

UKIP's future hangs on the strength of its leadership, not its internal democracy

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*Nigel Farage has recently come under fire from an influential member from within his own party for his authoritarian style of leadership. But research suggests successful right-wing populist parties often have leaders with strong internal leadership qualities who exercise firm control over the party. In this article, **Fabio Wolkenstein** looks at examples from across Europe, which may provide lessons for UKIP.*

In an interview with the *Times* last week, UKIP's general election campaign director Patrick O'Flynn strongly criticised party leader Nigel Farage for his authoritarian style of leadership. O'Flynn complained that Farage's leadership is making UKIP look like a “[personality cult](#)”, and called for a more [consultative and democratic form of leadership](#).



This internal row raises important questions about the future of UKIP as a relevant player in UK politics. Does the party require internal reform to achieve electoral persistence? Need it become more internally democratic and less top-down? The party's disappointing election result proved to be a catalyst for debates on the necessity of organisational change.

But perhaps UKIP's problem is not that it is not “consultative and democratic” enough—but that its leadership is not authoritarian enough. The European experience of populism explains why. Research suggests that right-wing populist parties tend to be most successful when they are organised in a strict top-down fashion, with the leader exercising firm control over the party.

The most extreme example is perhaps the Dutch PVV, where party leader Geert Wilders is the only member of the party. Wilders not only accepts no party members. He usually handpicks and trains all his election candidates himself, even [accompanying them to debates](#) to coach them and provide feedback on their performance. This allows Wilders to enforce party discipline, since all his candidates are loyal to him. And it allows him to prevent extremists, who are often attracted to parties like the PVV, to become candidates. The incentive to keep extremists out is that they both tend to [damage the party's reputation in the electorate](#) and undermine party unity.

Another emblematic example is the Austrian FPÖ under the leadership of Jörg Haider. During the party's remarkable rise in the 1990s, Haider exercised stern control over the party. Those who opposed Haider were either expelled or have defected in the face of serious pressure, as did the party's 1992 presidential candidate Heide Schmidt. When Haider eventually stood down as party leader—ironically after a historic success in the 1999 elections—the party faced a power vacuum at the top and internal conflicts broke loose, leading to the split of the party in 2005.

In short, successful right-wing populist parties often have leaders with strong internal leadership qualities. They have leaders who safeguard the party from extremists, and keep candidates and personnel in line.

Farage succeeded at neither. He failed to keep party members in order (as the recent row shows), and he [failed to keep the extremists out](#), making the party a breeding ground for internal tensions—which might unravel now as the party faces electoral defeat.

Perhaps one of UKIP's big strategic mistakes was its rather open approach to the recruitment of candidates. In his [pre-election interview](#) at BBC Newsnight, Farage described the party's personnel policy as “meritocratic”, by which is essentially meant that all those who want to devote themselves more to the party can in principle obtain senior positions. While such a policy certainly carries the aura of democratic openness, it is a dangerous in a party that is

prone to attract [political adventurers](#), extremists, and opportunists. A lack of selectiveness can put party unity at risk.

Now, of course, one should be cautious with diagnoses that see UKIP as on the verge of disintegrating. But it seems that the recent infighting is more than the party's "[blowing off steam](#)" after the election, as Farage said towards the end of last week. Indeed, O'Flynn's public criticism of Farage is indicative of the enormous potential for internal conflict within UKIP, a characteristic it shares with many parties of its kind.

One only needs to look to Germany's anti-EU party AfD to find a potential scenario for UKIP's future. Like UKIP, the AfD adopted a relatively open personnel policy. As a result, several functionaries who oppose the leadership of chairman Bernd Lucke have obtained senior positions in the party, and so gained the power to successfully mobilise internal dissent. Now loyalty to Lucke is in decline, and [even a party split is considered possible](#). The source of instability within the AfD is, as one German commentator put it, that it mainly consists of people for whom "[revolting against political authority is the baseline of their political engagement](#)". The same could be said about UKIP.

Thus, UKIP's future as an important actor in UK politics may depend on whether it could become less, rather than more, organisationally democratic. This is the lesson to take from parties like the PVV and the early FPÖ, as well as from "negative" cases like the AfD.

To be sure, strong, top-down leadership is not a magic bullet for the success of right-wing populist parties. Leaders must themselves avoid to come across as incompetent or too extreme—Geert Wilders PVV suffered a disappointing result at the European Parliament elections last year in part because he made [a controversial statement](#) about Moroccan immigrants, for example. But it can eliminate some of the main sources of internal instability and help the party present itself to the electorate as a unified agent.

O'Flynn's sudden resignation from the party on Tuesday could be a first sign of Farage tightening controls and getting to grips with discipline within the party. It could signal to potential dissenters the consequences of questioning the leadership, and so ward off future efforts at undermining Farage's authority—at least for the time being.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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