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HEADLINE: 1 in 5 Britons could vote far right; Ukip and the BNP are far closer in their views and much more popular with voters than most of us realise. Peter John, **Helen Margetts** and Stuart Weir report on new research

BYLINE: Peter John, **Helen Margetts** and Stuart Weir

BODY:

Nick Griffin, chairman of the British National Party, had something extra to celebrate at Christmas. His arrest last month on suspicion of incitement to racial hatred (he was later released on bail until March) gives him a pre-election platform to parade himself yet again as a champion of free speech who is being persecuted for telling the truth about immigration and asylum. This will no doubt be central to his campaign in Keighley, west Yorkshire, where this month he announced his intention to stand against the Labour MP Ann Cryer and where he was arrested for, among other things, saying Islam was 'a vicious, wicked faith'.

The rhetoric of 'truth-telling' is fundamental to the strategies of both the BNP and United Kingdom Independence Party (Ukip) and shows that they are part of the same phenomenon. It allows them to express solidarity with racism and xenophobia while also defining themselves as plain-speaking folk who will risk persecution for their defiance of liberal hegemony and 'politically correct' laws and attitudes.

We have uncovered alarming signs that the BNP has far higher potential support than conventional wisdom would have it at a time when (as the latest British Social Attitudes survey shows) public hostility towards immigration is hardening.

The traditional view is that Britain's constitutional arrangements and tolerant political culture protect it from the dangers of the far-right extremism that has surfaced elsewhere in Europe. The BNP's three council seat victories in Burnley in 2002 (on 28 per cent of the vote) provoked only short-term concerns; and Ukip's successes in the 2004 Euro elections were seen as a one-off.

Yet we estimate that the two parties between them can draw upon a potential reservoir of support from about 20 per cent of the electorate. It is our view that this level of potential backing has existed at least since the late 1960s - when Enoch Powell gave his 'rivers of blood' speech - but is only becoming evident with falling support for the Labour-Conservative duopoly and the introduction of a wider range of elections with diverse voting systems that make voters' preferences more apparent.

The BNP may be easily the most unpopular political party, as three polls on which we have drawn show. Three-quarters of the people questioned in the 2004 State of the Nation poll for the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust said they 'could never vote' for the BNP, with trade unionists especially hostile (at 83 per cent). European election exit polls showed that two-thirds disliked the BNP 'a lot'. But this doesn't mean that people won't vote for it. The Rowntree poll found that 18 per cent across the UK say that they might vote BNP in the future; this proportion rose to 24 per cent in the 2004 London Elections Study. In the European exit polls, 19 per cent said they might vote BNP.

In the London study, more than a quarter had voted BNP in the European, mayoral or London Assembly elections or said they identified with it, or said they might vote for it in the future. Among 18- to 24-year-olds, nearly 10 per cent had given one of their preferences to the BNP in 2004 - and, remember, Ukip was also standing, and eclipsing the BNP. More than a third of these young Londoners contemplated voting BNP in the future.

The BNP and Ukip are bitter rivals, but they draw from the same reservoir of support, and opinion polls and focus groups suggest they are linked in voters' minds. Though Ukip's main policy position is withdrawal from the EU, its policies link the EU and immigration as closely related nationalist concerns. The party would 'put an end to mass immigration'. One of its five pledges is 'freedom from overcrowding' - which echoes popular resentments about immigrants and asylum-seekers clogging up roads, railways, doctors' surgeries, hospitals and even the countryside.

In the European election exit polls, we found that 77 per cent of BNP voters and 53 per cent of Ukip voters - against fewer than a quarter of those who voted for the three main parties - believed immigration to be 'the most important issue facing Britain today'. The media highlighted the rivalry between Ukip and the BNP, and the former's triumph in the elections. But look instead at their combined strength and shared philosophy. Between them they won just over 21 per cent of the total vote in the Euro elections; and the exit polls showed that about half of those who voted BNP in local elections voted for Ukip in the European election. In the London mayoralty elections, nearly half the BNP voters gave their second preferences to Ukip and nearly a quarter of Ukip voters cast theirs for the BNP. Ukip, with its less extreme image, attracts a wider socioeconomic constituency. But its supporters and the BNP's less well-educated supporters have similar views and fears. Crucially, they give importance to the same issues. The two parties thus draw, in large measure, from the same poisoned well.

As Nigel Farage, leader of Ukip's MEPs, explained to the Times, Ukip allows voters to 'express their anxieties about immigration, but without having to vote for a party that is violent and racist'.

Our two focus groups, one of under-45s and one of over-45s, both held in Northampton, revealed how strong and interconnected are the resentments and fears behind the two parties' support. One man said: 'The BNP . . . is a bit more of an extremist party, but definitely I think a lot of people voted for the Ukip . . . because it is a massive talking point, this problem with asylum-seekers.' Someone else chipped in: 'I think some people might feel more strongly about Europe or about immigration, but then they're all singing from the same hymn sheet.'

The groups thought Britain, or rather England, was a pushover for asylum-seekers, who crowd city centres speaking foreign languages, wearing leather jackets, exploiting public services and gaining 'freebies' from the authorities. Similarly, Britain was a pushover in 'Europe', obeying alien rules that others such as the French chose whether or not to recognise. Here's one exchange:

'Europe's going to try and take control of us.'

'They'll be in control of England.'

'In Europe, they're laughing at us, you know, because we're a joke.'

'We're a pushover.'

'Yeah.'

'It's like with immigration.' The talk then verged on overt racism and in the younger group no one challenged these views, even though a black woman was present - and silent throughout. People were open to parties that 'tell the truth' and address their concerns - 'whether they can or can't, they get your attention'. 'You know you can't speak your mind,' said one man. 'It's racist this,

sexist that, and everything else, and I think that's to blame for a lot of things, because a lot of things need to be said, but no one's had the guts to stand up and say it because it will cost them their career.'

This comment clearly referred to Robert Kilroy-Silk, who campaigned in Northampton. It is easy to ridicule Kilroy-Silk and his perma-tan conceit, the pompous Griffin and many of their colleagues. But we should abandon the belief that far-right parties in the UK attract only a lunatic fringe. There is significant potential support for both parties and Ukip has the image and skills to broaden this constituency. We need to take this threat seriously.

Peter John, Hallsworth professor of governance, Manchester University, **Helen Margetts**, of Oxford University's Internet Institute, and Stuart Weir, director of Democratic Audit, Essex University, are working on a study of the BNP's political appeal

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