2005). In the last decade, however, the BNP has garnered increasing support. Almost fifty thousand people voted for the BNP in the 2001 Westminster election; more than half a million did so in 2010. This number is all the more impressive because the first-past-the-post electoral system discourages voting for small parties. In the European election in 2009, based on proportional representation, the BNP gained over nine hundred thousand votes, winning two seats in the European Parliament.

To investigate support for the BNP, as for other extreme-right parties, social scientists have relied on two sources of quantitative data: electoral returns, where votes can be matched to the ecological characteristics of constituencies (Bowyer 2008), and telephone surveys (Ford and Goodwin 2010). In surveys, respondents must be reluctant to disclose their support for the party because it is highly stigmatized; police officers and teachers have even been disciplined for association with the BNP. Electoral returns overcome response bias, but voting is influenced by tactical considerations: someone who supports the BNP could decide to vote for the United Kingdom Independence party or even the Conservative party, because they had a greater chance of winning. We use a unique data source: a leaked list of over 12,000 members in 2007. This escapes the disadvantages of electoral returns and telephone surveys. It also provides systematic data on the hard core of the extreme right, who have manifested a commitment that greatly exceeds voting. Such activists have hitherto been investigated only by interviews (Goodwin 2010; Klandermans and Mayer (eds) 2005). Most importantly for our purpose, the fine spatial resolution of these data enables us to disentangle the effects of ethnic composition at different scales, and thus to test contact and threat theories.
Theory

An efflorescence of theorizing about ethnic prejudice occurred in the United States after the Second World War, when the memory of Nazism was fresh and where the problem of institutionalized racial oppression in the American South was urgent (e.g., Williams 1947). We can derive contact and threat theories from Blumer’s (1958) exposition of ‘race prejudice as a sense of group position’. This prejudice can be condensed into two intensional propositions, formulated from the point of view of the majority: first, ‘we are different from and superior to them’; second, ‘they have designs upon our prerogatives’. This paper uses the term ‘majority’ for convenience, but Blumer’s analysis emphasizes that this is not just a matter of numerical preponderance, but also of political and cultural dominance.

The first proposition yields contact theory. The majority’s sense of difference and superiority should be eroded by social interaction with the minority, at least under certain conditions. In Allport’s (1954: 281) classic formulation: ‘Prejudice ... may be reduced by equal status contact between majority and minority groups in the pursuit of common goals. The effect is greatly enhanced if this contact is sanctioned by institutional supports …, and provided it is of a sort that leads to the perception of common interests and common humanity between members of the two groups.’ This theory has since been developed primarily by social psychologists (e.g., Brown and Hewstone 2005; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006, 2008). Using experimental treatments or longitudinal designs, researchers have demonstrated that increased contact genuinely causes a reduction in prejudice. Causation also operates in the reverse direction—from lower prejudice to greater contact—but this direction explains less of the association. Contact operates primarily through psychological mechanisms that attenuate anxiety and increase empathy, rather than by enhanced knowledge.

The second belief—‘they have designs on our prerogatives’—leads to threat theory. The majority’s perception of the threat posed by the minority should increase with the numerical size of the minority. ‘Migration of a visibly different group into a given area increases the likelihood of conflict; the probability of conflict is greater ... the larger the ratio of the incoming minority to the resident population’, as Williams (1947: 57-58) proposed. Allport (1954: 227-33) also recognized this theory. It was systematically tested and elaborated by Blalock (1957; 1967: ch. 5), who distinguished competition for resources and for power. We prefer a generic formulation of threat, for the prediction about numerical size should hold whether the majority feels threatened in economic, political, or cultural domains.

Threat and contact theories are both plausible, but they appear to make opposing predictions about the size of the minority population. A larger minority population constitutes a greater threat, but it also means more opportunity for contact. This apparent contradiction could be resolved by differentiating the spatial scale at which these theories operate. Contact involves interaction among individuals, which predominantly occurs within shorter distances: living on the same street, taking children to the same school, joining the same association or club, working in the same office, factory, or shop. Threat, by contrast, can also be perceived at a much greater distance, because economic and political competition occurs at a municipal, regional, and national level.
Beyond the size of the minority, threat theory makes other predictions. The perception of threat is also a function of the general economic situation and of the individual’s own circumstances. Threat should be greater where unemployment is high and economic growth is sluggish (Quillian 1995). It should also be greater for individuals in the majority who are most exposed to economic competition from the minority, and for those who have the lowest status in society; in capitalist societies, of course, status and resources are highly correlated.

How do these theories fare in accounting for hostility towards immigrant minorities in Europe who trace their ancestry back to the Caribbean, Africa, the Middle East, or Asia? We focus on multilevel analyses that take as the dependent variable either attitudes of prejudice or support for the extreme right. This selective review ignores cross-national differences in political institutions and party organization (e.g. Carter 2005; Norris 2005), as they are not relevant for our analysis of variation within Britain.

Threat theory successfully predicts individual characteristics. Lower education, for example, is invariably associated with hostility towards minorities. The theory’s prediction about economic context, by contrast, is not well supported. In a pioneering analysis, Quillian (1995) does find greater prejudice in countries where economic growth is lower; this interacts positively with the proportion of non-European citizens. Subsequent cross-national analyses do not find a positive effect for unemployment (e.g., Knigge 1998; Lubbers, Gisjberts, and Scheepers 2002). Arzheimer (2009) finds that a high level of either unemployment or asylum seekers increases voting for the extreme right, as threat predicts—but that high levels of both together reduce such voting. Analyses of variation within a country do not identify an effect of unemployment at the regional or municipal level (Bowyer 2008; Lubbers and Scheepers 2001; Rink, Phalet, and Swyngedouw 2009). Note that as an individual characteristic, unemployment does predict hostility to minorities (e.g. Ford and Goodwin 2010); it is as a contextual variable that findings are ambiguous.

When it comes to the proportion of minorities, threat theory also falls short. Quillian’s cross-national analysis (1995) finds that prejudice increases with the proportion of non-European citizens. Some subsequent studies confirm this finding at the national level (e.g., Lubbers, Gisjberts, and Scheepers 2002; Lubbers and Scheepers 2001), but Arzheimer (2009) finds the negative interaction with unemployment noted above. Below the national level, results are also mixed (e.g., Lubbers, Coenders, and Scheepers 2006). Rink, Phalet, and Swyngedouw (2009) identify a surprising nonmonotonic relationship in Flanders: once the proportion of people originating from Muslim countries exceeds about 5%, support for the Vlaams Blok begins to fall. Ford and Goodwin (2010) find that support for the BNP increases with the proportion of people of Bangladeshi and Pakistani heritage within the Parliamentary constituency. Bowyer (2008) makes an important contribution by finding opposing effects at different scales: votes for the BNP increase with the proportion of people of this heritage in the city, but decrease with that proportion in the ward (a smaller unit of about 8,000 households). The former is consonant with threat theory, and the latter with contact theory. At the shortest distance, contact theory is supported by a study of racial prejudice among English school children (including nonwhites as well as whites), in which opportunity for contact—measured by asking what proportion of the other group lived in the neighbourhood and were
seen on a typical day—decreased implicit prejudice, though it did not directly affect explicit prejudice (Turner, Hewstone, and Voci 2007).

In sum, empirical research on contemporary Europe does not endorse threat theory’s predictions about social context. Nor does it resolve the apparent contradiction between contact and threat theories. There is a wide gap between the interpersonal interaction specified by contact theory and the larger social entities—most often national states and cities—that are typically used as units of analysis. We meet this challenge by investigating contextual effects within small neighbourhoods as well as cities. Our explanandum is a measure of extreme prejudice, in action rather than attitude: the probability that a white British adult belongs to the BNP. We test first whether contact and threat theories operate at different scales. Due to enhanced contact, a higher minority proportion within a neighbourhood makes BNP membership less likely (Hypothesis 1). Due to inflated threat, a higher minority proportion within a city makes BNP membership more likely (Hypothesis 2).

While literature has focused on the size of the minority population, we should also consider the degree of segregation. Here contact and threat theories make convergent predictions. For a given minority population size, greater segregation will reduce the opportunity for contact, making prejudice more likely. Occupational segregation might reduce the economic threat to the majority (Olzak 1992). Spatial segregation, however, will increase political threat, because in some places the minority has sufficient votes to influence elections—and also cultural threat, because in those places the minority has sufficient numbers to visibly alter the environment (a mosque is built, more women are seen to be wearing headscarves). Due to reduced contact and increased threat, we hypothesize that greater spatial segregation within a city makes BNP membership more likely (Hypothesis 3).

Turning aside from minority population, we also test threat theory’s prediction that higher unemployment within a city makes BNP membership more likely (Hypothesis 4). The theory’s prediction about individual insecurity will not be formulated as a hypothesis, because it has been proven by so many studies. Measures of insecurity will be included in our analysis, of course, in order to identify the hypothesized contextual effects.

Data and method
The BNP’s membership list appeared on wikileaks.org in November 2008. Its authenticity is not disputed. The party’s leader, Nick Griffin, described the person who leaked the list as a ‘hardliner ... who didn’t like the direction the party was going and broke away, taking the list with him’ (Guardian, 19 Nov 2008). Dated to November-December 2007, the list contains details of 13,009 members. Of these, 30 were missing a current address, 138 had a foreign address, and 41 lived in Northern Ireland. Of the remaining members, 12,536 (97.9%) can be precisely located in Britain using the postcode field of their address.

The distribution of members does not merely echo the distribution of voters. Figure 1 compares votes cast for the BNP in the 2005 election to Westminster, when it received almost 200,000 votes.\(^4\) The correlation of votes with membership, across the 628 constituencies in Britain, is surprisingly modest (\(r = .46\)). The party contested only one in five seats, but the
correlation is scarcely higher in those alone. Voting also gives a misleading impression of the national distribution of the party’s support. Scotland accounted for only 0.8% of its total vote, but 3.7% of its total British membership. Certainly the BNP is stronger in England and Wales, but its presence north of the border must not be ignored.

To explain the distribution of membership, we use data from the 2001 Census (conducted in April). In November 2001, the BNP had 2,173 members (Copsey 2008: 137). Thus a large majority of members (at least 83%) on the leaked list had joined subsequently. The finest geographical unit defined by the Census is the “output area”, a small local neighbourhood containing on average 262 people. There are 218,038 neighbourhoods (as output areas will be termed) in Britain: the BNP was present in 10,165 (4.7%) of them. Most of those had a single member; eleven was the maximum. The population denominator is white British adults, because the BNP recruited only “indigenous Caucasian” people (Copsey 2008: 238). (This rule has since been challenged under the Race Relations Act.) The Census schedule asked people to categorize their ethnicity. We count adults who identified themselves as “White British”, including “White Scottish”. The probability of a white British adult belonging to the BNP was .032% across Britain as a whole. The highest probability in any neighbourhood was 5.7%. Our task is to explain variation in this probability across Britain.

We begin with independent variables capturing economic insecurity. These are measured ecologically, as the fraction of people in the neighbourhood with a particular characteristic, though they are proxies for individual characteristics predicting support the BNP. Education is divided into three categories: no qualifications, qualifications below university degree, and degree (the denominator is people aged 16 to 74). Class is divided into five categories following Erikson and Goldthorpe’s class scheme (Rose and Pevalin 2003): from semi-routine and routine to managerial and professional (the denominator is occupied population). Unemployment is also measured (as a proportion of the labour force plus full-time students, aged 16 to 74). Alongside these sociological staples, housing is worth including because the BNP promotes the myth that minorities are given privileged access to public housing. Housing tenure is divided into three categories: owned or mortgaged, rented from the local authority, and private rental (including other arrangements). Overcrowding, as defined by the Census, is also measured. (In both cases the denominator is households.) We expect, then, that white British adults are more likely to belong to the BNP in neighbourhoods with lower education, lower social class, higher unemployment, more private renting, and higher overcrowding. Control variables are entered for sex and age, because BNP voters tend to be male and middle-aged (Ford and Goodwin 2010).

Hypotheses 1 to 3 are captured by independent variables measuring the composition of the population at two different spatial scales. The first level is the neighbourhood. The second level is the city or town, which is the most appropriate unit for assessing competition in the labour and housing markets and electoral mobilization for local government. The Census identifies 408 “local authority districts”, comprising rural areas as well as cities and towns. The smallest authority is the Isles of Scilly, the largest is Birmingham. Greater London is divided into 33 authorities, corresponding to its boroughs.
Minority—from the viewpoint of white British people—can be defined in various ways. The simplest definition is nonwhite. Nonwhites comprise 8.1% of the population (whites who do not identify as British comprise 3.7%). A second classification differentiates the largest nonwhite ethnic groups: South Asian (3.6%) and black (2.0%). For convenience we refer to South Asians, but it should be emphasized that people in this group identified as “Asian or Asian British”, and most are British-born. The BNP has come to define their enemy in religious rather than racial terms, especially since 2001, focusing on Muslims. Most Muslims originate from the Indian subcontinent, and voting for the BNP responds to South Asians rather than to blacks (Bowyer 2008; Ford and Goodwin 2010). We can also measure religion directly. Muslims comprise 2.8% of the population. These three definitions—nonwhite, South Asian and black, and Muslim—will be investigated in separate models, because the figures are very highly correlated.

For Hypothesis 1, we measure the minority proportion in the neighbourhood, which approximates the extent to which a white British person interacts with the minority. This is expected to have a negative effect on BNP membership. For Hypothesis 2, we measure the minority proportion in the authority. This is expected to have the opposite effect. For Hypothesis 3, we measure the index of dissimilarity for each authority, where \( m_i \) is the minority population, \( w_i \) is the white British population, and \( i \) indexes the \( n \) neighbourhoods within the authority. The index ranges from 0 to 1 and can be interpreted as the proportion of minorities who would have to move to another neighbourhood in order to equalize their distribution with white British people (or vice versa). Segregation is expected to have a positive effect on BNP membership.

These three variables are related, of course. The proportion of minorities at the neighbourhood and authority level is highly correlated. With over two hundred thousand neighbourhoods, however, all four corners of the scatterplot are filled. There is a low negative correlation of both proportions with segregation. Nevertheless, it is apparent that the highest levels of segregation occur in authorities with tiny populations of minorities. Therefore we construct an interaction term between the degree of segregation and the proportion of minorities at the authority level (Hypothesis 2×3). This can be conceptualized as the interaction of threat and contact. We expect this interaction term to be positive, because BNP membership should be most likely where contact is low (due to high segregation) while threat is high (due to a high proportion of minorities and also to high segregation).

For Hypothesis 4, we measure the unemployment rate within the authority. This is only modestly correlated (\( r = .43 \)) with unemployment at the neighbourhood level, introduced above as a proxy for individual insecurity. Following the literature (e.g. Quillian 1995), we also construct an interaction term between the unemployment rate and the proportion of minorities within the authority (Hypotheses 3×4). We expect that insecurity and threat multiply each other, and so predict this term to be positive.
Social, economic, and demographic variables derived from the Census operate at one remove from the political processes of campaigning and recruitment. Trying to incorporate these processes, however, would introduce problems of endogeneity. For example, even if we had a systematic index of BNP recruitment activity, this would partly reflect the distribution of existing members. Nevertheless, it is worth investigating two political variables. A binary variable is coded for the three towns where severe ethnic rioting erupted in the spring and summer of 2001: Bradford, Burnley, and Oldham (Bagguley and Hussain 2008). This was the worst outbreak of ethnic conflict in Britain since the mid 1980s, and nothing of this magnitude has occurred since. The rioting indicated reciprocal mobilization by people of South Asian heritage and by the extreme right. Indeed, the initial riot at Oldham was preceded by active campaigning by the National Front (a racist organization, from which the BNP split) and the BNP; Griffin announced he would stand for Parliament there. So this variable compounds two factors: manifest threat, as whites might perceive it, and campaigning by extreme-right activists. Because most of the membership at the end of 2007 had joined since 2001, the problem of endogeneity is less pronounced.

The second political variable is support for the Labour Party. White British people could perceive a greater political threat where Labour is strong, because the party captures a disproportionate share of minority votes and is most closely associated with policies promoting multiculturalism and enabling immigration. We measure the proportion of votes received by the Labour candidate at the 2005 Westminster election, which is highly correlated with the proportion in the previous election in 2001 (r = .97). The geographical unit is the constituency, of which there were 628.

Control variables are coded for Wales and Scotland, where peripheral nationalisms compete with a British identity.

The method of analysis is multilevel binomial logistic regression (xtmelogit ... binomial(...) in Stata version 10). This enables us to estimate the probability that a white British adult belongs to the BNP, which is easily interpreted and naturally incorporates the population at risk as the denominator. One reservation is that this method treats multiple members within a neighbourhood as independent, which is not always strictly correct. In the neighbourhood with eleven members, they lived in five households; two of the houses were next door to each other and another was the next house but one. An alternative would be to collapse the number of members into a binary variable—any BNP members in the neighbourhood—and to enter the number of white British adults as an independent variable. This alternative disregards useful information (half a dozen members differs from one) and so it is not reported here, but the results are essentially identical. The multilevel model introduces random intercepts at the authority level; the number of neighbourhoods in each authority ranges from 9 to 5,163. The model is estimated with seven integration points.

Results
In Table 1, Model 1 begins with variables for insecurity, along with control variables. Model 2 adds contextual variables, defining minority as nonwhites. Model 3 is reduced by dropping the insignificant interaction term (Hypothesis 3×4). Table 2 compares alternative definitions
of minority: Model 4 differentiates South Asians and blacks, while Model 5 defines minority as Muslim. Only the results for minority composition are reported, as the other results are essentially the same as Model 3. Coefficients are expressed as odds ratios, indicating how much an increase of one unit in the independent variable would multiply the probability of a white British adult belonging to the BNP (because the probability is so low, probability and odds are effectively interchangeable). As is customary, standard errors and statistical tests are reported even though the data are not sampled from a population. Statistical inference helps us to decide whether an observed pattern could have been produced by chance alone, or whether that is so unlikely that we may attribute a causal relationship. $R^2$ is computed assuming the binary outcome represents an underlying continuous variable (Snijders and Bosker 1999). Unexplained variance is partitioned between the neighbourhood and the authority level. With a binary outcome, unexplained variance is inevitably high; this is exacerbated here by the use of ecological measures and of course the absence of measures of subjective attitudes.

Variables capturing insecurity have similar effects in all models. As expected, education reduces the likelihood of BNP membership. The social class most prone to membership is not the working class, but rather small employers and the self-employed (differences among the other classes are not statistically significant). These class effects are partial, controlling for education which of course is strongly associated with class. Considering purely the bivariate association with class, however, small employers and the self-employed are still far more prone to membership than routine and semi-routine workers. Compared to people who rent from private landlords, people who own their homes are less likely to belong to the BNP, and those who rent from the council are even less likely to do so (the difference between the two is statistically significant, $p < .01$). Overcrowding greatly increases the probability of membership. Unemployment has no statistically significant effect at the neighbourhood level.

Hypothesis 1 is modestly supported. The effect of contact at the neighbourhood level is nonlinear. As the proportion of nonwhites increases beyond about 45%, the probability of belonging to the BNP falls at an increasing rate. Setting all other variables at their median and using Model 3, the probability would decline from .034% where nonwhites form a third of the neighbourhood to .026% where they form two-thirds. (This does not merely reflect the fact that neighbourhoods with more nonwhites have fewer white British people, because the number of the latter is already entered as the denominator for the probability.) Note, though, that such a substantial presence of nonwhites is rare; the proportion exceeds a third in about one in twenty neighbourhoods. This finding also has an alternative interpretation, to be discussed below.

Hypotheses 2 and 3 are strongly supported, but jointly rather singly: at the authority level, there is a strong interaction between the proportion nonwhite and the degree of segregation. Figure 2 shows how both variables affect the estimated probability of a white British person belonging to the BNP. (The graph omits combinations that are beyond the bounds of what is empirically observed.) The probability of membership is highest in cities where the nonwhite population is substantial and also highly segregated. Where the nonwhite population is small, a high level of segregation makes no difference, as would be expected. More surprising is the
inverse: where segregation is low, a large nonwhite proportion does not increase the probability of membership. (The minor decrease at the lowest level of segregation does not signify; it is an artifact of imposing a plane defined by three parameters.) This finding suggests that contact moderates threat, insofar as segregation reduces contact (beyond the neighbourhood) with minorities.

Hypothesis 4 receives no support. Unemployment at the authority level has no significant effect. The interaction of unemployment with the proportion of nonwhites (Hypothesis 3×4) also has no effect.

When the nonwhite category is disaggregated in Model 4, it is clear that BNP membership responds especially to South Asians and not to blacks. The effect of contact (Hypothesis 1) is again nonlinear, though it is barely discernible (tested jointly, both terms are statistically significant with p = .02). The probability of BNP membership falls rapidly when the proportion of South Asians in the neighbourhood exceeds 7%. At the authority level, there is again a strong interaction between segregation and proportion (Hypothesis 2×3 and also 3). BNP membership is most likely in authorities where South Asians are highly segregated as well as numerous. With all variables set to the median, the probability of BNP membership is .032%. That probability would increase to .076% in an extreme configuration like Leicester, where South Asians comprise 28% of the population and their index of dissimilarity is .64. Contrast a cosmopolitan configuration like Harrow in London, where South Asians comprise 24% but their index of dissimilarity is only .32: here the probability of membership would be .048%. Model 5 defines minority as Muslims. The results are very similar to those at the authority level (Hypotheses 2, 3, and 2×3). At the neighbourhood level, however, the effect of contact (Hypothesis 1) is not statistically significant (tested jointly, p = .14).

Variables for political context have very similar effects in all models. The three towns with major riots in 2001 have a somewhat higher BNP membership, though the effect is not quite statistically significant. The Labour vote has a positive effect. Increasing it from 20% to 60% would raise the probability of BNP membership from .029% to .034%. The effect is small, but it is noteworthy given that the model already incorporates most social and economic characteristics that shape a constituency’s political complexion. This ecological effect is compatible with the hypothesis of political threat. An alternative interpretation could be that people were drawn to the BNP in constituencies where the mainstream right-wing party was too weak to win, but there is no significant association with Conservative vote.

Discussion
Before discussing the implications of the results, we should reiterate their limitations. The data are ecological rather than individual. This ecological problem is exacerbated by the fact that the BNP attracts only a tiny minority of the population; it is mitigated, though, by the small size of the unit of analysis at the lowest level (the neighbourhood). There is a gap of some years between the independent variables and the dependent variable. Despite these limitations, the membership data have the virtue of measuring strong commitment to the BNP, not contaminated by response bias and not influenced by tactical voting.
The results for insecurity suggest that members are similar to those who express support for the BNP in surveys, except for class and unemployment. It is the petit bourgeoisie rather than the proletariat who are most likely to join the party. Unemployment has no discernible effect. Both differences could be explained by the financial demands of membership, which costs £30 per year (£15 for the unemployed). More generally, the people who join any political party tend to have more resources than people who vote for it. One finding that emerges clearly is the importance of the housing market, which is usually neglected by social scientists in favour of the labour market. In Britain this is particularly important due to the high cost of housing (reflecting population density) along with the cultural prestige of home ownership. White British people who live in overcrowded conditions and who neither own property nor enjoy social housing are more likely to blame minorities.

Our primary aim is to disentangle the apparent contradiction between contact and threat theories. At the neighbourhood level, we have provided modest support for contact theory (Hypothesis 1): the probability of BNP membership is lower in neighbourhoods where nonwhites constitute a significant minority. This association is admittedly less certain where minority is defined as South Asian or Muslim. More seriously, however, this association could be interpreted as evidence of another causal mechanism: self-selection. White British people who are racist might naturally choose to live in predominantly white neighbourhoods.

Although our cross-sectional data are not able to adjudicate between self-selection and contact, some considerations favour contact. Rigorous studies in social psychology suggest that contact outweighs selection (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006: 757-8). Similar findings come from an American survey on prejudice which elicited preferences for integration at the neighbourhood level (Oliver and Wong 2003). Whites who lived in predominantly white neighbourhoods are less likely to prefer integration, but when preferences are entered as an independent variable, effectively controlling for self-selection, the actual composition of the neighbourhood still has a strong effect on prejudice. From detailed investigation of the National Front in the 1970s, Husbands (1983: esp. 144) argued that its support came from unusually parochial working-class communities, where people strongly identified with their immediate locality. Note finally that migration from deprived areas in the year preceding the 2001 Census was most likely for people with higher education; these are precisely the people who are least likely to belong to the BNP (Bailey and Livingston 2008). None of these considerations are decisive, of course, and so discriminating contact from self-selection must be left for future research.

Beyond the neighbourhood, the impact of segregation (Hypothesis 3) is also compatible with contact theory. The probability of membership is greatest where the authority has a large minority population who are concentrated in different neighbourhoods from those inhabited by the white British population. This finding cannot be interpreted as self-selection, for it is implausible that racists should move away from authorities like Brent, with a large and relatively integrated minority population, to cities like Leicester, where the minority population is also large but highly segregated; if they were moving to another city, they would surely choose a destination with a negligible minority population.
Contact theory thus receives support from two findings. Given that these pertain to opportunity for contact—not to actual contact, let alone friendship—the theory emerges with considerable credit.

Threat theory gains strong support at the authority level (Hypothesis 2)—with the qualification that threat is mitigated by contact (Hypothesis 3). In cities where minorities are sufficiently numerous to be perceived as a threat, white British people are more likely to belong to the BNP only if the minority population is also highly segregated. Whether the perceived threat is predominantly economic, political, or cultural lies beyond the reach of our analysis. The positive effect of Labour vote suggests the significance of political threat. Where Labour is dominant, some white British people suspect that the council or borough will show favouritism—in the allocation of social housing and schools, for example—to minority communities. These sorts of claims are frequently made in BNP propaganda (e.g. Goodwin 2010: 46). As for economic threat, the absence of any discernible effect for unemployment—at the level of the neighbourhood or authority (Hypothesis 4)—might suggest that competition in the labour market is less significant. The fact that small employers and the self-employed are especially prone to membership could, however, be interpreted as indicating competition in the product market. Taxi-drivers and shopkeepers, for example, might face competition from people of South Asian origins.\footnote{We should emphasize, however, that we are agnostic on the question of whether this threat is real or imaginary; in any case, collective threat is predicated on particular identities and boundaries. To illustrate, a white British shopkeeper might face real competition from his South Asian counterpart, but they both also face a common threat from supermarkets.}

We have measured threat and contact using different definitions of minority. Reinforcing the results of other recent studies of support for the BNP, we have shown that it manifests particular hostility to the overlapping categories of South Asians and Muslims. It should be noted that people who incline towards the BNP are unlikely to be able to distinguish Sikhs and Hindus from Muslims of South Asian heritage.

Conclusion

The leaked BNP membership list is a uniquely valuable source of data. Our analysis advances our understanding of the BNP, and more generally of the extreme right; it also has implications for theories of ethnic hostility or prejudice.

Some of our results reinforce findings from recent analyses of BNP support (Bowyer 2008; Ford and Goodwin 2010), albeit with a more demanding measure of support and with comprehensive geographical coverage. An example is the importance of insecurity in housing. Residing in overcrowded housing and renting from a private landlord make people more receptive to the BNP’s propaganda, which blames these problems on immigrants. Our multilevel analysis also vindicates Bowyer’s (2008) insight into the opposing effects of minority proportion at different spatial scales; we have developed this further by testing the effects of contact over much shorter distances. The most significant novel finding is the importance of segregation within each city. The BNP thrives where the nonwhite (and especially South Asian) population is large—but only if this population is also highly
Segregated. Segregation means that white British people are likely less to have contact with nonwhites in social settings beyond the immediate neighbourhood. It might also mean that the concentration of nonwhites in certain areas makes white British people perceive a greater threat. Whatever the precise mechanism, segregation aids the BNP.

There are two more general lessons for analyses of the extreme right in Europe. One is that contextual effects within the smallest geographical units are worth testing, especially given the compelling theoretical reason to expect them. Another lesson is that it is not sufficient to measure the minority proportion within a geographical unit like the city, even when the proportion is also measured at a lower level. It is also crucial to measure the degree of segregation of minorities within that unit. Recent methodological developments in spatial analysis (e.g., McAllister et al. 2001; Lee et al. 2008) should be exploited in future research. Although we have focused on explaining variation within one country, cross-national studies could also measure the degree of segregation (an index of dissimilarity calculated across cities, for example) within each country.

Our analysis, like almost all empirical studies, uses objective population figures to measure one component of perceived threat. Leaving aside all the other complications of how people in the majority construct perceptions of threat, there is also the question of how they actually estimate the minority proportion. Threat theory assumes a correspondence between subjective estimates and objective numbers. Research already demonstrates, however, that people in the majority greatly exaggerate the size of minority populations (Citrin and Sides 2008). Our finding on the importance of segregation could suggest that subjective estimates depend also on the concentration of minorities in particular areas, by increasing their visibility. This hypothesis is worth testing in future research, and in principle it is readily measured by a survey question asking the respondent to estimate the proportion of a specified minority within a well-defined geographical unit.

We hope finally that our analysis will encourage the synthesis of contact and threat theories. Because these theories have been developed in different disciplines—social psychology and sociology—they have existed in parallel, largely without reference to each another. Our analysis shows how their apparently contradictory predictions can be reconciled. It also suggests that contact and threat interact: what generates hostility is not just a large minority population, but also a high degree of segregation that reduces contact.
References

Carter, Elizabeth L., 2005, *The Extreme Right in Western Europe: Success or Failure?* Manchester: Manchester University Press
Ivarsflaten, Elisabeth, 2008, ‘What Unites Right-Wing Populists in Western Europe? Re-examining Grievance Mobilization Models in Seven Successful Cases’, *Comparative Political Studies* 41: 3-23
James, David R. and Taeuber, Karl E., 1985, ‘Measures of Segregation’, *Sociological Methodology* 15 1-32


Figure 1: Support for the British National Party by Westminster Constituency

Votes for BNP, 2005 election

Members of BNP, 2007
Figure 2: The effect of nonwhite proportion and segregation within authori
Table 1: Probability of a white British adult belonging to the BNP

Binomial logistic regression

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>odds</td>
<td>s.e.</td>
<td>p</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighbourhood</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aged 30 to 65</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>.00 ***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education: no qualifications</td>
<td>1.65</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education: university degree</td>
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<td>.04</td>
<td>.00 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>2.46</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class: managerial &amp; professional</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class: intermediate occupations</td>
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<td>.31</td>
<td>.52</td>
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<tr>
<td>Class: small employers &amp; self-employed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Class: lower supervisory and technical</td>
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<td>.47</td>
<td>.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House: owned</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.01 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House: rented from council</td>
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<td>.05</td>
<td>.00 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overcrowded housing</td>
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<td>.00 **</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nonwhite proportion (H1)</td>
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<td>Authority</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nonwhite segregation (H3)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nonwhite proportion \times segregation (H2 x3)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unemployed (H4)</td>
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<td>Constituency</td>
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<tr>
<td>Labour vote, 2005</td>
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<td>Wales</td>
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<td>.00 ***</td>
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<td>Scotland</td>
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<td>.00 ***</td>
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<td>Random effects (standard deviation)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Neighbourhood</td>
<td>88.9%</td>
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<td>Authority</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
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</table>

N = 218,038 neighbourhoods; 408 authorities

dds: odds ratio; s.e.: standard error; p: p-value for 2-tailed test *** p < .001, ** p < .01, * p < .05
Table 2: Probability of a white British adult belonging to the BNP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Binomial logistic regression</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
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<td>s.e.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>odds</td>
<td>s.e.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

...  

**Neighbourhood**

- South Asian proportion: 1.18, .45, .66
- South Asian proportion squared: .29, .21, .09
- Black proportion: 1.91, 1.38, .37
- Black proportion squared: .36, .73, .62
- Muslim proportion: 1.96, .83, .11
- Muslim proportion squared: .19, .16, .05 *

**Authority**

- South Asian proportion: .11, .25, .33
- South Asian segregation: .52, .14, .02 *
- South Asian proportion x segregation: 3.3E+03, 1.3E+04, .04 *
- Black proportion: .96, .03, .17
- Black segregation: 1.34, .37, .29
- Black proportion x segregation: 1.09, .10, .31
- Muslim proportion: .00, .01, .02 *
- Muslim segregation: .70, .12, .04 *
- Muslim proportion x segregation: 8.3E+05, 3.3E+06, .00 **

**Random effects (standard deviation)**

| Authority | .373 | .017 | .00 *** |
| Authority | .377 | .017 | .00 *** |

| \( R^2 \) | .074 | .074 |

**Unexplained variance**

| Neighbourhood | 88.8% | 88.8% |
| Authority | 3.8% | 3.8% |

N = 218,038 neighbourhoods; 408 authorities  
**odds:** odds ratio; **s.e.:** standard error; **p:** p-value for 2-tailed test  
*** \( p < .001 \), ** \( p < .01 \), * \( p < .05 \)
Notes

i Petersen’s (2002) concept of “resentment” converges with Blumer’s propositions, albeit formulated in terms of emotion rather than cognition.

ii Williams (1947) stated also that the probability of conflict rises with the minority’s rate of growth.

iii Earlier analyses of the proportion of immigrants and votes for the National Front in England in the late 1970s are worth noting. Husbands (1979) and Taylor (1979) included no other variables and their results are not easily interpreted; Whiteley’s (1979) multivariate analysis found no effect.

iv Voting data are taken from Norris (comp., 2005), adding results for one constituency where the election was postponed due to a candidate’s death (South Staffordshire 2005). Constituencies are easily matched with Census output areas for England and Wales (Office for National Statistics 2004). Scottish constituencies were completely reorganized between 2001 and 2005, but the General Register Office for Scotland kindly provided us with matching information—for 188 output areas, geographical imputation is necessary. 17 output areas spanned two or three constituencies, and these were randomly allocated to one.

v This figure is an approximation, calculated by multiplying the number of white British people in each neighbourhood by the fraction aged 18 and over.

vi The Census releases socio-economic tabulations only for the general population at this neighbourhood level, to maintain confidentiality. Ideally we would use figures pertaining exclusively to white British. This would make little difference, because white British are the majority in over 95% of neighbourhoods.

vii The unemployment rate was stable from 2001 to 2007, hovering around 5%.

viii Entering a binary variable for the authorities in Greater London reveals no differences between the metropolis and the rest of Britain.

ix South Asian encompasses those identifying as Indian, Pakistani, or Bangladeshi—but not other—within the category “Asian or Asian British” (“or Asian Scottish” in Scotland). Black includes Caribbean, African, or any other black background. People identifying as “mixed” are excluded.

x Assuming homogenous mixing, the probability is

$$\frac{w_i m_j}{w_i w_j - w_i} = \frac{m_j}{t_i - 1}$$

where \( t \) is the total population (white British and minority and others).

xi There were no South Asians or blacks in the Isles of Scilly (population 2,153), and therefore the index for these groups is undefined. Here 1 is substituted, because the index otherwise reaches .97 and .99 respectively in authorities with a tiny minority population.

xii This interpretation—comparable to the proportion of minorities—makes the index of dissimilarity index especially suitable here, though there are other measures of segregation (James and Taeuber 1985).

xiii This correlation is for England and Wales only, because Scottish constituencies were redrawn between the two elections.

xiv Surprisingly, these simple binary variables are superior to the proportion voting in 2005 for Plaid Cymru and the Scottish Nationalist Party respectively.
An interaction term is sensitive to outliers. This term has its maximum value for Leicester. Even dropping this city, however, the interaction is still large and statistically significant. Adding a squared term for nonwhite proportion at the authority level (like at the neighbourhood level) has no effect.

Adding a squared term has no effect.

People of Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage are disproportionately concentrated in this class: 12% and 10% respectively are small employed and self-employed, compared to 9% of white British (2001 Census, Table T13 for England and Wales, Table S243 for Scotland).

We find a counterintuitive interaction between nonwhite proportion and unemployment (Hypothesis 3×4) at the authority level—resembling Arzheimer’s (2009) finding at the national level—only when the interaction with segregation (Hypothesis 2×3) is omitted.