**Did UKIP win the referendum?**

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On 24 June 2016, one might have been forgiven for thinking that the United Kingdom was finally living the UK Independence Party (UKIP) dream. A clear victory in the referendum held the day before to leave the European Union; a Prime Minister resigning to let various eurosceptics battle it out for the keys to Number 10; a Labour party riven by internal dissent, not least over its stance on immigration. Not for nothing did Nigel Farage, UKIP’s long-standing leader, stride in near raptures across College Green, outside the Houses of Parliament, that morning, to proclaim a new dawn for British politics.

And yet, it might reasonably be asked whether that image is either accurate or helpful. While UKIP’s headline goal, its very *raison d’être*, was achieved on 23 June, it poses the obvious question: what is UKIP for any more? Moreover, did UKIP’s actions and presence actually matter in getting to this present juncture?

**Did UKIP make a referendum happen?**

The starting point for our discussion must be here. Since its foundation in 1993, the party has consistently sought to bring about the UK’s exit from the European Union (EU). Initially, that was to be achieved by securing seats in the European Parliament and using this as a platform to push this policy, both nationally and at the EU level.

While the party was able to build up a presence in the European Parliament from 1999 – once the UK had switched to a proportional representation system – it was clear that this strategy was not going to work: UKIP MEPs were no more than one part of the public debate and held no substantive power. Even the broadening out of the party’s agenda into other areas in the early 2000s – notably on immigration – did not give enough of a base to move debate.

However, at the same time there was a burgeoning movement across the EU for more use of referendums. The immediate cause was the process that ran from 2001 to 2004 to produce the Constitutional Treaty: if the EU was to have a constitution, ran the reasoning, then the people needed a voice and a say in agreeing this. This pressure came from a broad spectrum, from those keen to build a stronger EU through to those wishing to slow or stop it. The result was a series of commitments to referendums in many EU member states, including the UK.

While the 2005 votes in France and the Netherlands were to kill off the Constitutional Treaty, the idea that ‘the voice of the people’ needed to be heard was a powerful one. A paradoxical effect of the resurrection of the failed text as the Lisbon Treaty in 2007 – approved almost entirely by national parliaments – was that while the EU could continue, many more people felt that they were not being heard.

In the UK, this was an essential part of the groundwork for the movement towards a referendum.

In particular, the election of David Cameron as leader of the Conservative party in 2005 and his backtracking on a referendum on Lisbon once it made into force in 2009 provided a clear opportunity for his backbenches to pressure him towards every more critical positions on the EU.

That pressure – ultimately resulting in the Bloomberg speech in 2013, when Cameron committed to a referendum on membership – came from a number of sources. The rise of UKIP from the late 2000s onwards had made some in the Tory party nervous that their voter base was at risk: at the time, UKIP was seen as being very much as of the right of the political spectrum. This reached a peak in 2014 when two Tory MPs defected to UKIP, winning their seats again in by-elections. But just as important were factors more internal to the Conservatives: the growing number of new MPs for whom euroscepticism was a visceral part of their political being, drawing on a very-oversimplified image of Margaret Thatcher as an unbending critic of European integration.

Regardless of the accuracy of such views, as the run-up to the 2015 general election began, there was a general pressure on all parties to commit to a membership referendum. UKIP was, ironically, one of the last to go this: for them, it represented a step back from their position that a UKIP government meant that leaving the EU was a given. It was only to be in the 2015 manifesto that the party finally committed to a popular vote.

**Did UKIP win the referendum?**

If UKIP played only a marginal role in getting a referendum to happen, then once Cameron found himself re-installed in Number 10 in May 2015, the party’s eyes were firmly set on fighting to win the vote.

Nigel Farage’s efforts to resign as party leader were quickly rebuffed and any criticism of his leadership was managed away. The party focused all of its efforts on laying the groundwork for the referendum that still had no date (other than before the end of 2017, following Cameron’s imprecision on the matter).

By the end of summer of 2015, UKIP had used its European Parliament funding to set up a nation-wide tour, with public events and debates. It had also broadly decided that it would ally itself with a new group – Leave.EU – that would contest the referendum and seek to be the official lead organisation for Leave.

This decision was based on the involvement of Arron Banks, UKIP’s largest financial backer, and the relatively free hand it would give Farage to campaign. But it was also a decision with serious consequences.

Firstly, not everyone in the party agreed, including their sole MP, Douglas Carswell. He preferred to work instead with a second group that was aiming to be the designated lead, Vote Leave. This group was more obviously cross-party in composition, albeit also more populated by political insiders.

Secondly, UKIP’s and (especially) Farage’s reputation came at a cost. As the best-known face of British euroscepticism and a very charismatic communicator, Farage was undoubtedly an asset in mobilising voters. However, that also meant mobilisation of those opposed to him. In what looked like a potentially close-run contest, Farage did not necessarily look like the best option to convince those who were wavering in their decision.

The Electoral Commission’s choice in April 2016 of Vote Leave to lead the Leave campaign meant that UKIP would have to abandon Leave.EU if it wanted to get a plum position in the campaign. However, a mixture of personality clashes and continued unease in Vote Leave about how to fit UKIP into their line-up meant that this did not happen.

The upshot of this was to allow Farage and UKIP to play something of a wildcard role in the campaign. Outside of the official campaign, but with their extensive membership list at Leave.EU’s disposal, the party was able to push lines of argument that opened a second front on the Remain campaign.

Most obviously, it was on immigration that UKIP sought to make the running, going beyond Vote Leave’s rhetoric of “uncontrolled immigration” to play up the negative effects on local communities and public services. The unveiling of the “breaking point” in the final week by Farage was the logical culmination of this.

More surprisingly, despite being outside the lead organisation, Farage was still able to get regular coverage, be that for regular press communications or through his involvement in the TV debates. His eye for a line and willingness to provoke served him well in gaining media time, making him easily the most visible Leave campaigner outside of Vote Leave.

But if Farage was able to work to his strengths, then so too did the rest of the party, most notably in local activity: running local pamphletting, town centre stalls and getting voters to polling stations. The groundwork that had been laid for the 2105 general election was put to good effect in the referendum, with a degree of mobilisation unmatched by either StrongerIn or Vote Leave.

When Farage was to claim that UKIP had won the referendum, it was an undoubted overstatement. The figures of Vote Leave – especially Boris Johnson – played a much more central role in the construction of campaign rhetoric and activity, and the constant sniping between Vote Leave and Leave.EU did little to help UKIP’s claim to speak for the country as a whole. However, without the party, it is evident that the campaign would have been very much harder to win.

**Will the referendum mean the end of UKIP?**

Which brings us to the final question, on the continued relevance of the party.

As we noted, the immediate aftermath of the referendum looked to be the ideal situation for UKIP, with a majority of those voting behind a policy decision that the party has long espoused and all major rivals in a state of distress.

This second point matters because UKIP has become more than the single issue on which it was founded: under Farage’s leadership it has become a welcoming home for the many in British society who feel that ‘the system’ isn’t working for them, or has left them behind, economically, socially or politically. In so doing, it has gained supports from across the political spectrum, including many old Labour voters in economically distressed regions of the country.

In that respect, UKIP clearly has a future, because those voters are still disaffected, a feeling that is likely to be heightened by the general sense of unpreparedness and confusion around the referendum result. With neither Labour nor the Conservatives looking to make immediate efforts to reconnect with this constituency, UKIP is well-placed to build up its support further.

However, there are three major hurdles to be leapt.

Firstly, UKIP is losing its talismanic leader. Farage’s announcement to step down, made two weeks after the referendum, makes sense for him personally, as he has achieved his life-long political objective, but he will leave the party in a difficult position.

One of the reasons for Farage’s longevity as leader was his willingness to keep any challenger to his authority on a very short leash: there have been many individuals over the years who have had roles taken away from them, membership suspended or even rescinded. As such, there is no obvious successor, and certainly none that has been able to build up a public profile even remotely close to Farage’s own.

The flip side of this is that the new leader – to be chosen by the autumn – will be able to set a new direction for the party. But here we encounter the second problem, namely that the party is held together by what it dislikes – the EU, uncontrolled immigration – rather than by what it likes. In other words, there is no ideological coherence.

With the removal of one of those core issues – EU membership – it is reasonable to ask whether the immigration is enough to hold the party together, especially if a post-Brexit deal allows for restrictions on people entering the UK. For all that the party has done in trying to build a full manifesto of policies in recent years, without the USP of being outside the EU, it is going to become a much harder sell to voters.

And this is the third hurdle: representation. A paradox on Brexit is that UKIP will be losing its main institutional representation – its MEPs – and their funding, which has been an important income stream, even after the growth of recent years. The failure to break through in the Commons in 2015 highlights the difficulties of a First-Post-the-Post system for an insurgent party: recall that this came after a very strong phase for the party after the 2014 European elections and very substantial funding for campaigning. With no obvious waypoint before the 2020 general election, the party risks losing what little momentum it still has.

Of course, for all these problems, it is important to recall that UKIP has been one of the more resilient parts of modern British politics. Riven by internal tensions throughout its existence, it has come back from the edge several times: even in its current position, it is much stronger than it has been at any point before this decade.

At a time when the entire political system is in disarray, UKIP cannot be discounted as a voice for a wide constituency. Whoever becomes its new leader, they will find many opportunities in the twists and turns of Brexit negotiations, Scottish independence and the general mêlée of party politics to establish a new narrative and basis for support. However, that might well mean that UKIP undergoes some radical surgery, just as it enters the post-EU era that it has long fought for.