

## Getting back in the DeLorean

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**Getting back in the DeLorean:  
Modernisation vs Anti-modernisation in Contemporary  
British Politics**

Journal:	<i>Political Studies</i>
Manuscript ID	Draft
Manuscript Type:	Original Article
Keywords:	Modernisation, Anti-Modernisation, UK party politics, Empty signifiers
Abstract:	<p>This paper sets out to highlight a growing clash between modernising and anti-modernising forces in the UK. Whilst previous scholarship has focussed on processes of party modernisation over the past three decades, little attention has been paid to the countervailing forces of anti-modernisation. Here, our argument is that modernisation processes have worked to produce a recent backlash from anti-modernising tendencies seeking to reassert various types of traditional values and practices. This backlash is evidenced across the political spectrum and can be cited as a factor in the recent rise in support for UKIP and, grassroots backing in the Labour Party for Jeremy Corbyn. Empirically, we show how this increasingly prevalent line of conflict is playing out within the Conservatives, Labour and UKIP, whilst theoretically, we argue that Ernesto Laclau's work on empty signifiers is useful in explaining the dynamic interplay between modernising and anti-modernising discourses.</p>

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## Introduction

For three decades, much scholarly attention has been directed towards the analysis of ‘modernising’ tendencies within the two main UK political parties. In the case of Labour, a focus on internal party modernisation during the 1990s (Smith, 1994; Hay, 1999; Wickham-Jones, 1995; Heffernan, 2000) eventually extended to New Labour’s outward attempts to modernise the state, economy, society and the UK more generally (Finalyson, 2003). Similarly, since 2005, and David Cameron’s embarkation into his own party modernisation project, the discourse of modernisation, and assessments of its fate, has dominated the attention of Conservative party commentators (Dorey, 2007; Bale, 2008; Byrne et al, 2011). Yet, little detailed attention has been paid in the UK to the flip side of such modernising processes; the countervailing forces of anti-modernisation. In recent years, a growing body of evidence suggests that modernising forces have created their own backlash, not just in the UK, but more generally throughout Western Europe, and are being increasingly challenged by anti-modernising narratives directed towards a reassertion of various aspects of tradition and a nostalgia for the past. In Europe, these anti-modernisation tendencies have been cited as a key explanation for the ascendancy of populist right parties, whilst in Britain, they have been noted as a key factor in the electoral rise of UKIP (Ford & Goodwin, 2014) and, as we argue here, are further evidenced in more recent support for the election of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour Party leader.

As yet, the tension between modernisation and anti-modernisation, or traditionalism, in British politics remains generally overlooked and, as we argue here, sometimes misunderstood. Where it has been noted, is in relation to the Conservative party, where conflicts between traditionalists and modernisers have been identified as the key basis of Conservative party splits and, more recently, defections to UKIP. In the European context, the conflict between modernisation and anti-modernisation has been dealt with in greater detail, with a negative response to modernisation being noted as a key variable in driving support for the populist radical right. Indeed, some scholars argue that an opposition to modernisation represents one element of the emergence of new political cleavages across Western Europe (Kreisi *et al*, 2006); cleavages which are shaped by the impact of globalisation with its attendant ‘winners’ and ‘losers’.

Our aim here is to bridge some of these literatures and examine the role which the clash between modernisation and anti-modernisation has played in structuring party competition in the UK. Our approach is theoretically driven rather than quantitative; however, the analysis draws upon existing quantitative and qualitative studies of electoral change and party competition. Our argument divides as follows. Firstly, we contend that a clash between modernising and anti-modernising forces should be viewed as an increasingly prevalent line of political conflict with a growing relevance in explaining both inter and intra party competition in the UK. Secondly, this line of conflict structuring political competition is not confined to the right of the political spectrum as some literature implies; rather, it has as much potential to explain the rise of Jeremy Corbyn in Labour as it does the increase in support for UKIP. Thirdly, much of the existing

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3 literature too readily depicts modernisation and traditionalism as static, fixed political  
4 alignments; in response, our aim is to show that these positions have a more fluid and relational  
5 character, helping to condition and shape the emergence of each other in such a way that allows  
6 political actors to sometimes move from one to the other to vie for competitive advantage.  
7 Fourthly, we argue that, in this relational sense, both should be viewed as performing the  
8 function in discourse of Ernesto Laclau's 'empty signifiers'. As empty signifiers, these  
9 discourses have come to play three key political functions: 1) they are being increasingly used to  
10 mobilise voters; 2) they work to construct the identity and demands of such voters; 3) they help  
11 to create a social antagonism which attempts to depoliticise or naturalise particular policy  
12 agendas.  
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### 17 **The Modernisation Zeitgeist**

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20 The discourse of modernisation has come to define the contemporary era of UK party politics  
21 (Byrne *et al*, 2011). Since the 1960s, it has underpinned various governmental projects, from the  
22 first Wilson administration's attempts to harness the 'white heat of technology' to the Thatcher  
23 governments' efforts to overhaul the putatively social democratic postwar regime. Its more  
24 contemporary usage is epitomised in the Labour party's attempts during the 1980s and 1990s to  
25 adapt towards what it perceived as the modern realities of neo-liberal globalisation (Hay, 1999;  
26 Heffernan, 2000). Portrayed as an inescapable response to such realities, Labour's modernisation  
27 project started as an exercise in internal party restructuring and rebranding before extending  
28 outwards towards innumerable attempts to modernise British society writ large (Finlayson,  
29 2003). With a lesser degree of scope, the discourse of modernisation has more recently been  
30 seized upon by David Cameron who, following his election as Conservative party leader in 2005,  
31 embarked on his own modernisation drive to address the party's electoral problems in the wake  
32 of the New Labour project. As is often noted, both parties' modernisations have involved a  
33 number of shared elements, including: organisational change; policy change; image rebranding; a  
34 putative move to the centre; a distancing of the party from its past; and most importantly, an  
35 accommodation of the party towards what its leadership perceived to be 'modern' conditions (for  
36 eg, Bale, 2008; Dorey, 2007; Byrne *et al*, 2011; Dommett, 2015).  
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45 As a result, a great deal of scholarly focus has been directed towards understanding such  
46 processes of modernisation. Within this literature, a broad consensus emerged over the defining  
47 features of Labour's modernisation project. These were taken to include commitments towards:  
48 Third Way ideas; globalisation; marketisation; multi-level governance; social justice;  
49 multiculturalism; social pluralism; freedom of information; ethical foreign policy; and,  
50 constitutional reform. Nevertheless, some debate emerged over how to interpret these changes.  
51 Scholars divided over whether this modernising direction represented continuity with Labour's  
52 reformist traditions (Smith, 1994), a more fundamental rejuvenation of social democracy  
53 (Giddens, 2007), a capitulation to neo-liberalism (Hay, 1999; Heffernan, 2000) or a combination  
54 of such elements (Driver & Martell, 1998; Hall, 2007). Since 2005, Conservative party scholars  
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3 have similarly highlighted the defining features of David Cameron's modernisation drive. These  
4 have been noted to include commitments towards: Big Society ideas; social liberalism and equal  
5 marriage; social justice; environmentalism; a quality of life agenda; feminisation of the party;  
6 EU reform; liberal foreign policy and, limited constitutional reform. Again, some debate exists  
7 over whether this signals a turn towards a more socially liberal or compassionate form of  
8 Conservatism (Dorey, 2007; Beech, 2011), an accommodation towards New Labour (McAnulla,  
9 2010) or a revised form of Thatcherite neo-liberalism (Kerr *et al*, 2011). Nevertheless, a strong  
10 theme that unites much of this literature is the sense that the Tories modernisation project has  
11 been less substantial than its New Labour counterpart. As such, it has tended to be more easily  
12 blown off course, and should be viewed as a relatively more precarious and unsuccessful attempt  
13 at party adaptation (Hayton & McEnHill, 2015; Dommett, 2015; Kerr & Hayton, 2015).

### 19 **Anti-Modernisation Backlash and Populist Zeitgeist**

22 At the heart of such literature is a recognition that both Labour and the Conservatives, alongside  
23 other mainstream parties across Europe, have attempted to align themselves with broader social,  
24 political and economic changes perceived to have taken place at the national and international  
25 levels (Dommett, 2015). In particular, they have sought to bring themselves into step with wider  
26 forces of modernisation which work toward greater political, economic and cultural integration.  
27 However, in recent years it has also been increasingly noted that these types of modernising  
28 tendencies have created a backlash and worked to alienate elements of the mainstream parties'  
29 memberships and core voters. In a comparative context, it is widely recognised that social  
30 changes perceived as synonymous with modernisation, such as increased global integration,  
31 migration and multiculturalism, have helped to constitute groups which are variously referred to  
32 within the literature as 'modernisation losers' (Pelinka, 2013), 'globalisation losers' (Kriesi et al,  
33 2006) or, in a British context, the 'left behind' (Ford & Goodwin, 2014). The composition of  
34 such groups is sometimes disputed, with some emphasising their mainly working class, blue  
35 collar character (Pelinka, 2013; Ford & Goodwin, 2014) and others pointing to their more  
36 heterogeneous make-up (Kriesi et al, 2006; Evans & Mellon, 2015). What all agree on, is that  
37 these groups have become alienated from the mainstream political centre and are acting as a key  
38 driver of a 'populist zeitgeist' across Europe (Mudde, 2004) as they become drawn towards  
39 mainly right-wing parties utilising traditionalist discourses which promise to restore values and  
40 practices perceived to have been displaced by modernisation. These emergent populist right  
41 parties are noted to have developed a type of 'counter revolution' (Ignazi, 1992), in their  
42 response to modernisation, as they seek to promote a programmatic appeal around 'the  
43 preservation of the status quo ante - as it was before mass migration, Europeanisation and  
44 globalisation started to challenge the nation state' (Pelinka, 2013).

55 These developments are linked to a broader restructuring of the traditional lines of political  
56 competition across Europe. Over the postwar period, long-established economic and religious  
57 voting patterns are noted to have been eroded by developments such as the expansion of  
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3 education, rising living standards, secularisation and value changes associated with the  
4 'liberalising' impact of new social movements pushing for extensions to civil rights. Such  
5 changes are argued to have triggered a realignment of citizens around new cultural and identity  
6 issues shaped by the social transformations that have occurred since the 1960s (for eg, Dalton et  
7 al, 1984; Inglehart, 1990; Franklin et al, 1992; Kitschelt, 1994d). In light of these, a new type of  
8 two dimensional political space has developed in which traditional economic and distributional  
9 concerns now intersect with new cultural conflicts between social liberals or libertarians, on the  
10 one hand, and those who defend more traditional authoritarian values on the other. In much of  
11 this literature, it is often argued that, the postwar period has brought a shift in the relative  
12 salience of economic versus cultural issues, to the extent that cultural issues, such as disputes  
13 over immigration and civil rights, now often supercede economic ones.

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20 In recent literature, some studies assert that this realignment of the two dimensional political  
21 space, initially triggered by the impact of trends such as liberalisation, the rise of feminism and  
22 the extension of civil rights, is in the process of being further transformed by developments more  
23 specifically associated with 'modernisation'; most notably increased economic and cultural  
24 integration triggered by globalisation and new migration patterns (Kriesi et al, 2006; Bornschieer,  
25 2010). For eg, as Dolezal (2010: 356) notes:

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29 the decline of national sovereignty, the increasing cultural heterogeneity of European  
30 societies as a consequence of mass immigration, and the combined forces of a globalised  
31 and neo-liberal economy might be conceived of as a new critical juncture leading to new  
32 structural alignments in European electorates.  
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36 For such authors, the twin processes of economic and cultural modernisation are working to open  
37 up new structural conflicts between the various groups of 'winners' and 'losers' they help to  
38 create. According to Bonschier (2010: p 421): 'As a result of these evolutions certain social  
39 groups have lost in terms of life-chances or privileges, while others feel threatened in their  
40 identity by the policies enacting universalistic values and by European integration'. This, in turn,  
41 has opened up new potentials for political mobilisation within national political spaces;  
42 potentials which have been seized upon by both mainstream parties on the 'modernising' side  
43 and populist right parties which seek to preserve former values and practices on the  
44 'traditionalist' side.  
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49 Such literatures bring to light growing clashes, throughout Europe, between social and political  
50 forces often broadly classified as 'modernising' and those resisting such forces with reactionary,  
51 anti-modernising agendas which oppose certain interpretations of the 'modern' and appeal to  
52 more traditional values and the restoration of past practices. However, these conflicts are not  
53 always presented explicitly as an emerging clash between modernisation and anti-modernisation  
54 per se. Rather, we see these conflicts expressed variously throughout the literature. For eg, Kriesi  
55 et al (2006) refer to new structural conflicts emerging between *integrationists* and  
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3 *demarcationists*; ie, those who support greater denationalisation and cultural pluralism on one  
4 side and those who support protectionism and a defence of tradition on the other. Alternatively,  
5 Bonschier (2010) locates growing clashes between *libertarian-universalist* and *traditionalist-*  
6 *communitarian* forces at either end of the cultural pole of the two dimensional political axis. In a  
7 British context, Wheatley (2015) highlights a growing *cosmopolitan vs communitarian* clash  
8 which he argues can help explain the recent surge in support for UKIP, whilst more broadly  
9 Zizek (2006) argues that recent clashes in Europe are structured around conflicts between the  
10 *Anglo-Saxon model* of the economic modernisers, on one side, and those who seek to defend the  
11 traditional *French-German model* of the old Europe on the other. As such, there exists a  
12 reasonable amount of conceptual fuzziness in relation to how we can best characterise these  
13 conflicts.  
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20 In the midst of this lack of clarity, we argue that it is useful to utilise the broader terms of  
21 modernisation vs anti-modernisation. In doing so, we emphasise that modernisation has become  
22 the dominant form of discourse most commonly employed to homogenise a diverse, and  
23 sometimes contradictory, array of developments which have helped to structure political  
24 competition and mobilise voters, since the 1960s, but much more explicitly since the 1990s.  
25 These developments are broadly seen to include both economic and cultural elements. On the  
26 economic level, modernisation has come to include such elements as globalisation, neo-  
27 liberalism, marketisation and, commitments towards social justice; whilst on the cultural level,  
28 modernisation refers to broad elements such as universalism, social diversity, multiculturalism  
29 and liberalisation. These are the types of developments which mainstream parties have been keen  
30 to align themselves with through the deployment of modernisation discourses (Dommett, 2015).  
31 However, in light of these developments, a number of social forces have more recently begun to  
32 coalesce around discourses which are becoming increasingly homogenised as ‘anti-modernising’  
33 in their character. Here, the prefix ‘anti’ is important to our argument, in that these forces are  
34 widely perceived to be reactionary and defensive against the developments broadly characterised  
35 as modernisation. In their empirical content, these revolve around the rejection of many (though  
36 not always all) aspects of modernisation, and the evocation of ideas of tradition and a nostalgia  
37 for past values and practices.  
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### 45 **Modernisation vs Anti-Modernisation in the UK**

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48 To date, little attention has been directed towards how such clashes have manifested themselves  
49 in the UK. This is perhaps understandable. Until recently, the UK party system has been immune  
50 to the impact of successful populist right parties, though this should probably be viewed as a  
51 supply, rather than a demand side problem (John & Margetts, 2009). As such, conflicts between  
52 modernising and anti-modernising forces have been muted in the UK, with the result that  
53 scholarly focus has generally been directed towards understanding modernisation rather than  
54 anti-modernisation. One area where studies have noted conflict is in relation to the intra-party  
55 dynamics of the Conservative Party, where a clash between modernisers and traditionalists has  
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3 long been seen as the key source of party divisions. It is only recently that a backlash against  
4 modernisation has been viewed as a driver of inter-party conflict, with both Conservative and  
5 Labour party modernisations having been noted to have played a key role in fuelling support for  
6 UKIP (Ford & Goodwin, 2014, 2015; Evans & Mellon, 2015). Here, we add to such claims with  
7 our argument that tensions between modernising and anti-modernising forces in the UK have not  
8 been confined to the political right; they have also evidenced themselves in the recent divisions  
9 within the Labour party around Jeremy Corbyn's 2015 successful leadership bid. It is from such  
10 evidence that we develop our key argument below - that a growing clash between modernisation  
11 and anti-modernisation is becoming a more prevalent line of both intra and inter-party  
12 competition in the UK. Below, we take a brief look at how such conflicts have played out in  
13 relation to the Conservatives, Labour and UKIP respectively.

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*The Conservatives*

A tension between 'centrist' modernisers and centre-right traditionalists has long been a key source of division within the Conservative party. This clash has been particularly prevalent in the wake of the Thatcher governments and the source of a number of party management problems. On one side, the traditionalists look towards further embedding Thatcherite reforms, whilst placing strong emphasis on issues of law and order, immigration control, welfare retrenchment, traditional family values, national sovereignty and strong Euroscepticism. On the other side, the modernisers take inspiration from one nation and social liberal ideas and have sought in recent years to reform the party's image as a 'nasty' party, appealing to a more compassionate and inclusive form of Conservatism. Although both sides commit to limiting the size of the state, the modernisers tend to favour a slightly more expansive role for government on issues around inequality and economic development. In recent years, the traditionalists have tended to hold the upper hand in the party, and the close association they bring to the legacy of the Thatcher governments has helped to earn the party a reputation for failing to represent vulnerable and minority groups. In turn, this prompted, under the respective leaderships of William Hague, Iain Duncan Smith and Michael Howard, successive but failed attempts to modernise and decontaminate the party's brand (see for eg: Denham & O'Hara, 2007; Bale, 2011).

In the wake of the New Labour project, the task for the modernisers has been to pull the party away from an over-reliance on a core vote strategy, based around a primary emphasis on anti-immigration, law and order and state retrenchment. To date, this has been a seemingly staccato process and it was not until the election of David Cameron as party leader, that the modernisers appeared to gain any type of ascendancy or momentum. Central to Cameron's strategy has been an attempt to align the party with key elements of Labour's modernising project (McAnulla, 2010), such as a greater emphasis on social justice and social pluralism; the latter of which was exemplified by his commitment towards equal marriage legislation and the furthering of attempts to increase the representation of women within the party. As well as a change to the party's logo and early attempts to lower the salience of issues around immigration (Bale & Partos, 2015) and



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3 Europe (Lynch, 2015), other symbolic moves towards signalling the party's modernising ethos  
4 have included an emphasis on environmental protection (Carter & Clements, 2015) and a  
5 commitment, thus far sustained, towards ring-fencing budgets for international aid and  
6 development.  
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10 Cameron's strategy has been to bring the party into line with what are perceived to be 'modern'  
11 conditions, values and practices (Dommett, 2015). In doing so, much effort has been directed  
12 towards aligning the party with the cultural aspects of modernisation; ie, those elements which  
13 include increasing diversity, integration and social pluralism. A central pillar of this strategy was  
14 the strong push for the full legal recognition of gay marriage, a key issue in provoking fierce  
15 conflict with traditionalists (Heppell, 2013). On the economic aspects of modernisation, the  
16 Conservatives have for a long time been aligned with key elements of economic modernisation,  
17 such as support for deregulation, marketisation and financialisation. Nevertheless, Cameron has  
18 attempted to further modernise the party's image on the economic side by focussing on two main  
19 fronts. Firstly, he has attempted to bolster public confidence in the Tories' ability to protect  
20 public services (Smith & Jones, 2015) and secondly, he has attempted to improve the party's  
21 image in relation to the issue of social justice. This latter theme has long been a missing element  
22 to the Conservatives' modernising credentials and both Cameron and his Chancellor George  
23 Osborne have directed much of their efforts towards addressing this by reassuring voters that the  
24 party can be trusted around issues of poverty and inequality.  
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32 Yet, the overall fate of Cameron's modernisation remains to be seen. Having hit the ground  
33 running with a series of symbolic moves signalling a strong departure from the party's  
34 traditionalist core vote strategy, Cameron's modernising momentum began to falter after 2007 in  
35 the wake of the financial crisis. Since then, his modernisation project has been beset with various  
36 problems, including some serious party divisions, confused objectives and a seeming lack of  
37 strong political leadership (Kerr & Hayton, 2015). At worst, the success of Cameron's  
38 modernisation remains in the balance, whilst at best it has arguably received some limited  
39 renewal in the wake of the party's success in the 2015 General Election. Important though, is the  
40 very strong reaction which the leader's modernisation agenda has provoked from within both the  
41 party itself and key elements of its wider support. Far from securing a dominant hold, Cameron's  
42 modernisation strategy has served to strengthen often fierce opposition from traditionalists and  
43 core voters, particularly since around 2007 and the onset of global economic downturn. This has  
44 led to continual pressure on Cameron to take tougher and more traditionalist stances on issues  
45 such as Europe and immigration. Even on other issues which were previously dominated by the  
46 modernisers, Cameron has been forced to either defend his stand against some aggressively  
47 traditionalist opposition, as in the case of equal marriage, or beat a hasty retreat onto more  
48 traditionalist ground, as in for eg, social policy, where Cameron's former, more compassionate  
49 rhetoric has given way to some stringent welfare reforms (Hayton & McEnhill, 2015). Similarly,  
50 on the issue of the environment, his modernising pledge to deliver the 'greenest government  
51 ever' has largely given way to a discourse of 'get rid of all the green crap' and commitments  
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3 towards allowing ‘fracking’ and the construction of HS2 (Carter & Clements, 2015). Likewise,  
4 the PM’s pledges to restore public confidence in the party’s commitment to public services has  
5 been accompanied by some of the most stringent and successful attempts ever to radically reduce  
6 the size and role of the state (Smith & Jones, 2015). In addition, his attempted ‘feminisation’ of  
7 the party has largely failed to alter the party’s core commitment to more traditional gender norms  
8 and family values (Childs and Campbell, 2015).  
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12 In light of this, it is generally noted that Cameron’s efforts to modernise the party have merely  
13 served to reanimate long-standing conflicts between traditionalists and modernisers, and in many  
14 of these conflicts, the traditionalists may still retain much of the higher ground. Whilst  
15 opposition to modernisation initially appeared reasonably muted from 2005 - 2007, fresh impetus  
16 to these conflicts came as the party considered its response to the financial crisis, whilst  
17 Cameron’s subsequent failure to deliver an overall majority in the 2010 general election brought  
18 tensions to a height. Since then, a sustained backlash against the leader’s modernisation drive has  
19 been widely evident from within the party and has also been noted to have increased electoral  
20 support for UKIP, with a number of Conservative voters deserting the party in various elections  
21 up to, and including, the 2015 General Election (Hayton, 2010; Webb & Bale, 2014).  
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### 27 *Labour*

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29 In Labour, clashes between modernisers and traditionalists have been, until recently, subdued by  
30 the modernisers, who achieved dominance following the splits, conflicts and expulsions that  
31 animated the party’s internal politics throughout the 1980s. In the context of such divisions,  
32 Labour’s modernisation drive, initiated by Neil Kinnock, was a lengthy, antagonistic process  
33 lasting for over a decade. A key aim of the modernisers was to expunge the party of its deep  
34 nostalgia for the past (Jobson & Wickham-Jones, 2010), whilst asserting that their own forward-  
35 looking, modernising outlook represented the true spirit of Labour’s historical trajectory  
36 (Finlayson, 2003; Randall, 2009). As the modernisation project increased momentum under the  
37 leadership of John Smith and came to full fruition under Tony Blair, it achieved a near  
38 hegemony for the modernisers and a central role for modernisation discourses in New Labour’s  
39 governing agenda. In light of this, the Tories modernisation drive, which has largely faltered in  
40 the face of traditionalist opposition, looks like a pale reflection of its New Labour counterpart.  
41 This is perhaps no surprise, since the term modernisation has been linked more closely to the  
42 liberal left, whilst traditionalism has largely remained in the preserve of the right. Thus, just as  
43 traditionalism has tended to hold sway in the Conservative party, modernisation has become  
44 more synonymous with Labour; a development which had started to take root even before the  
45 leadership of Kinnock (Finlayson, 2003).  
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54 It is perhaps unsurprising then, that left parties such as Labour, have been cited as a key trigger  
55 for traditionalist backlashes against modernisation, with anti-modernising forces often  
56 interpreted as reacting against either the progressive social impact of the New Left since the  
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3 1960s or, paradoxically, the accommodation of social democratic parties to neo-liberalism since  
4 the 1980s (Marsdal, 2013). This latter trend has undermined left parties' ability to mobilise  
5 traditional working class voters and exposed these voters to the mobilising effects of the right.  
6 Thus, a growing neo-liberal consensus amongst Europe's political elites is argued to have  
7 destabilised working class voters' left-right compass by de-politicising macro-economic policy  
8 and closing debates over key economic issues that are important to working class voters (Evans  
9 & Tilley, 2012). This has created space for the populist right to place a heightened focus on  
10 'value politics', by increasing the salience of issues around immigration and law and order etc.  
11 Linked to the left's movement towards a neo-liberal economic consensus is also the broader  
12 accommodation of the metropolitan elites towards a cultural consensus around liberal  
13 cosmopolitanism which is said to favour middle class voters and further undermine the interests  
14 of the social democratic parties' traditional support (Ford & Goodwin, 2014).  
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21 There is now recent evidence to suggest that similar types of dynamics are playing out in the UK,  
22 with the Labour party's drift towards neo-liberal convergence having been noted as a key trigger  
23 for rising disaffection amongst working class voters, driving many towards support for UKIP.  
24 For eg, Evans & Melon (2015: 10) locate the leakage of Labour support precisely in its  
25 modernisation process: 'the damage to Labour's core support had already been done by New  
26 Labour's focus on a pro-middle class, pro-EU and, as it eventually turned out, pro-immigration  
27 agenda, before the arrival of UKIP as a plausible electoral choice'. But, importantly, it is not just  
28 inter-party dynamics that this anti-modernisation backlash has worked to create; more recent  
29 years have seen a growing reaction against Labour modernisers from within the party itself,  
30 where an attachment to nostalgia and tradition had been quietened but never fully expunged by  
31 the New Labour project (Jobson & Wickham-Jones, 2010). For eg, there were faint echoes of  
32 modernisers vs traditionalists in the split between Blairites and Brownites; though given Gordon  
33 Brown's role as a key architect in the Blair project, it is perhaps more accurate to refer to this  
34 clash as a tension between modernisers and modernisers-lite. Similarly, the victory of Ed  
35 Miliband over his brother David in Labour's 2010 leadership contest, which had strong support  
36 amongst the affiliated trades unions, also signalled to some degree, an emerging backlash against  
37 the Blairite, New Labour project. However, it is with the general election defeat of 2015, and the  
38 emergence of Jeremy Corbyn as party leader, that we've seen a heightened reignition of a more  
39 fundamental clash between party modernisers and its traditionalist grassroots base.  
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48 Whilst embracing most of the key elements of cultural modernisation, including the drift towards  
49 cultural integration, social pluralism and liberalisation, Corbyn's rhetoric has been directed more  
50 specifically towards an opposition to key aspects of economic modernisation, particularly those  
51 elements of neoliberalism, deregulation and financialisation that have accompanied the spread of  
52 globalisation. In their opposition to 'Blairite' economic modernisation, the Corbynites present  
53 themselves as standing in defence of what they regard as the party's traditional core values of  
54 social justice, redistribution, public ownership and state-led growth. In addition, they also  
55 promise to strengthen the party's affiliation with its traditional blue collar and multicultural  
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3 support base by promising to reconnect the party to its grassroots supporters and trades union  
4 affiliates. A further element to Corbyn's opposition to modernising trends is a forceful rejection  
5 of modern methods of political communication and spin, the introduction of which was a key  
6 element of Labour's modernisation project (Finlayson, 2003). Thus, the leader has emphasised  
7 his commitment to processes of democratisation, consultation and consensus building.  
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11 As such, the key spur for the groundswell of support for Corbyn has been a forceful reaction  
12 against the direction the modernisers have taken the party. To both Corbyn's supporters and  
13 critics alike, the Labour leader's position is entrenched in the anti-modernising camp, and is  
14 rooted in the more traditional politics of 'old' Labour. This has led many critics to dismiss the  
15 Corbynites as wanting to turn 'back the clock' towards a largely discredited past, before the era  
16 of modernisation. This was perhaps best exemplified by David Cameron, who at PMQs on the  
17 21st October 2015 - the so called 'Back to the Future Day' - remarked: 'I am not surprised that  
18 many people sitting behind him say he should get in his DeLorean and go back to 1985 and stay  
19 there'. Indeed, this vein of criticism, that Corbyn the traditionalist, needs to reconnect the party  
20 with modern 'realities', is one, which as we argue below, has long been used by the modernisers  
21 to marginalise both internal and external opposition. However, the important point here is that,  
22 whereas such depoliticising discourse worked effectively to stymie opposition throughout the  
23 1990s and 2000s, it appears to have lost some of its efficacy in the light of an increasingly  
24 assertive backlash from the party's traditionalist wing.  
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### 31 *UKIP*

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34 The recent surge in electoral support for UKIP has been one of the most notable developments in  
35 contemporary UK party politics. The idea that UKIP attracts much of its support from voters  
36 who feel alienated by the modernising tendencies of the two main parties is central to much of  
37 the current literature. In particular, Ford & Goodwin (2014) argue that the surge in UKIP support  
38 has been driven by a general feeling of disaffection amongst mainly older, white, working class  
39 and low skilled voters, towards the parties' convergence around key elements of both Labour and  
40 Conservative party modernisations. This, combined with wider economic and social  
41 transformations, particularly those that have brought greater cultural and economic integration,  
42 has helped to establish a group of voters who feel alienated by the liberal cosmopolitanism of the  
43 Westminster elite. These 'left-behind' voters share broadly similar characteristics to those groups  
44 referred to within the comparative literature as modernisation or globalisation 'losers'.  
45 According to such literature, it is mainly anti-establishment, populist right parties, such as UKIP,  
46 that have become the key beneficiaries of these groups' backlash against modernising and  
47 globalising tendencies.  
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55 Ford and Goodwin's work has been hugely influential in helping us to interpret, not only the  
56 dynamics of support for UKIP, but also some of the ways in which electoral competition in the  
57 UK has shifted more broadly. It points towards the mainstream parties' close alignment with  
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3 wider modernising tendencies as having helped to create the potential for a type of ‘anti-politics’  
4 (Stoker, 2006), in the form of voters who are disenchanted and ripe for mobilisation against  
5 political and cultural elites. This opening of fertile ground for populist, anti-establishment  
6 parties, although common in Europe, represents a significant transformation of the electoral  
7 landscape in the UK. Importantly, the bulk of empirical work in this area emphasises that an  
8 electoral appeal towards traditional values and practices and a nostalgia for the past has helped to  
9 solidify this transformation. However, whilst Ford and Goodwin’s work has attracted much  
10 praise, it has also been criticised for placing too much emphasis on the working-class basis of  
11 UKIP’s support. According to Evans and Mellon (2015), UKIP draws as much support from  
12 middle class voters, particularly those who are self employed and small business owners. This  
13 chimes with some of the comparative literature which asserts that those groups most likely to  
14 feel threatened by modernisation are heterogeneous in their composition (Kriesi et al, 2006). Yet,  
15 despite this level of disagreement, most authors agree that much of UKIP’s vote comes from  
16 voters who were alienated years before the emergence of UKIP as a political force, and  
17 specifically, by both parties’ realignment towards a ‘liberal consensus’ on issues such as the EU  
18 and immigration.  
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26 Such literature locates UKIP’s support in a mixture of traditional, working class Labour voters  
27 and petit-bourgeois or middle class Conservative voters, who feel shared grievances at the  
28 mainstream parties’ convergence around issues broadly associated with modernisation. Whilst  
29 the movement of past Labour voters to the right does not necessarily point to a weakening of  
30 class identity, it does potentially demonstrate a shift from economic to cultural voting patterns in  
31 an environment in which economic issues have become increasingly depoliticised. That said,  
32 some authors point out (for eg, Kriesi et al, 2006; Kholi, 2000) that it may be misleading to try to  
33 separate economic and cultural interests in this way. What, to us, is important here is the range of  
34 anti-modernisation and traditionalist themes which have been noted to help animate UKIP’s  
35 rhetoric and mobilise such voters. These include UKIP’s: strong cultural conservatism and  
36 backlash against issues such as gay marriage (Webb & Bale, 2014); it’s anti-establishment  
37 positioning (Abedi & Lundberg, 2009); support for civic nationalism and Euroscepticism  
38 (Tournier-Sol, 2015); rejection of multiculturalism, open borders and political correctness  
39 (Lynch & Whitaker, 2013); and, appeals for a return to national sovereignty (Crines & Heppell,  
40 2015).  
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### 48 **The Fluidity of Modernisation and Anti-modernising discourses**

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50 So far, we have argued that conflicts between modernising and anti-modernising forces are  
51 becoming increasingly prevalent in the UK, whilst showing that this development echoes wider  
52 trends across Europe. In this section, we attempt to build some theoretical flesh on the dynamics  
53 that help to constitute these conflicts; and in doing so, we venture to disrupt certain aspects of the  
54 dominant narrative. Specifically, our aim here is to emphasise the contingent and fluid character  
55 of these conflicts by reminding ourselves that modernisation is not a ‘real’ thing per se, but  
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rather a set of discourses which have become inscribed into a series of empirical observations which may not be largely precise or indeed linked to each other. To recognise the contingent character of modernisation is to acknowledge that modernisation ‘does not simply progressively develop according to any logic internal either to it or to a wider historical process’ (Finlayson, 2003: 73). Rather, the word modernisation has come to represent a wide, and often contradictory, variety of ‘different needs, desires, strategies and demands’. Likewise, the proliferation of modernisation discourse has, in turn, helped to shape its own (seeming) antithesis in the form of anti-modernising and traditionalist discourses which rely on narratives of the past which likewise may not be accurate (Wodak & KhosraviNik, 2013; Pelinka, 2013) and which have also come to represent a diverse and often contradictory range of grievances, interests and political conflicts.

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Whilst there is much to commend existing studies of the tension between modernising and anti-modernising forces, there remains a problematic tendency to see both positions as largely static and fixed ideological alignments. Thus voters, parties or factions are often portrayed as belonging firmly to one or either camp. This leads to two further problems. Firstly, there is a tendency to narrowly equate modernisation with the Left and anti-modernisation with the Right. Yet, if we compare, for eg, Jeremy Corbyn’s version of ‘old’ Labour politics with that of Nigel Farage’s UKIP, we can begin to detect some elements of commonality in their respective rejections of the modern and their defensive stance in favour of past traditions and established values. In this respect, both Corbyn and Farage, to varying degrees and from different starting points, share an undoubtedly anti-modernising ground. This could help to explain the strong appeal which UKIP has on former ‘old’ Labour voters. Moreover, it could also be used to hypothesise that Corbyn’s own brand of retro style Labour politics may hold the potential to attract back some of those same voters. Secondly, there is a correlative tendency to view such voters, who are likely to be attracted to either camp, as having their own sets of interests and identities ‘fixed’ by their relationship to social changes such as the impact of globalisation. These voters’ interests are often seen as pre-constituted, placing them in either the ‘winners’ or ‘losers’ camp. In fact, the lines between modernisation and anti-modernisation are often much more blurred, and it is reasonably common for political actors and voters to be able, at certain times, to move between each.

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The fluidity of these alignments is evidenced in the intra party politics of the two main UK parties. In the Conservative party for eg, it is interesting to note that over the past three decades the ‘modernisers’ and ‘traditionalists’ have largely swapped roles. Whereas formerly the Thatcherites were viewed as the modernising, forward-looking force, these are now firmly rooted in the traditionalist camp, whilst it is the formerly more traditionalist ‘one nation’ Tories who have been able to take up the modernising mantle. Likewise, the contingent character of these alignments can also be seen in the ways that both modernisers and traditionalists have positioned themselves on specific policy issues. For eg, throughout the Coalition government, as Cameron sought to reduce the salience of Europe as part of his own modernisation strategy, it was the more traditionalist right of the party which was able to position themselves as progressive

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3 modernisers keen to embrace ideas of popular democracy and globalisation to push for a  
4 reformed relationship with the EU (Lynch, 2015). Likewise, in debates over equal marriage,  
5 Tory modernisers fought hard to construct their modernising reform as an attempt to preserve  
6 and maintain more traditional Conservative ideas around the sanctity of marriage (Hayton &  
7 McEnhill, 2015). In Labour, even the Blairite modernisers inscribed their modernising agenda  
8 with a strong notion of tradition, as Blair sought to reconstruct the British political tradition as  
9 inherently bound to ideas of reform and change (Finlayson, 2003). Thus Blair's modernisation  
10 presented itself as an attempt to restore Britain's true heritage. Likewise, although much of  
11 Jeremy Corbyn's rhetoric is aimed at restoring more traditional 'old' Labour values, it also  
12 promises to deliver a 'new', more progressive and modern type of politics.  
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18 As a result, it is fruitful to view the lines between modernisation and anti-modernisation as ones  
19 which are very often transgressed and made blurry by elite actors hoping to utilise such  
20 discourses in order to gain competitive advantage or dismiss their opponents. Thus, rather than  
21 view both positions as fixed alignments, it is more advantageous to acknowledge that the  
22 meanings and the specific constitution of political forces around each are a constantly contested  
23 and contingent field. In light of this, in our final section, we argue that modernisation and  
24 traditionalism are best viewed as performing the role in discourse of Ernesto Laclau's 'empty  
25 signifiers'. As empty signifiers, modernisation and traditionalist discourses, whilst preserving a  
26 relative autonomy from any specific and fixed sets of meaning, have come to serve three key  
27 political functions: 1) they are being increasingly used to mobilise voters; 2) they work to  
28 construct the identity and demands of such voters; 3) they help to create a social antagonism  
29 which attempts to depoliticise or naturalise particular policy agendas.  
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### 36 **Modernisation and Traditionalism as Empty Signifiers**

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38 To assert the contingent character of modernisation and anti-modernisation is to move beyond  
39 some of the claims within the current literature. As we noted, a common claim is that the  
40 rejection of cultural and economic modernisation provides anti-establishment parties with an  
41 inherent appeal to groups of left behind voters. A strong implication here is that the relationship  
42 between these voters and their parties is 'bottom-up'; ie, the demands of the voters are pre-  
43 constituted by social changes and this then sets the conditions for anti-establishment parties to  
44 tap into this groundswell of already existing demand for a traditionalist agenda. From a  
45 Laclauian perspective, the problem with such a narrative is that it ignores the central role which  
46 political projects play, not only in mobilising such voters, but in helping to constitute the very  
47 interests, identities and demands of these voters. In some parts of the current literature, this point  
48 is partially acknowledged. For eg, Kriesi *et al* (2006: 923) observe that: 'on the one hand, parties  
49 position themselves strategically with respect to new political potentials, which are created by  
50 the new structural conflicts, on the other hand, *it is the very articulation of the new conflicts by*  
51 *political parties that structures the political space*'. This points to a mutually constitutive  
52 relationship between social change and political mobilisation; whereas globalisation opens up  
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3 political opportunities, it is for elite actors to decide how to construct and exploit these. What a  
4 Laclauian perspective brings is a recognition that the mobilisation of voters, either towards or  
5 against these social changes, involves the discursive constitution of group identities, such as that  
6 of the 'left behind'. As such, political mobilisation does not simply act upon pre-existing groups  
7 of voters; rather, the process of mobilisation itself plays a key role in the construction of these  
8 groups. Thus for Laclau, one must first constitute 'the people' who are to be mobilised and, it is  
9 here particularly, that empty signifiers come to play a central role (Laclau, 2005).  
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14 To Laclau, empty signifiers act as the focal points for hegemonic contestation between rival  
15 political projects. These components of discourse, which can come in the form of aims, figures,  
16 symbols or slogans, 'stand-in' as over-arching, but largely empty, representations of disparate,  
17 and often irreconcilable sets of demands. Their key function is to bring a symbolic coherence,  
18 meaning and unity - in Laclau's terms, an equivalential bond - to the otherwise distinct and  
19 unconnected social grievances they purport to represent. In doing so, they become the 'rallying  
20 point of passionate attachments', as those who are aggrieved within this equivalential chain -  
21 become constituted as 'the people' - and bring what Laclau terms a 'radical investment', or  
22 emotional attachment, to this symbolic representation of their cause. As such, empty signifiers,  
23 such as modernisation, become elevated to the status of 'the Thing' which 'the people' are  
24 seemingly demanding to see fulfilled; yet given their meaningless character, their achievement is  
25 ultimately unfulfillable.  
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32 In UK politics, modernisation has arguably performed such a role over the past few decades  
33 (Byrne et al, 2011). Whilst the word incorporates a variety of elements including globalisation,  
34 cultural pluralism, social liberalism, social justice and marketisation, its meaning remains  
35 sufficiently amorphous to allow it to mobilise heterogeneous groups of actors. Moreover, whilst  
36 modernisation works to make sense of a diverse array of social changes, so too does it function  
37 to produce ideas about which groups emerge as its 'winners' and 'losers'. Thus, it constructs  
38 lines of political conflict and identity - in this case between modernisers and traditionalists -  
39 whilst at the same time articulating a unity amongst the disparate parties, voters and demands it  
40 recruits to its cause. From a Laclauian perspective, what's at stake in these conflicts is a struggle  
41 to construct and mobilise the 'true people'; whether that be, for Corbynites, the true voice of  
42 Labour or for Farage, the authentic voice of the 'man in the pub'. Thus, Blair's modernising  
43 rhetoric promised to restore Britain's true heritage: 'his rhetoric seeks to arrange itself on the  
44 side of 'the people', and hence (by implication) opposed to the anti-popular interests of the anti-  
45 modernisers'. Importantly, in constituting this 'people', who stand on the side of modernisation,  
46 modernising discourses likewise work to constitute an antagonism with those outside the  
47 equivalential chain - the anti-modernisers - or in the case of New Labour, the 'forces of  
48 conservatism' (Finlayson, 2003). Thus, the former modernisation 'zeitgeist' can be said to have  
49 created its own conditions for a rival, anti-modernising backlash based around a reassertion of  
50 traditionalist values and practices. And, as with the modernisers, the anti-modernisers similarly  
51 seek to utilise traditionalist discourses to construct the same populist mandate, characterising the  
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3 modernisers as 'out of touch' with the more traditional values and aspirations of the British  
4 public.  
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7 This latter point allows us to identify another key function of modernising and anti-modernising  
8 discourses. Whilst they primarily work to mobilise and constitute voters, they also create a  
9 depoliticising / politicising dynamic which works towards delegitimising opposing agendas.  
10 Thus, modernisation discourses assert that one must 'get real', wake up and smell the coffee.  
11 They ridicule 'out-of-touch' backward-looking traditionalists and assert a 'no alternative' ethos  
12 (Hay, 1999). The de-politicising mechanism here is the assertion that the modernisers are  
13 expertly schooled in the 'realities' of the modern context and therefore the only actors  
14 knowledgeable enough to recognise the limited set of responses appropriate to that context.  
15 Thus, in discussing French and Dutch resistance to the EU project, Zizek (2005: 16) noted that  
16 the respective 'No' campaigns were infantilised, dismissed as immature and irrational forms of  
17 populism: 'in their reaction to the *no* they treated the people like slow pupils who did not get the  
18 lesson of the experts; their self-criticism was the one of the teacher who admits that he failed to  
19 educate his pupils'. Likewise, similar types of rhetoric have been directed towards Jeremy  
20 Corbyn from all parts of the political spectrum. Such critics regularly deploy modernising  
21 discourses to dismiss Corbyn as a backward looking, intellectually deficient politician painfully  
22 out of touch with modern realities. For eg, Suzanne Moore wrote in the Guardian:  
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30 For Corbyn, the unspun unmoderniser, to lead an extra-parliamentary movement inside  
31 parliament, he needs to be intellectually deft. Leaders have to embody modernity, to  
32 represent who we think we are. Politics is about pragmatism, but it is also about ideas;  
33 there has to be an intellectual underpinning. Retro paternalism, whether from him or  
34 Farage, cannot be the future. Even getting into the present would be good.  
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38 Thus, although modernisation is ideological, in that it splits the political field into two camps  
39 (Finlayson, 2003) - one which is structured and rational in its approach and another which is  
40 nonsense or out-dated - it has the advantage of presenting itself as non-ideological and therefore  
41 a practical, common sense approach to contemporary realities. Likewise, just as modernisers  
42 work towards naturalising their agendas, so too are similar 'get real' discourses also employed  
43 by the anti-modernisers. Whilst the right attempt to portray the liberal elite as fantasists deluded  
44 by modern myths of egalitarianism, multi-culturalism and political correctness, the left portray  
45 the neo-liberal faith in progress as delusional, whilst emphasising the hard realities of poverty,  
46 conflict, exploitation and inequality.  
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## 51 **Conclusion**

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54 In conclusion, our argument is that in recent years, anti-modernising discourses, based around a  
55 reassertion of past practices and traditions, have taken an increasingly prominent position  
56 alongside modernisation discourses as rallying points for the mobilisation of voters in the UK.  
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3 The antagonism between modernisers and anti-modernisers has been deepening since the onset  
4 of the financial crisis and is working to create a field of political conflict which is increasingly  
5 helping to structure both intra and inter party competition across the political spectrum. Yet,  
6 rather than view these as static alignments, we have argued that both positions are better  
7 characterised as relational and fluid discursive fields which are often transgressed by  
8 protagonists from both camps. As such, the meanings, and thereby the specific constitution of  
9 political forces around each, are a constantly contestable and contingent field, open to various  
10 language games. Thus, the recourse to either a modernising or anti-modernising discourse can be  
11 used by elite actors as a relational strategic positioning in a context in which one, or other  
12 discourse has become dominant. As we have attempted to show here, this emerging conflict,  
13 which has long divided the Conservative party, and which is evident throughout much of  
14 Western Europe, has extended itself in recent years towards fuelling both the recent rise in  
15 electoral support for UKIP, and the emergence of strong, grassroots support within Labour for  
16 Jeremy Corbyn.  
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