

Crisis, Populism & Anti-Immigration Politics in Britain

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the sources of support for Reform UK, arguing that anti-immigration attitudes function as a discursively mediated expression of economic insecurity rather than an autonomous cultural disposition. It contributes an original synthesis of social reproduction theory and populism studies, demonstrating that the binary between economic and cultural explanations of radical right support is analytically false. Situating Reform UK's rise within the conditions produced by the 2008 Global Financial Crisis and subsequent austerity, the dissertation argues that the material contraction of welfare and social provision generated the insecurity that Reform UK's populist rhetoric has strategically reframed as cultural threat, translating a crisis of social reproduction into a crisis of national belonging.

A mixed-methods design combines quantitative analysis of British Election Study Wave 29 (N = 31,098) with Critical Discourse Analysis of Reform UK and UKIP political communications spanning 2014–2026. Binary logistic regression identifies anti-immigration attitudes as explaining 37.9% of variance in Reform support independently, rising to 41.0% when populist attitudes — elite distrust, British identity, and subjective economic insecurity — are included, consistent with partial mediation. The qualitative analysis applies Aslanidis's Collective

Action Framing and Laclau's chain of equivalence to examine how Reform UK's rhetoric constructs a unified antagonism between austerity-induced insecurity, immigrant threat, and elite betrayal. Particular attention is paid to femonationalist and orientalist narratives that mobilise gendered and racialised threats to consolidate a racially exclusive British national identity. The dissertation finds that support for Reform UK is best understood not as a reflection of objective socioeconomic position, with income and housing tenure showing weak associations, but as the product of a discursive process in which subjective insecurity is translated into racialised hostility. Economic and cultural explanations are inseparable dimensions of the same process; Reform UK's rhetoric functions as the mechanism through which material anxiety is consolidated into targeted political hostility.

Introduction

Right-wing populist parties (RPPs) have moved populism from what was previously understood as a ‘normal pathology’ of western democracy to a ‘populist zeitgeist’ at the centre of mainstream politics (Mudde 2004, p. 541). This phenomenon is evident across Europe: from Viktor Orbán’s 2010 – 2026 illiberal democracy in Hungary, to the electoral breakthroughs of France’s National Rally, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and Fratelli d’Italia (Bíró-Nagy 2017). Each represents distinct but structurally comparable articulations of RPPs (Xiong 2023, p. 241). The re-election of Donald Trump in 2024 as the president of the United States (US) further illustrates how populist rhetoric is broadening the boundaries of acceptable political discourse normalising previously controversial attitudes. As political figures achieve or consolidate success despite, or through derogatory language, prejudices recently considered socially unacceptable have found renewed political expression (Crandall et al. 2018, p. 186).

Reform UK’s rise reflects a broader transformation in British politics, in which traditional class-based voting alignments are less rigid as new divisions structured around identity and culture are becoming increasingly significant (Evans and Tilley 2017, p. 714). Reform UK has rearticulated a familiar populist project within a post-Brexit context, presenting itself as an insurgent force challenging a corrupt and unresponsive establishment. At the core of this appeal lies a populist logic that constructs politics as a struggle between a virtuous people and a corrupt, self-serving elite. In post-Brexit UK, immigration functions as the primary discursive vehicle through which this antagonism is expressed (Mudde 2004, p. 543).

This dissertation examines the sources of support for Reform UK by analysing the interplay between socioeconomic conditions, political attitudes, and national identity. It engages with a key debate in the literature on radical right populism: whether support for such parties is primarily driven by economic 'left-behind' status or by cultural and identity-based grievances (Fetzer 2019, p. 3849, Inglehart and Norris 2016, p. 1). While some accounts emphasise the role of material deprivation and class position, others highlight the growing importance of value-based cleavages, particularly those linked to immigration, national identity, and distrust of political institutions that operate in an increasingly volatile electoral landscape (Inglehart and Norris 2016, p. 4). This study finds that support for Reform UK cannot be reduced to objective socioeconomic positions but is the outcome of a mediated process in which subjective economic insecurity is translated into political preferences through strategic cultural and discursive frames.

Literature Review

Theorising Populism

The literature on populism is marked by conceptual contestation, with ideational, discursive and strategic approaches offering three distinct accounts. The most influential ideational definition of populism remains Cas Mudde's (2004, p. 544) conception of a 'thin-centred ideology'. Unbound to a specific host ideology, this approach understands populism as organised around a moral binary between a 'pure people' and a 'corrupt elite'. Detached from the traditional left-right axis it enables international and cross-temporal comparison (Mudde 2004, p. 543). Yet this same parsimony is criticised for disregarding the contextual and discursive variation through which populism emerges (Aslanidis 2024, p. 59). This Manichean logic renders politics a zero-sum contest in which criticism of the populist leader is construed as a witch-hunt orchestrated by corrupt elites (Mudde 2004, p. 562; Müller 2016, p. 20). The high moral stakes render any compromise with 'corrupt elites' a betrayal of 'the people',

sitting in fundamental tension with the pluralist foundations of liberal democracy. While populist politics can operate across diverse contexts, it is increasingly articulated through national identity, grounding moral antagonisms in a politics of belonging and cultural attachment (Inglehart and Norris 2016, p. 4).

The ideational approach is criticised for treating populism as a stable set of beliefs, thereby underplaying its strategic and performative dimensions. Understanding populism's contextual and discursive enactment in contemporary Britain therefore requires a thicker account of the term. Paris Aslanidis (2024, p. 59) understands the characteristics outlined by Mudde as discursively constructed collective action frames (CAF) rather than a static ideology. The discursive approach conceptualises populism as a 'meaning-making operation' structured around three stages: the diagnostic, prognostic and motivational, which function respectively to assign blame to a specific entity, prescribe a solution and cultivate a sense of temporal urgency (Aslanidis 2024, p. 58, Benford and Snow 2000, p. 616). This approach emphasises human agency in constructing a 'level of reality' through discursive signifiers such as 'the people', 'sovereignty' and 'national identity' (Aslanidis 2024, p. 52, p. 57). Ernesto Laclau (2005, p. 40, p. 70-71) argues that these signifiers are 'emptied' of their content and reconstrued to function as 'nodal points' that draw together disparate grievances. Akin to Aslanidis's diagnostic stage, Laclau (2005, p. 35) theorises that populism requires the naming of an antagonistic group to blame for shared grievances. This establishes a chain of equivalence between grievances such as material insecurity or political distrust, and a named out-group (Laclau 2005, p. 71).

Where the discursive approach is useful in providing an account of populism's symbolic architecture, the political strategic approach (PSA) offers insight into the importance of the 'personalistic leader' (Weyland 2021, p. 185). Rhetorical devices are understood as a deliberate political strategy deployed by leadership figures seeking to

establish and consolidate a mass following (Weyland 2021, p. 187). While there may be specific nodal points within the populist discourse, an otherwise fluid ideology enables a 'revealed preferences approach' whereby populist strategy is calibrated to exploit 'conjunctural opportunities', such as economic crisis, that provide the conditions for successful mobilisation (Weyland 2021, p. 186). While PSA has been criticised for an excessive focus on leadership, sidelining demand-side factors, this study understands both aspects as co-constitutive of populist mobilisation (Rueda 2021, p. 174). This integrated approach, combining Aslanidis's CAF stages with Laclau's chain of equivalence and Weyland's PSA, is applied to United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and Reform UK, cases that combine named out-groups, charismatic leadership and discursive flexibility.

Realignment & Reform UK

Historically, the British electoral landscape was anchored in the material stability of a geographically concentrated industrial working class whose shared conditions provided the structure for durable partisan alignment. Shared employment and communal 'third spaces' fostered cohesive social identities that reinforced a 'neighbourhood pattern' of voting behaviour (Miller 1997, p. 65). Deindustrialisation and the expansion of the middle class eroded this alignment, displacing the electorate from partisan loyalty toward an increasingly volatile and de-aligned model of voting behaviour (Denver 2005, p. 292). This transformation incentivised a Downsian convergence, reflected in New Labour's strategic pivot to the centre (Downs 1957). In courting the median voter of the growing middle class, New Labour successfully captured the centre but alienated its traditional voting base (English et al. 2016, p. 581). This representational vacuum rendered old Labour voters available to parties able to articulate their sense of abandonment, a dynamic reflected in growing working-class support for UKIP (Ford and Goodwin 2014, p. 152).

UKIP, formerly a marginal Eurosceptic party, evolved into an organised populist movement culminating in the 2016 Brexit referendum. Nigel Farage subsequently founded the Brexit Party and, in 2021, Reform UK, consolidating socially conservative concerns around opposition to the EU, immigration, and the established political class. While Reform UK may appear as a repository for disaffected conservatives, the working class constituted 42% of UKIP's support between 2004 and 2013 (Ford and Goodwin 2014, p. 152). Daniel Oesch (2008, p. 350) identified this as a seemingly 'paradoxical link'; those most at risk in the labour market frequently support radical right-wing protectionism in apparent contradiction to the left-wing interventionism that would more directly serve their material interests. This 'proletarianisation' of support demonstrates that such actors have occupied the representational vacuum by organising an insider-outsider antagonism that condenses disparate working-class grievances regarding material insecurity into a singular, exclusionary nationalist diagnostic frame (Mudde 1999, p. 183; Aslanidis 2024, p. 57).

Denver and Johns (2022, p. 211) argue that a 'geographical bifurcation' has occurred between cosmopolitan centres and 'left behind' rural towns producing divergent political cultures. This electoral restructuring is characterised by the emergence of a 'vertical axis' of sociocultural and post-material values, specifically a libertarian-authoritarian dimension that cuts across the horizontal axis of traditional left-right conflict (Denver and Johns 2022, p. 211; Norris and Inglehart 2019, p. 19). This reconfiguration advantages insurgent parties, enabling the exploitation of 'conjunctural opportunities', while their absence of a governing record leaves them unfettered by the electoral 'punishment' associated with policy failure (Weyland 2021, p. 186; Clarke et al. 2009, p. 315). Since 2015, growing polarisation suggests that Brexit activated a vertical, libertarian-authoritarian axis of political conflict, a cleavage that has persisted following the UK's exit from the EU (Denver and Johns 2022, p. 211). Reform UK's focus on

law and order, border control, family values, and national identity, issues that strongly predicted leave support in 2016, map onto the socially conservative pole of this axis. This aligns with Norris and Inglehart's (2019, p. 32) cultural backlash thesis, which identifies anti-immigration attitudes and national identity as value-based rather than materially driven predictors of authoritarian populist support. While established literature identifies age, education, and ethnicity as robust demographic predictors of support for Reform UK, this study seeks to identify the subjective attitudinal dispositions and the populist discursive frames that contribute to its base, thereby moving beyond demographic description toward an explanatory account of how structural conditions are translated into political preference (Ford and Goodwin 2014, p. 175).

Financial Crisis and Social Reproductive Insecurity

This section examines the structural conditions produced by the 2008 Global Financial Crisis (GFC), arguing that the material pressures of austerity displaced reproductive costs onto households, generating the insecurity that RPPs have strategically reframed as cultural and demographic threat. Central to this analysis is Social Reproduction Theory (SRT), which holds that capitalist accumulation is subsidised by and requires the unpaid labour that is performed in the domestic sphere (Fraser 2017, p. 33). This is grounded in Marx's analysis that the exploitation of labour power constitutes the sole source of surplus value in the circuit of capital accumulation (Marx [1867]1977, p. 106). The unpaid work required to produce and maintain capable labour power thus represents an unremunerated yet indispensable subsidy to capital, one that is systematically concealed by the devaluation of feminised reproductive labour (Fraser 2017, p. 33; Peterson 2005, p. 517). The tension between capital's dependence on reproductive labour and its systematic devaluation of that labour was intensified by the move from Fordist to financialised capitalism. The breakdown of Bretton Woods (1971-1973) detached money from its commodity value and facilitated greater financial expansion. This enabled states to competitively

deregulate constraints on financial circulation to attract mobile capital. Alongside deregulation, declining real wages undermined household purchasing power (Kotz 2008, p. 11). In a state of overaccumulation, capital was increasingly redirected into fictitious instruments such as credit and complex derivatives, generating financial claims that expanded beyond the circuit's capacity for realisation (Bresser-Pereira 2010, p. 3; Clarke 1994, p. 96; Jessop 2004, p. 4). The collapse of the US subprime housing bubble revealed that trillions of ostensibly safe securities could not be validated, exposing what Bob Jessop (2004, p. 4) terms the failure of 'temporal fixes' that defer rather than resolve the structural contradictions of capitalist accumulation. An increasingly integrated financial system saw this crisis operate at a global scale.

This crisis revealed how aggregate demand and social reproduction had been sustained through household debt while real incomes remained stagnant (Bresser-Pereira 2010, p. 14). Jessop (2004, p. 5) theorises that crisis under capitalism functions as a violent regulatory mechanism, devaluing capital and labour power to clear surpluses and renew the conditions for accumulation. Similarly, Loïc Wacquant's (2012, p. 66) concept of the 'centaur state' - liberal at the top, punitive at the bottom - argues that financial deregulation at the top necessitates a corresponding withdrawal of the 'social hand' of the state at the bottom (Fraser 2017, p. 33). The UK's response to the GFC began with bank bailouts and developed into a politically guided intensification of market rule and austerity policy (HM Treasury 2012, p. 24, p. 40). Fraser (2022, p. 9) understands financialised capitalism as inherently self-cannibalising, devouring the social foundations on which it depends through the contraction of welfare provision.

As individuals are driven into credit dependency to avoid poverty and maintain social status, they are subjected to market discipline and intensified financial precarity (Foucault 2008, p. 139, p. 146). The effects of 'disciplinary

neoliberalism' are disproportionately absorbed through increased pressure on residual public services and the concentration of reproductive burdens onto the domestic sphere (Nunn and Tepe-Belfrage 2022, p. 1305). Simultaneously, the state shifted responsibility for contested economic outcomes onto ostensibly neutral technocratic authorities through what Burnham (2001, p. 127) terms the strategic 'depoliticisation' of monetary and fiscal policy, obscuring the political authorship of austerity and intensifying the institutional distrust that Reform UK subsequently exploited.

Public services that had previously alleviated the fiscal, emotional and temporal costs of social reproduction, such as community centres, social care and child benefits were systematically contracted under austerity, displacing these costs onto households already trying to manage stagnant or declining real wages (Briggs and Hall 2023, p. 15). Women disproportionately absorb the intensified reproductive burden alongside their exploitation in the sphere of production; this dual exploitation manifests most acutely through time poverty, labour market withdrawal, and an increased psychological burden (Fraser 2017, p. 21). This condition of social reproductive insecurity, characterised by material precarity, institutional abandonment, and the displacement of care costs onto already-strained households, constitutes the subjective experience upon which Reform UK's populist discourse operates. Consistent with Aslanidis's (2024, p. 57) diagnostic stage of CAF, Reform UK attributes this insecurity, experienced most acutely by those hit hardest by austerity, to immigrant competition for scarce public resources, converting structural economic grievances into an exclusionary political demand. The relationship between SRT and populism is therefore not merely complementary but structurally necessary: austerity cannibalises the social foundations that Fordist stability once provided, generating the affective conditions of abandonment and scarcity that populist discourse translates into a crisis of national belonging. This is a dimension that accounts focused on labour market position and cultural values have overlooked.

From Grievance to Support

Thiemo Fetzer's (2019, p. 3849) analysis of the Understanding Society Study identifies a significant association between welfare retrenchment and UKIP support, concluding that austerity cuts functioned as an 'activating factor' for the success of the Leave campaign in the 2016 referendum. Those most affected by welfare cuts were more likely to report political inefficacy and institutional abandonment, particularly among those from communities previously reliant on routine and manufacturing employment (Fetzer 2019, p. 3849). While Fetzer (2019, p. 3852) notes the era's anti-immigration rhetoric, he does not formally model it as a statistical mediator. This study addresses that gap, testing whether anti-immigration attitudes mediate the relationship between subjective decline and Reform support. It extends the insights from Fetzer's contribution to a post-Brexit landscape, providing temporal relevance to the recent surge in Reform UK (Heath et al. 2024, p. 91). Though Fetzer establishes that austerity functioned as a material trigger for populist support, his work focuses primarily on benefit receipt, lacking the range of attitudinal and discursive dimensions to understand how material hardship is articulated into a 'nationalist common sense' (Kılınçoğlu 2024, p. 89).

Antonio Gramsci (1971, p. 10) provides a structural account of this discursive translation, theorising how changes in the sphere of economic production generate new configurations of social groups including subaltern groups, often racially or culturally distinct that are constituted in relation to and against the dominant bloc. This aims to preserve hegemonic consent by channelling social antagonism toward those groups rather than toward existing power relations (Gramsci 1971, p. 10). Muzafer Sherif et al.'s (1961, p. 201) social-psychological account complements this, experimentally tracing the origins of prejudice to material competition for scarce resources, rather than to innate disposition. Relative deprivation theory extends this further, emphasising the potency of

comparison and competition (Runciman and Bagley 1969, p. 363). It finds that perceived or experienced insecurity relative to a reference group, rather than objective material position, is the primary driver of political grievances (Alesina and La Ferrara 2000, p. 847). These frameworks collectively inform the central hypothesis of this study: that Reform UK's rhetoric scapegoats subaltern groups for the material consequences of austerity, generating the affective conditions through which right-wing nativist narratives translate economic grievance into anti-immigration political demands (Aslanidis 2024, p. 58).

While economic disruption can provide the conditions for political realignment, it cannot determine its direction or success. Stuart Hall's (1979, p. 15) concept of Authoritarian Populism (AP) theorises how material conditions can be discursively organised into a coherent right-wing nationalist appeal to 'the people' characterised by authoritarian cultural conservatism and moral authoritarianism. In his analysis of Thatcherism, Hall (1988, p. 10) describes the construction of a vertical cleavage between the hard-working, respectable citizen and the parasitic welfare claimant (Jessop et al. 1984, p. 53-55). This framework retains analytical purchase; immigrants are substituted for the welfare claimant as the object responsible for depleting state resources from the 'deserving' citizen, despite their substantial contribution to the UK's care and hospitality sectors (Migration Observatory 2024). That this diagnostic framing persists despite contradicting the empirical record speaks to the discursive power of populist narrative to override evidential counterargument. Fairclough's (2010, p. 218) dialectical-relational approach to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides the basis to examine how this operates. This approach understands discourse as simultaneously constituting and being constituted by social relations; power, institutions and beliefs 'internalise' language without being reducible to it. This is directly relevant to how Reform UK's diagnostic framing acquires common-sense status despite contradicting reality (Fairclough

2010, p. 218). This enables Laclau's 'naming' operation through which a demand, "once one of many", in this case, immigration control, "acquires centrality and becomes the name of something exceeding it" (Laclau 2005, p. 120).

Methodology

This dissertation employs a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative survey analysis with qualitative CDA to examine the attitudinal and discursive bases of Reform UK support. A critical political economy ontology is adopted, while a constructivist epistemology holds that structural crises only generate specific political outcomes when articulated through constructed antagonisms. The quantitative component identifies statistical associations between economic insecurity, populist attitudes, and Reform UK support, while the qualitative component examines the discursive mechanisms through which structural grievances are politically articulated.

Data Source

British Election Study (BES) Wave 29 (July–September 2024) was selected as the primary quantitative dataset for its temporal proximity to Reform UK's 2024 electoral surge and the broader rise of anti-immigration, nationalist movements (Heath et al. 2024, p. 91), providing a large sample of 31,098. Valid sample sizes vary across variables due to missing data. Variable selection is theoretically driven rather than exhaustive, constituting an acknowledged source of specification bias. As a voluntary panel study, the BES is subject to non-response bias — those agreeing to participate in long-running political surveys are likely to be more politically engaged than the general population, potentially underrepresenting the most disengaged segments of the electorate in which populist support may be concentrated. Demographic factors including age, gender, and ethnicity, are widely explored in other literature and are omitted to maintain analytical focus on attitudinal predictors, yet this is acknowledged as a limitation (Ford and Goodwin 2014, p. 152).

Operationalising Variables

Variables were selected to operationalise the theoretical framework's core constructs: objective and subjective economic insecurity and populist attitudinal dispositions, including anti-immigration attitudes that were also a hypothesised mediator.

Reform Support

Reform support (BES Variable 245) is operationalised as an overall attitude toward Reform UK on a like-dislike scale rather than vote choice, minimising the influence of tactical voting on underlying attitudinal dispositions.

Immigration Attitudes

Anti-immigration attitudes (BES Variable 359) operationalised the discursive framing of economic insecurity as cultural threat by capturing the out-group hostility dimension of Mudde's (2004, p. 562) thin-centred ideology. Theoretically positioned as both a mediator between structural conditions and Reform support and an independent predictor, this variable is modelled as a dependent and independent variable across the regression models. While central to Reform UK's populist appeal, anti-immigration is not grouped with other variables measuring populist characteristics to enable clear comparison.

Objective Economic Insecurity

Objective economic insecurity is operationalised through gross household income (BES Variable 1472) and housing tenure (BES Variable 1467), capturing objective material position and long-term economic security

respectively. Their inclusion provides an empirical test of the relative deprivation hypothesis that subjective rather than objective insecurity constitutes the more politically consequential driver of Reform support (Alesina and La Ferrara 2000, p. 847).

Subjective Economic Evaluation

Subjective economic evaluation is operationalised through expected household financial situation (BES Variable 251), capturing perceived economic trajectory rather than absolute position. This is consistent with relative deprivation theories as described above (Nunn and Tepe-Belfrage 2022, p. 1315; Alesina and La Ferrara 2000, p. 847).

Populist Attitudes Variables

Two variables operationalise the populist characteristics of Reform UK's appeal. Trust in MPs (BES Variable 877) captures the anti-elite sentiment central to Reform UK's anti-Westminster position and British identity (BES Variable 881) captures the in-group national belonging through which this appeal is articulated. These are analysed separately rather than combined into an index as they are not assumed to exhaust the full range of populist beliefs. Individual analysis permits clearer assessment of their distinct contributions to Reform support and anti-immigration attitudes.

Recoding

All variables were recoded into three ordinal categories to ensure directional consistency, with higher values indicating stronger alignment with populist attitudes and Reform support; Reform support and immigration attitudes were additionally recoded into binaries for use as dependent variables in logistic regression. Responses

coded Don't Know (9999) were treated as missing throughout. The three-category recoding prioritises strong attitudinal alignment over moderate positions, consistent with the study's focus on Reform UK's populist core. Full recoding details are provided in Appendix C.

Quantitative Analysis

Frequency distributions were generated for all recoded variables and verified against original data. Cross-tabulations were conducted for each variable against Reform support to identify associations of greatest substantive significance. Given that large samples such as the BES (N = 31,098) can achieve statistical significance for substantively negligible effects, a conservative significance threshold of $p < 0.01$ is applied throughout (Sedgwick 2014, p. 349). Effect size is measured using Cramér's V, with thresholds adjusted for degrees of freedom ($df = 4$): $ES < 0.05$ reflects a negligible association, $0.05 \leq ES < 0.15$ a weak association, $0.15 \leq ES < 0.25$ a moderate association, and $ES \geq 0.25$ a strong association (Cohen 1988, p. 222; Zaiontz, n.d.).

To ensure the model captures moderately associated variables yet prioritises substantive predictors, only variables with a Cramér's V exceeding 0.10 are carried forward to regression analysis. Model fit is assessed using adjusted Nagelkerke R^2 , interpreted against Cohen's (1988, p. 283) benchmarks of small (0.02), medium (0.13), and large (0.26) effect sizes. Given the positive coding direction established above, adjusted odds ratios (OR) above one or higher indicate a greater likelihood of Reform support or anti-immigration attitudes respectively. Multicollinearity diagnostics confirmed no evidence of collinearity across variables ($VIF < 5$; tolerance > 0.2). Mediation is tested using Baron and Kenny's (1986, p. 1176) four-step procedure (Appendix A). As binary logistic regression cannot confirm mediation directly, this test is indicative rather than definitive; bootstrapped indirect effects via Hayes's

(2018) PROCESS macro would provide more robust analysis (Bolin 2014, p. 336). The following regression models assess predictor strength and test the mediation pathway:

- Model A examines the collective and independent predictive power of populist attitudes and anti-immigration attitudes on Reform support. A hierarchical entry structure isolates the contributions of anti-immigration attitudes and populist attitudes, by entering the anti-immigration attitudes in Block 2 after controlling for the populist attitudes.
 - Dependent variable: Reform UK Support
 - Block 1: Economic Insecurity, Elite Distrust, National Identity
 - Block 2: Immigration Attitudes
- Model B reverses the entry order to assess the change in model fit between blocks when anti-immigration attitudes are entered first, providing a basis for comparison with Model A and enabling bivariate assessment of anti-immigration attitudes on Reform support in Block 1.
 - Dependent variable: Reform UK Support
 - Block 1: Anti-Immigration attitudes
 - Block 2: Economic Insecurity, Elite Distrust, National Identity
- Model C was designed to investigate the relationship between populist attitudes and anti-immigration by using anti-immigration attitudes as the dependent variable. It aims to better understand how anti-immigration functions within models A and B while assessing whether anti-immigration attitudes function as an indirect mediator between populist dispositions and Reform support.

- o Dependent variable: Anti-Immigration Attitudes
- o Predictors: Economic Insecurity, Elite Distrust, National Identity

Critical Discourse Analysis

Political attitudes do not translate directly into political behaviour but are mediated through discourse, which frames grievances and assigns meaning to material conditions. CDA is applied to political rhetoric produced by Nigel Farage, UKIP, and Reform UK to examine the discursive mechanisms through which structural grievances are politically mediated. Where the BES analysis identifies statistical associations between attitudinal dispositions and Reform support, CDA explores how these associations are produced and assigned meaning. Aslanidis's (2024, p. 59) CAF provides the primary analytical framework, as defined in 2.1. Laclau's (2005, p. 71) chain of equivalence directs attention to how disparate grievances are unified through a shared antagonist, while Weyland's PSA (2021, p. 185) directs analytical focus toward Farage as a personalistic leader whose rhetoric reflects deliberate conjunctural strategy.

Three theoretically grounded coding categories are applied:

- **Invasion narrative:** Operationalises out-group naming by identifying language that constructs immigration as an existential threat to national sovereignty or cultural identity.
- **Welfare competition:** Operationalises language that constructs a zero-sum antagonism between the deserving citizen and the undeserving outsider.
- **Anti-elite sentiment:** Operationalises language that constructs the political establishment as complicit in generating and sustaining immigration and, in this view, also social insecurity.

Corpus Overview

Sources were selected to capture variation across the institutional, mediated, and informal contexts through which Reform UK's rhetoric operates. Consistent with Weyland's (2021) PSA and Fairclough's (2010, p. 221) recognition of multimodal texts, the sample is typologically diverse, spanning parliamentary contributions, conference speeches, press interviews, social media content, campaign materials, and press coverage.

Parliamentary contributions (2025) provide formally constrained elite communication enabling analysis of rhetoric within institutional debate. Party conference speeches (Farage 2014–2025) represent strategic communication directed at partisan audiences, revealing the movement's core CAF in controlled settings. News interviews and press conferences (2025–26) provide mediated communication under journalistic challenge, testing CAF consistency across less controlled environments. Social media content (X and YouTube 2024–26) enables analysis of direct, unmediated populist communication at scale. The 2016 UKIP campaign poster is included as symbolic communication analysed for the compression of the diagnostic CAF into visual form. Press coverage (2026) captures the broader discursive environment within which Reform UK's rhetoric is circulated and amplified. For full source details see Appendix B.

Restricting analysis to a single communicative format would only capture one register of a strategically flexible rhetorical project. The dataset spans 2014–2026, corresponding to UKIP's post-austerity surge, the 2016 Brexit referendum, and Reform UK's recent mobilisation — each representing 'conjunctural opportunities' identified by Weyland as activating populist support. Variation across these contexts is analytically productive, revealing how the movement's collective action frame is adapted across audiences while maintaining its core diagnostic structure.

Coding and Analysis

Coding was conducted iteratively, with categories refined through repeated engagement with the Reform UK's political communications. Where multiple themes appeared within a single extract, simultaneous coding was applied, reflecting Laclau's (2005, p. 71) argument that populist discourse derives its power from condensing multiple grievances into a unified antagonism. Quantitative findings regarding Reform UK's attitudinal base are integrated with qualitative analysis of how political actors translate diffuse economic anxiety into targeted hostility toward a racialised out-group, illuminating the mechanism connecting structural conditions to populist political demand (Fairclough 2010, p. 221). Following Fairclough's (2010, p. 218) argument that discourse analysis must move beyond textual description toward explanation of the social conditions that produce and are reproduced by language, quoted extracts function as illustrative anchors for theoretically informed analytical claims rather than as standalone evidence.

Quantitative Results

Survey Data: British Election Study Wave 29 Internet Panel July – September 2024

The sample skews toward Reform scepticism (64.9% strongly disliking), consistent with Reform UK's minority but electorally significant base. 50.6% of the sample favoured reducing immigration and 51.4% identified as very strongly British. Valid sample sizes across the four independent variables range from $N = 28,105$ to $N = 30,486$, indicating minimal missing data concerns. Descriptive statistics are detailed in Appendix D.

Bivariate Analysis

To examine associations between attitudinal variables and Reform UK support, cross-tabulations were conducted for each variable, using Cramér's V to assess effect size.

Table 1. Reform Cross Tabulation Summary

Variable	Cramér's V	Valid N
Trust in MPs X	.105	28214
Reform ***		
Economic	.164	26593
Evaluation X		
Reform ***		
British Identity X	.179	28646
Reform ***		
Anti-Immigration	.389	27663
X Reform ***		
Housing Tenure X	.056	28364
Reform ***		
Household Income X	.079	21755
Reform ***		

Note: Total N = 31,098, *** = $P < .001$

All six variables demonstrated statistically significant associations with Reform UK support ($p < .001$). Consistent with the exclusion threshold of Cramér's $V < 0.10$ established in the methodology, housing tenure ($V = .056$) and household income ($V = .079$) demonstrated only weak associations and were excluded from further analysis. The most notable finding is the substantially stronger association between anti-immigration attitudes and Reform

support ($V = .389$) relative to all other variables, which cluster within a narrow band between $V = .105$ and $V = .179$. This gap suggests that immigration attitudes function as the dominant attitudinal predictor of Reform support, aligning with the theoretical expectation. It supports the application of Aslanidis's (2024, p. 57) diagnostic stage in which immigration is identified as Reform UK's primary out-group. Among those strongly liking Reform, 93.2% favoured reducing immigration compared to just 1.4% favouring increased immigration showing near-complete alignment between strong Reform support and anti-immigration attitudes. Among those strongly disliking Reform, only 29.6% favoured reducing immigration, confirming that opposition to immigration is strongly aligned with Reform support. This is consistent with Mudde's (2004, p. 562) out-group hostility framework. Trust in MPs ($V = .105$) demonstrates a modest but significant association, with those expressing low institutional trust appearing as substantially more likely to strongly support Reform (52.6%) than those with high trust (2.8%). This supports the anti-elite dimension of populism explicit in Reform UK's anti-Westminster positioning (Mudde 2004, p. 543). Subjective economic evaluation ($V = .164$) shows a comparable pattern: those expecting their financial situation to worsen were substantially more likely to strongly support Reform (58.3%) than those expecting improvement (9.2%). This supports the relative deprivation hypothesis that perceived economic trajectory rather than absolute material position constitutes the more politically consequential driver of populist support (Alesina and La Ferrara 2000, p. 847).

British identity produced the second strongest association ($V = .179$), with strongly British respondents most likely to strongly support Reform (71.4%) compared to those not identifying as British (4.4%) - consistent with Norris and Inglehart's (2019, p. 32) cultural backlash thesis which identifies the role of national identity in anchoring Reform UK's populist appeal. Taken together, these findings confirm the theoretical expectation that Reform support is driven by a cluster of populist attitudinal dispositions, with anti-immigration attitudes operating as the

dominant predictor. This pattern justified the examination of whether anti-immigration attitudes also mediate the relationship between populist attitudes and Reform support.

Regression Analysis

Predicting Reform Support

Binary logistic regression was conducted individually for economic evaluation, British identity, elite distrust, and anti-immigration attitudes to examine their individual effect on Reform UK support with full results detailed in Appendix F. While each variable independently predicted Reform support, hierarchical regression was employed to assess the incremental explanatory power of populist attitudes and anti-immigration when the other was controlled for.

Model A. Binary Logistic Regression: Reform Support: Populist Attitudes and Anti-Immigration

Table 2. Block 1

Variable		OR (95% CI)
British	Identity	2.580 (2.44-2.728)

Elite Distrust	***	1.809 (1.803-1.982)
Economic		1.890 (1.707-1.917)
Evaluation	***	

Nagelkerke R ²	0.162
Constant	-6.263
χ^2	2727.989

N=23,909 *** = P<.001, CI=Confidence Intervals, constant reported as log-odds coefficient (β).

Block 1 enters the three populist attitude predictors simultaneously. All three significantly predicted Reform support ($p < .001$), with British identity returning the strongest association (OR = 2.580), followed by subjective economic evaluation (OR = 1.890) and elite distrust (OR = 1.809), together explaining 16.2% of variance in Reform support (Nagelkerke R² = 0.162).

Table 3. Block 1: Populist Attitudes Block 2: Immigration Attitudes

Variable	OR (95% CI)
British Identity ***	1.624 (1.527-1.726)
Elite Distrust ***	1.392 (1.306 -1.484)
Economic Evaluation	1.482 (1.407-1.561)

Anti-Immigration ***	10.330 (9.472 -11.266)
Constant (β)	-10.077

Nagelkerke R ²	0.410
χ^2	7645.110

N=23,119 *** = P <.001

The addition of anti-immigration attitudes in Block 2 produced a substantial increase in model fit ($\Delta R^2 = 0.248$; Nagelkerke R² = 0.410). The odds ratio of 10.330 indicates that the odds of supporting Reform UK among those holding strongly anti-immigration attitudes are over ten times those of respondents who do not, confirming anti-immigration attitudes as the strongest single predictor in the model.

The odds ratios for all populist attitude variables decreased substantially following the inclusion of anti-immigration attitudes: British identity from 2.580 to 1.624, economic evaluation from 1.890 to 1.482, and elite distrust from 1.809 to 1.392, a pattern of attenuation that is consistent with partial mediation (Baron and Kenny 1986, p. 1176). This suggests that these variables influence Reform support partly through their association with anti-immigration attitudes.

Model B. Binary Logistic Regression, Reform Support: Anti-Immigration and Populist Attitudes

The attenuation pattern identified in Model A warranted a second hierarchical model reversing block entry order, entering anti-immigration attitudes first to establish its independent contribution before the addition of populist attitude variables. The results of Model B are illustrated in Figure 1, see Table in Appendix G.



N=23,119, All variables significant at $P < .001$

Key: Model A (Block 1: Populist Attitudes, Block 2: Anti-Immigration), Model B (Block 1: Anti-Immigration, Block 2: Populist Attitudes), Total Model (all).

Figure 1 shows the contribution of each variable block across Models A and B. The total model, including all predictors, explains 41.0% of variance in Reform support ($R^2 = .410$). Model A demonstrates that when populist attitudes are entered first, the addition of anti-immigration attitudes produces a substantial improvement in model fit ($\Delta R^2 = .248$), confirming its dominant explanatory role. Model B reveals that anti-immigration attitudes alone account for 37.9% of variance ($R^2 = .379$), with the addition of populist attitudes producing only a modest incremental improvement ($\Delta R^2 = .031$). This asymmetry is the key analytical finding: anti-immigration attitudes are the primary driver of model fit, while populist attitudes provide additional but substantially smaller explanatory power. This aligns with the theoretical argument that populist attitudinal dispositions are translated into Reform support through the discursive nodal point of immigration (Laclau 2005, p. 71; Aslanidis 2024, p. 58). A second regression model was therefore completed to examine whether British Identity, economic evaluation and trust independently predict anti-immigration attitudes.

Predicting Anti-Immigration

Model C. Binary Logistic Regression, Anti-Immigration: Populist Attitudes

Table 4. Binary Logistic Regression: Anti-Immigration Attitudes

Variable	OR (95% CI)
British Identity ***	3.391(3.215-3.576)
Economic Evaluation ***	1.866 (1.781-1.955)
Trust in MPs ***	1.890 (1.775-2.011)
Nagelkerke R ²	.221
Constant	- 4.792
χ^2	3473.304

N=20,842 ***= P <.001

Table 4 presents the odds ratios for each populist attitude variable in predicting anti-immigration attitudes. British Identity, economic evaluation, and trust in MPs were entered simultaneously in a single block. The three populist attitude variables collectively account for 22.1% of variance in anti-immigration attitudes (Nagelkerke R² = .221), with British identity returning the strongest association (OR = 3.391).

This confirms that populist attitudinal dispositions are significant independent predictors of anti-immigration attitudes. Together these models support partial mediation (Baron and Kenny 1986, p. 1176): populist attitudes predict anti-immigration attitudes (R² = .221), which predict Reform support (R² = .379) while the direct effect of populist attitudes attenuates but does not disappear when anti-immigration attitudes are included (R² = .410). British Identity, economic insecurity, and elite distrust appear to influence Reform support both directly and indirectly through their association with anti-immigration attitudes. Anti-immigration attitudes appear to

function as the primary, but not exclusive mechanism through which populist dispositions generate Reform support. The qualitative analysis that follows examines how this mediation operates.

Qualitative Analysis & Discussion

The Invasion Narrative

The quantitative findings establish anti-immigration attitudes as the dominant attitudinal predictor of Reform support, accounting for 37.9% of variance bivariate and producing an OR of 10.330. The scale of this alignment operationalises the 'us versus them' antagonism central to populist rhetoric (Mudde 2004, p. 543), supporting the hypothesis that anti-immigration attitudes function as the 'signifying glue' through which Reform UK's collective action frame consolidates disparate grievances (Aslanidis 2024, p. 57; Laclau 2005, p. 71). The following discourse analysis examines how Reform UK constructs immigration as a threat and the mechanisms through which this construction shapes its supporters' political perceptions. Reform UK's construction of immigration as an 'invasion' that the party 'promises to reverse' simultaneously operationalises the diagnostic stage, the naming of a racialised out-group as responsible for collective decline, and the prognostic stage, prescribing itself as the only solution (Aslanidis 2024, p. 58; Yusuf 2026). The 2015 refugee crisis provided the conjunctural opportunity through which immigration was elevated to a central element of populist mobilisation across Europe and was followed by an increase in racialised constructions of non-western subjects (Xiong 2023, 241; Weyland 2021, p. 186). The UKIP Breaking Point poster (2016), included in appendix H, compresses this diagnostic logic into visual form. It shows a dense queue of racialised refugees positioned beneath the claim that the UK has reached its 'breaking point'. Consistent with Fairclough's (2010, p. 221) recognition of multimodal texts as discourse, the image performs Laclau's (2005, p. 120) 'naming' operation, condensing the anxieties surrounding Brexit into a single, racialised

antagonist. Published one week before the 2016 referendum, the poster exploits precisely the conjunctural opportunity Weyland (2021, p. 186) identifies as necessary for successful populist mobilisation, while the urgency of 'breaking point' operationalises Aslanidis's (2024, p. 58) motivational stage by constructing the political situation as demanding immediate alignment rather than considered deliberation.

Farage's framing of immigration as an invasion of 'cultures that are alien to ours' (Farage 2025a) can be analysed through Edward Said's (1979) concept of Orientalism. Said (1979, p. 7, p. 33) theorises how the non-western subject is discursively constructed as backward, dangerous, and incompatible with the 'civilised' west, a logic that structures Reform UK's racialised construction of immigrant communities. Addressing Parliament on UK membership of the European Convention on Human Rights, Farage (2025b) references 'Brazilian murderers and rapists' and 'an illegal immigrant from Iran' admitted to the UK, constructing a chain of equivalence between immigration and criminality through his foregrounding of ethnicity (Laclau 2005, p. 71). His description of this as a list that 'goes on and on' elevates anecdotal cases into a generalised construction of immigration as an uncontrollable and systemic threat.

This framing operates alongside what Farris (2012, p. 184) terms 'femonationalism'. This theorises that apparent concern for women's safety from racialised male threats such as 'Pakistani child sex offenders' is used to justify nationalist exclusion (Farris 2012, p. 185; Farage 2025b). Robert Jenrick MP (2025b), a Conservative MP prior to joining Reform UK in January 2026, told a reporter that 'rape gangs' with 'medieval attitudes towards women' are being allowed into the country. Jenrick's comments are situated within the public memory of cases such as the Rochdale child sexual abuse ring. The case involved British Pakistani men and gained widespread attention from 2012 onward. While such cases warrant national attention, their prominence in comparison to other such cases

reflects how Asian men are linked to sexual offences through racialised narratives (Tufail 2015, p. 30). A 2020 report from the Home Office found 'no answer' on a link between ethnicity and Group Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) cases despite coverage that suggests an over-representation of black and Asian offenders proportional to the national population (Home Office 2020, p. 80-81). Despite this, sensationalist reporting on the 'dangerous masculinities' of migrant men continues to reinforce the association of sexual crimes with racialised migrant men (Tufail 2015, p. 31). The front page of *The Sun* (April 2026) read 'migrant rapist on the run for murder' describing a 'monster arriving on a dinghy' aggressively foregrounding his migrant status in both the caption and headline (Atherley 2026, p. 1).

Spivak's (1985, p. 93) formulation that white men feel compelled to save brown women from brown men identifies the racialised logic of a colonial saviour that structures this discourse. Reform UK's rhetoric reproduces this structure, shifting its logic from imperial to nationalist, repositioning white men as protecting the 'women in our country' from racialised men. Reform politicians regularly express concern for "women at risk of sexual assault and rape" by men "predominantly from Muslim countries like Afghanistan" (Pochin 2025). Sarah Pochin MP (2025) blamed this on a "warped view on their right to sexually assault women" generalising men from these countries as believing they have a "right" to commit acts of sexual violence. The predictive power of British identity in both Model A and C (OR:1.624 and OR:3.391) adds to this argument. It shows that a strong British identity increases the odds of both anti-immigration and Reform UK support. Feminationalist discourse constructs immigrant men as threats to 'our women' while obscuring the indispensable reproductive labour performed by immigrants, especially women (Farris 2012, p. 193).

This contradiction reveals the racialised logic structuring attitudes toward different migrant groups. Research demonstrates that attitudes toward immigrants are stratified by proximity to whiteness. Britons express significantly greater willingness to support Ukrainian refugees than those from Syria or Somalia, a disparity attributed to the racialised perceptions through which different migrant groups are constructed (Xuereb 2023, p. 3). Reform UK's rhetoric mobilises and reinforces this racialised hierarchy, with Farage's warning that Britain will "look like a foreign land" (Farage 2014) operationalising the diagnostic stage's construction of cultural displacement as existential threat (Aslanidis 2024, p. 57). As construed in Farage's language, the criminalised immigrant operates as a convenient object through which the state can contain the social dislocations experienced throughout austerity and deflect discontent away from the retreat of welfare provisioning (Wacquant 2009, p. 69). In constructing immigrants as a threat to British identity, this discourse mobilises existing racial and gendered assumptions, naturalising prejudice as common sense rather than ideology. The racialised immigrant emerges as the primary subaltern antagonist, stratified along the ethnic and religious lines that Gramsci (1971, p. 10) identifies, providing a visible form of the impacts of elite corruption. The regression confirms this pattern: the three populist attitude variables collectively account for 22.1% variance in anti-immigration attitudes ($R^2 = .221$) with British identity returning the strongest association ($OR = 3.391$).

Welfare Chauvinism

The prognostic stage of Reform UK's collective action frame prescribes welfare restriction to a national in-group as the solution to perceived scarcity (Aslanidis 2024, p. 58). Jenrick's claim that immigrants 'milk the state' (2025a) performs this by attributing the material consequences of austerity and financialised capitalism to immigration, rather than to the structural contradictions and monetary policy that produced them. This operationalises Andersen and Bjørklund's (1990) concept of welfare chauvinism, constructing a zero-sum antagonism between the

deserving citizen and the parasitic outsider. This desire to ‘take back control’ offers a simplified solution to the structural contradictions that have underpinned the stagnation of living standards, declining wages and increased risk of poverty that the UK has experienced since 2008 (UKIP 2016; Fraser 2017, p. 33).

The efficacy of Farage’s crisis narrative relies upon the genuine socio-economic grievances of the UK electorate. Since 2021 this has been expressed as the cost-of-living crisis. Although the cost-of-living crisis has been intensified by exogenous shocks including the Russia-Ukraine war and COVID-19, its conditions predate them. Prior to the pandemic, Britain’s social security system had been depleted by £36 billion since 2010 leaving low-income families with limited capacity to absorb the subsequent 16.4% rise in food prices (Briggs and Hall 2023, p. 41). A decade of ‘regressive redistribution’ saw the state systematically divest from the sphere of social reproduction forming the material grievances that Reform UK’s collective action frame exploits (Briggs and Hall 2023, p. 52). Thus, Farage’s (2023a) focus on how immigration is ‘making us poorer in every way’ appeals to this insecurity, linking immigration to the consequences of austerity policy. In contrast, analysis of the fiscal effect of immigration to the UK since 2000 finds that immigrants have been of ‘substantial net fiscal benefit’ to the UK and have helped reduce the fiscal burden for domestic workers (Dustmann and Frattini 2014, p. 4). Including EU and non-EU migrants, the implicit human-capital savings stand at over £35 billion (Dustmann and Frattini 2014, p. 4).

Welfare chauvinism aims to channel economic and cultural insecurity into ‘nativist grievances’ (Andersen and Bjørklund 1990, p. 212; Ennser-Jedenastik 2017, p. 294). As welfare becomes scarcer, immigration scapegoating gains political potency. Paradoxically, the UK’s social reproduction architecture is dependent on migrant labour as ‘providers of jobs and welfare’ (Farris 2012, p. 193). As of 2024, non-UK nationals represented 25% of the social care workforce (Sehic et al. 2024, p. 4). This dependency reflects what Fraser (2017, p. 32, p. 34) terms the ‘global

care chain'. It identifies that core economies rely upon the often reproductive and feminised labour of migrants.

While the remittance model provides some easing to migrant families, the breakdown of local communities and support networks has borne significant consequences for the social reproduction architecture in migrant 'sending' countries (Kunz 2010, p. 915). Despite this, Farage describes immigrants forcing "us" to "provide a new home every two minutes" (Farage 2024). This framing places the blame for social reproductive insecurity, induced by austerity, onto immigration (Aslanidis 2024, p. 58). This framing reproduces a logic analogous to basic survival. By constructing immigrants as competitors for scarce resources and amplifying and mobilising the genuine material scarcity produced by austerity, not immigration. The Leave campaign directly operationalised this, attributing hospital closures and overstretched public services to immigration and EU membership, a tactic that successfully resonated with those hit hardest by austerity (Fetzer 2019, p. 3849).

Despite this, variables selected to operationalise objective economic conditions showed weak association with Reform support. This could suggest that there is no substantial relationship to be found or that these variables are ineffective in capturing objective economic insecurity. Future analysis could include measures such as occupational class or gross personal income. However, a pessimistic economic evaluation, used to capture subjective economic insecurity, showed significance across all regression models with OR values of 1.482 for predicting Reform support and 1.866 for predicting anti-immigration attitudes. These results are consistent with the argument that structural insecurity must be subjectively experienced before generating political mobilisation (Nunn and Tepe-Belfrage 2022, p. 1315). The internal contradiction of Reform UK's welfare chauvinist discourse is illustrated by their simultaneous "pledge to make massive future cuts to welfare spending" (Farage 2026). This reveals a diagnostic frame that deflects accountability from structural economic conditions onto a racialised out-group, consistent with Wacquant's (2009, p. 69) account of the punitive state managing social dislocation through the criminalisation of

marginalised populations rather than through welfare expansion. These cuts are planned to be partly funded by restricting government welfare to “exclusively...UK and not...foreign-born nationals” (Farage 2025c). This attitude toward welfare provision assumes that the migrant labour supporting the UK care sector will continue to absorb costs of welfare retrenchment, despite their exclusion from its benefits. The mediation pattern identified supports the hypothesis that when structural insecurity is subjectively experienced, it increases the likelihood of both anti-immigration attitudes and support for Reform UK. Placing blame on a visible out-group offers a tangible, proximate cause for feelings of subjective decline. Reform UK’s popularity reflects the success of its populist rhetoric in encouraging this rationale.

Anti-Elite Sentiment

Reform UK constructs itself as an insurgent outsider force, exemplified by Farage’s (2014) metaphor of the “UKIP fox in the Westminster hen house”, positioning the party as a disruptive presence within a corrupt political establishment. While trust in MPs as a proxy for elite distrust risks oversimplifying broader anti-establishment sentiment, the regression analysis nonetheless demonstrates that the odds of strongly supporting Reform UK are 1.392 times higher among those with low trust in MPs, after controlling for anti-immigration attitudes (Model A, Block 2). Yet the analytical significance of anti-elite sentiment exceeds its relatively modest OR: by identifying ‘corrupt elites’ as responsible for enabling immigration and depleting welfare, Reform completes its diagnostic chain of equivalence, providing ‘the people’ with an accountable antagonist for their collective insecurity (Laclau 2005, p. 71; Mudde 2004, p. 543). The construction of the establishment as having failed to control immigration is illustrated by Jenrick’s (2025a) claim that it offers “payouts to terrorists”, framing state failure as moral betrayal rather than institutional limitation. This moral framing of institutional failure allows Reform to attribute the morbid symptoms of failing infrastructure and stagnant wages to elite corruption rather than systemic economic

contradictions (Gramsci 1971, p. 566). Immigrants and the establishment are therefore understood as co-constitutive antagonists within a single Manichean worldview (Mudde 2004, p. 543).

Central to the prognostic stage of Reform UK's discourse is Farage's deliberate self-presentation as a personable outsider. He claims he is not interested in "climbing the greasy pole," positioning Reform UK as the only authentic alternative to a failing political class (Farage July 2022). Weyland's (2021, p. 187) PSA identifies this as the strategic cultivation of direct contact with a mass following by appearing unmediated by institutional politics. This appearance of radical authenticity is reinforced through his rejection of political correctness. By constructing mainstream discourse as a tool of elite management, Reform positions its own transgressive rhetoric as a naming operation that restores political voice to those rendered passive by liberal institutional closure (Laclau 2005, p. 120). Mainstream criticism is therefore construed as a witch-hunt and pre-emptively neutralised (Mudde 2004, p. 543). Jenrick's invocation of Farage as the "lone voice of common sense" naturalises Reform UK's ideological positions as objective truth, completing the populist antagonism and transforming policy preference into a moral crusade to rescue the general will from elite capture (Jenrick 2026).

Farage's description of the World Health Organisation as "clever people who want to bully and tell us what to do" (Farage 2017) extends the elite antagonist well beyond Westminster to encompass international technocratic institutions, a breadth of anti-establishment sentiment that the trust in MPs measure, as acknowledged in the methodology, cannot fully capture. His claim that the establishment sought to force him out of the UK by closing his bank accounts (Farage 2023b) personalises the elite antagonism, constructing concrete evidence of malice that transforms abstract institutional distrust into lived political persecution. This antagonism is further intensified through appeals to British identity, reflecting how Reform frames the political establishment as actively betraying

the nation. This urgency is amplified through social media, where Farage's direct unmediated communication distributes the persecution narrative at scale with minimal editorial constraints. This operationalises the motivational stage of the CAF by constructing the political situation as one demanding immediate alignment rather than considered deliberation (Aslanidis 2024, p. 58).

Taken together, the three coding categories do not operate independently but form the chain of equivalence Laclau (2005, p. 71) identifies as the defining feature of populist discourse: corrupt elites enabling criminal immigrants who compete with deserving citizens for the scarce resources austerity has depleted. The improvement in model fit from $R^2 = .379$ to $R^2 = .410$ when populist attitude variables are added to anti-immigration attitudes confirms that this rhetorical architecture is not merely discursive but substantively linked to voter alignment. A populist zeitgeist is empirically legible in the attitudinal data of the British electorate (Mudde 2004, p. 541).

Conclusion

This dissertation examines whether anti-immigration attitudes represent an autonomous cultural disposition or a discursively mediated expression of economic insecurity, a distinction with significant implications for how the sources of right-wing populist support are understood. The evidence presented here favours the latter. Support for Reform UK is not primarily a reflection of objective class position with the associations of household income ($V = .079$) and housing tenure ($V = .056$), substantially weaker than all attitudinal predictors, indicating that material deprivation alone does not determine political support. Rather, it is the subjective experience of insecurity, filtered through populist discourse attributing its causes to immigration and elite betrayal, that structures political support.

A mediation pathway is identified and satisfies the four steps of Baron and Kenny's procedure. Subjective economic insecurity is associated with both anti-immigration attitudes and Reform support. This insecurity converges with eroded institutional trust and strong British identity, producing a constellation of grievances that Reform UK's collective action frame attributes to immigration enabled by a corrupt political class. This appears to translate structural economic failure into nativist political demand. Anti-immigration sentiment emerges as the dominant political expression of these grievances, explaining 37.9% of variance in Reform support independently and functioning as the primary nodal point through which disparate anxieties are consolidated into political alignment.

The qualitative analysis illuminates the discursive mechanisms through which this operates. Reform UK's collective action frame deploys an invasion narrative, rooted in racialised constructions of the criminal immigrant (Said 1979, p. 33) and femonationalist mobilisation of gendered threat (Farris 2012, p. 185), as its primary diagnostic stage, naming a racialised out-group as the culpable entity responsible for collective decline (Aslanidis 2024, p. 57). Welfare competition rhetoric operationalises the prognostic stage (Aslanidis 2024, p. 58), prescribing restriction of entitlements to a national in-group as the solution to insecurity produced not by immigration but by austerity's systematic contraction of social reproduction (Fraser 2022). Anti-elite sentiment supplies the motivational urgency, constructing the political establishment as actively betraying the nation and positioning Farage as the authentic voice of the people under existential threat. Together, these three frames form Laclau's (2005, p. 71) chain of equivalence, linking material insecurity, cultural anxiety, and institutional distrust into a coherent antagonism that Reform UK presents itself as uniquely positioned to resolve.

That Farage's political project has found renewed electoral traction in the post-Brexit conjuncture requires explanation. Farage's retirement following the 2016 referendum appeared to signal the conclusion of his political career, yet the conditions generating demand for his movement were not resolved by Brexit. Conservative

governance, marked by austerity, pandemic mismanagement, and compounding institutional scandals, exhausted the party's capacity to absorb the grievances it had produced. While mainstream convergence toward the political centre generated the representational vacuum that first enabled UKIP's rise, growing polarisation along the libertarian-authoritarian axis has created fertile ground for a movement positioned at its authoritarian pole (Denver and Johns 2022, p. 211). The capture of seats with deep Labour roots by Reform UK, such as Runcorn and Helsby, underscores this. Rather than class position, the convergence of identity, subjective grievance, and immigration attitudes now structure political choice for a significant portion of the electorate. Whether this trajectory continues depends on conditions beyond the scope of this study, yet the structural contradictions identified in the literature remain unresolved. As Fraser (2022) argues, financialised capitalism cannibalises its own social foundations; this dissertation has argued that the resulting crisis of social reproduction constitutes the affective terrain on which Reform UK's discourse operates.

SRT's contribution to the analysis of radical right populism lies in revealing that the cultural anxieties driving Reform support are not autonomous from material conditions, but the subjective form taken by structural economic grievance when mediated through a nationalist and racialised diagnostic frame. If these conditions persist and mainstream parties fail to offer a credible alternative account of their causes, the populist rhetoric that attributes blame to immigration and elite betrayal sustains its mobilising potential. This dissertation contributes an original synthesis of SRT, political economy, and populist studies to the analysis of radical right support, arguing that the binary between economic and cultural explanations is analytically false. Anti-immigration attitudes are not an independent cultural phenomenon but function as a nodal point through which economic insecurity, racialised threat, and elite betrayal appear to be consolidated into political support. Future research would benefit from integrating demographic variables such as age, education, and ethnicity, alongside the attitudinal predictors examined here, and from extending discourse analysis to examine how Reform UK's rhetoric is received and

reproduced by its supporters. Reform UK's support is neither purely economic nor purely cultural in origin. The pressing analytical question is how political actors translate the structural failures of financialised capitalism into targeted hostility against racialised others, and what conditions would be required to challenge that translation.

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Appendix

A. Full/Partial Mediation Pathway (Baron and Kenny, 1986:1176)

Path A. Independent variable (X) significantly predicts Mediator (M).

Path B. M significantly predicts the dependent variable (Y).

Path C. X significantly predicts Y when entered alone.

Path C'. The effect of X on Y reduces or becomes non-significant when M is controlled for.

B. Appendix B: Corpus Overview

Category	Source	Date	Cited as
Parliamentary	Farage, N. — Engagements, Vol. 766	30/04/2025	2025a
Parliamentary	Farage, N. — ECHR Withdrawal, Vol. 774	29/10/2025	2025b
Parliamentary	Jenrick, R. — Vol. 775	20/11/2025	2025a
Conference	Farage, N. — UKIP Spring Conference, BBC News	2014	
Conference	Farage, N. — Reform UK Party Conference	05–06/09/2025	2025c
Interview	Farage, N. — GP News Commentary	13/02/2023	2023a
Interview	Farage, N. — GP News Commentary	05/07/2022	
Interview	Farage, N. — Reform UK Press Conference	02/04/2026	
Interview	Jenrick, R. — The Telegraph, Daniel Martin	07/01/2025	2025b
Interview	Jenrick, R. — Defection Press Conference	15/01/2026	
Interview	Pochin, S. — Press Conference	11/08/2025	
Social Media (X)	@Nigel_Farage — WHO comments	09/11/2017	
Social Media (X)	@Nigel_Farage — ITV Election Debate	13/04/2024	
Social Media (X)	@ZiaYusufUK	14/03/2026	
Social Media (YouTube)	@NigelFarageOfficial	29/06/2023	2023b
Campaign Material	UKIP Breaking Point Poster	16/06/2016	
Press Coverage	Atherley, J. — The Sun	24/04/2026	

C. Variable Recoding Summary

Variable	BES Variable	Original Scale	Recoded Categories	Binary Recode
Reform Support	V245	0–10	7–10 = 1 (Strong Dislike); 4–6 = 2 (No Strong Feeling); 0–3 = 3 (Strong Like)	6–10 = 0 (Dislike); 0–4 = 1 (Like); 5 = Missing
Immigration Attitudes	V359	0–10	7–10 = 1 (Allow More); 4–6 = 2 (No Strong Feeling); 0–3 = 3 (Allow Less)	6–10 = 0 (Allow More); 0–4 = 1 (Allow Less); 5 = Missing
Expected Household Financial Situation	V251	1–5	4–5 = 1 (Get Better); 3 = 2 (Stay Same); 1–2 = 3 (Get Worse)	—
Trust in MPs	V877	1–7	6–7 = 1 (High Trust); 3–5 = 2 (No Strong Feeling); 1–2 = 3 (No Trust)	—
British Identity	V881	1–7	1–2 = 1 (Not British); 3–5 = 2 (No Strong Feeling); 6–7 = 3 (Strongly British)	—
Gross Household Income	V1472	1–15	1 (High: £45,000+); 2 (Medium: £25,000–£49,999); 3 (Low: Under £25,000)	—
Housing Tenure	V1467	1–9	1 (Own: outright, shared, mortgage); 2 (Neither: rent-free, other); 3 (Rent: private, housing association, local authority)	—

D. Descriptive Frequencies

Variable	Direction	Valid Percent (%)			Valid N
		1	2	3	
Reform Support	1=Strongly Dislike				
	2= No Strong Feelings	64.9	16.2	19.0	29,045
	3=Strongly Like				
Anti-Immigration	1= Allow More				
	2= No Strong Feelings	15.8	33.6	50.6	29,073
	3= Allow Less				
British Identity	1= Not British At All				
	2= No Strong Feelings	7.3	41.2	51.4	30,486
	3= Strongly British				
Trust In MPs	1=Strongly Trust				
	2= No Strong Feelings	4.0	57.1	38.9	29,774

	3=Strongly Distrust				
Economic Prospects	1= Get A Lot Better				
	2= No Strong Feelings	17.33	43.5	39.2	28,105
	3=Get A Lot Worse				
Housing tenure	1=Own	70.5	8.5	21.0	30,342
	2=Neither				
	3= Rent				
Gross Household Income	1= High				
	2 = Medium	32.3	36.4	32.1	23,047
	3= Low				

Note: (N = 31,098)

E. Cross Tabulations: Reform Support (Variable 245) X BES Variables 881, 877,251, 359

Cross tab: Reform UK Support X Britishness

	Not British At All	No Strong Feeling	Strongly British
Strongly Dislike	9.2%	48.7%	42.1%
No Strong Feeling	3.5%	32.9%	63.6%
Strongly Like	4.4%	24.3%	71.4%
Total	7.4%	41.5%	51.2%

N=28,646, Cramér's V = .179, p<.001, χ^2 (4) =1835.734^a

Cross tab: Reform UK Support X Trust in MPs

	High Trust	No Strong Feeling	Low Trust
Strongly Dislike	4.4%	61.7%	33.9%
No Strong Feeling	4.2%	57.8%	38.0%
Strongly Like	2.8%	44.5%	52.6%

Cross tab: Reform UK Support X Gross Household Income

	High	Medium	Low
Strongly Dislike	36.5%	35.9%	27.6%
No Strong Feeling	28.2%	37.4%	34.4%
Strongly Like	25.2%	37.6%	37.2%
Total	33.1%	36.5%	30.5%

N=28,646, Cramér's V = .079, p<.001, χ^2 (4) = 274.684^a

Cross tab: Reform UK Support X Immigration Attitudes

	Allow More	No Strong Feeling	Allow Less
Strongly Dislike	24.5%	45.9%	29.6%
No Strong Feeling	2.5%	21.7%	75.8%
Strongly Like	1.4%	5.4%	93.2%
Total	16.4%	34.0%	49.7%

N=27,633, Cramér's V =, p<.001, χ^2 (4) =8373.008^a

Cross tab: Reform UK Support X Economic Evaluation

	Get Better	Stay The Same	Get Worse
Strongly Dislike	21.2%	47.6%	31.2%
No Strong Feeling	12.2%	42.3%	45.5%
Strongly Like	9.2%	32.5%	58.3%
Total	17.4%	43.8%	38.8%

Cross tab: Reform UK Support X Housing Tenure

	Own	Neither	Rent
Strongly Dislike	70%	9.9%	20.1%
No Strong Feeling	74.1%	6%	19.9%
Strongly Like	75.1%	5%	19.9%
Total	71.6%	8.3%	20%

N=28,364, Cramér's V = .056, p<.001, χ^2 (4) =178.948^a

F. Bivariate Regressions: Reform Support

	Exp(B)/OR	Lower CI	Upper Ci
British Identity ***	2.531	2.404	2.665
Subj Econ ***	2.109	2.018	2.204
Trust in MP***	1.782	1.692	1.878
Anti-Immigration	10.330	9.472	11.226

Constant	-10.007		

Note: N=23,119 *** = $p < .001$, $\chi^2 = 7645.110$

G. Model 2, Block 1: Immigration Attitudes, Block 2: Populist Attitudes

	Variable	OR	Lower CI 95%	Upper CI 95%
Block 1:	Anti-Immigration ***	13.053	11.985	14.215
	Constant	-7.695		
	Nagelkerke R ²	0.379		
	χ^2	7032.881		
Block 2:	Anti-Immigration ***	10.330	9.472	11.266
	National Identity ***	1.624	1.527	1.726
	Elite Distrust ***	1.392	1.306	1.484
	Subjective Insecurity	1.482	1.407	1.561

	Constant	-10.007		
	Nagelkerke R ²	0.410		
	χ^2	7645.110		

C. N=23,119 *** = $P < .001$

H. 'Breaking Point', UKIP 2016

