

unite against fascism

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European elections: clear danger that low turnout could hand over first Euro seats to BNP fascists

Some political commentators have used recent opinion polls to write off or play down the threat that the BNP might get its first Euro MP seats next month. The Observer's Nick Cohen says he found evidence of a BNP surge 'hard to find'.¹ Others have said that 'the threat from the BNP has been overblown'.²

Unite Against Fascism believes these arguments are dangerously complacent and run the risk of undermining the effort to mobilise the anti-fascist vote on 4 June. We think there is a very real danger of the BNP winning seats in the Euro elections.

Opinion polls tend to underestimate support for the BNP³ and factors such as regional variations in the BNP vote and the higher proportion of BNP supporters that are likely to vote also have to be considered.

These factors suggest that recent polling by Peter Kellner and YouGov, published by the Telegraph on 18 May⁴, may be a more accurate predictor of BNP support. This places the BNP with 7% of the vote nationally. When this is adjusted for regional variations, this suggests that a low turnout would leave the BNP on course to win three seats – though it would need a national vote of around 10% to win a fourth and around 12% to win any more.

More recent polls by Populus, published by the Times on 30 May⁵, and ICM, published by the Sunday Telegraph on 31 May⁶ confirm the recent growth in recorded support for the BNP and also suggest the party is currently on course to win Euro seats. William Hill, the bookmaker, quotes odds of 2/5 against the BNP winning a seat (ie. they are strong favourites to win a seat).

The latest YouGov poll,⁷ published in the Daily Telegraph on 1 June, places the BNP on the same 7% nationally as in the previous YouGov poll. A regional breakdown has not yet been published.

But the key reason why we need to take the BNP threat seriously lies in wider political factors rather than technical ones. Unemployment now stands at 2.2 million and look set to rise further. This creates a pool of anger and despair that can be rapidly sucked in by the BNP's racist message of blaming migrant workers and ethnic minorities for the recession.

Moreover, growing cynicism about the integrity of major financial institutions has now spread to cover MPs because of the scandal over parliamentary expenses. This is being dramatically reflected in polling. Those commentators who suggest that 'the BNP is struggling' or failing to 'gain from the expenses scandal' have failed to recognise the recent gains the BNP has made in the polls.

The local elections in 2006 in Barking & Dagenham show how quickly support for the Nazi BNP can rise. That election saw the BNP go from almost nowhere to 12 councillors in the space of a few weeks. It stands as a warning to us all. Attempts at talking down the BNP vote will not cut any ice.

As Peter Kellner puts it, 'It's a tiny margin between getting no seats and getting three seats for the BNP.' As in 2004, a higher turnout could stop the BNP from winning any seats. It is imperative that we raise the alarm and urge people to vote against the BNP fascists on 4 June.

In its Euro election campaign, the BNP has repeatedly made overt appeals to win the votes of those who support a racist political agenda that blames black and Asian people for the country's economic and social ills.

Nick Griffin's description of black and Asian British people as 'racial foreigners' that need to be 'repatriated' shows that the BNP now believes it can be more open about its racist and neo-Nazi policies in order to consolidate its share of the vote.

The anti-fascist movement must respond to this political escalation with an urgent appeal to the anti-racist majority to use its vote and stop such policies becoming an 'acceptable' part of the political mainstream.

BNP Euro seats will lead to racism being seen as a legitimate part of political debate. Every progressive cause will be under greater attack if the fascists manage to make an electoral breakthrough. And the lesson from mainland Europe is that stopping such a breakthrough is much easier than reversing it.

ENDS

Technical note: YouGov asks voters how likely they are to vote and who they would vote for. For a low turnout, where only those 'certain to vote' go to the ballot box, the 18 May poll predicts three seats for the BNP. For a high turnout, the BNP share of the vote falls from 7% to 5% and as a result they are predicted to win no seats.

FOOTNOTES

1. Nick Cohen's column in the Observer, 24 May 2009: <http://tinyurl.com/cohen240509>
2. Gerry Gable of Searchlight quoted in the EU Observer, 26 May 2009: <http://euobserver/843/28175>
3. In 2004 opinion polls placed the BNP at 3% but the party actually received 5%. Populus and ICM use phone polling techniques, which often underestimate BNP support. YouGov uses online polling.
4. See <http://tinyurl.com/yougov180509>
5. See <http://tinyurl.com/times300509>
6. See <http://tinyurl.com/telegraph010609>
7. See <http://tinyurl.com/yougov010609>

Graphs from YouGov poll: These show the possible outcomes of the European election if there is a low turnout, using YouGov's 'certain to vote' data from 18 May 2009. Regional votes are derived from the original data.

