

In This Issue

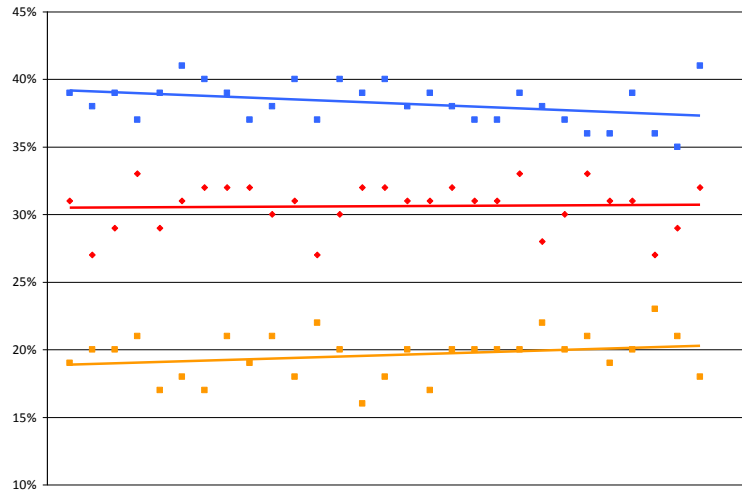
- The big picture
- Debate in context
- Time for a change – to whom?
- Whose policy?
- Brand effects

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The big picture

There have been more than thirty opinion polls published since Gordon Brown called the general election – an average of more than three a day. At times they have seemed to show radically different pictures of party support. But the golden rule of reading opinion polls is to remember what relatively blunt instruments they are: most of the differences between the ratings for the three main parties from one poll to another are within the margin of error and are probably statistically meaningless.

Polls ought to scatter either side of a mean, within their defined margin, so the best way to read them is, as in the chart below (which shows all polls published this month), in batches, as a series of dots. The true level of party support should lie on the trendline through the scattered poll numbers. As the chart shows, not much has changed. The only real movement during the campaign so far has been a slight drop in Conservative support, from around 39% to about 37.5%, and a very small trend increase in support for the Lib Dems.



Debate in context

It was widely speculated in advance that Nick Clegg was the most likely net beneficiary from the televised leaders' debates and so it proved. For many voters it was the first time they'd ever really seen him in action. The second debate, where expectations will be much higher, is likely to be a more telling test of whether many voters are really considering switching to the Lib Dems because of Mr Clegg.

The Populus post-debate poll for The Times, like all the other post-debate polls, found that Nick Clegg was judged 'winner' by most who watched. A couple of days before the debate, Populus benchmarked perceptions of the leader among those agreeing to participate in the post-debate poll. This reveals huge improvements in voter views of Nick Clegg – especially on the question of whether he would 'change this country for the better' (27% before the debate, 53% after it) and 'has clear ideas to deal with the big problems facing Britain' (from 28% before to 63% after).

But, though Nick Clegg 'won' the debate overall in the view of most voters, and his personal ratings rose sharply, he is still rated third among the three leaders when it comes to the central question of 'knowing what it takes to get the economy growing'; he still trails David Cameron (albeit narrowly) on the key attribute of being 'a strong leader'. Furthermore, David Cameron – who held a double digit lead (over both Gordon Brown and Nick Clegg) before the debate on 'having what it takes to be a good Prime Minister' – still holds a double-digit lead on this after the debate (but with Nick Clegg now having moved ahead of the man who is currently Prime Minister).

Links – <http://populus.co.uk/the-times-post-debate-poll-april-15-2010-150410.html>

Time for a change – to whom?

The context of the election and the explanation for the volatility of the voters is clearly illustrated by the Populus finding, in the latest campaign poll for The Times, that 75% of voters (and exactly the same proportion in key marginal seats) think it is 'time for a change from Labour', but only 34% also think it is 'time for a change to the Conservatives'. More than two voters in five say they want change from the Labour government, but aren't sure that the Conservatives represent the kind of change they want. How these voters resolve this and what they end up doing on 6th May will decide the election.

Links – <http://populus.co.uk/the-times-the-times-poll-april-2010-120410.html>

Whose policy?

Most voters are unable correctly to attribute to the right party several major policy positions announced in the first week of the election campaign. The Populus poll for The Times summarized eight policies and asked which party had proposed each one. Only one of the policies (the Conservative policy of tax relief for some married couples and civil partners) was correctly identified by more than half of voters and four of the policies were attributed by most voters to the wrong party.

The Conservative policy of reducing the planned increase in National Insurance Contributions, which has so far probably been the subject of more argument between the parties than any other, was correctly attributed to the Tories by only 35% of voters, with slightly more (39%) thinking this proposal had come from Labour.

The Labour policy of requiring foreign workers employed in the public services to speak English, which had been prominently covered in the media on the day the poll was conducted, was attributed to Labour by less than one in four voters (22%), with more than twice as many (48%) thinking it was a Conservative proposal.

Links – <http://populus.co.uk/the-times-the-times-poll-april-2010-120410.html>

Brand effects

As well as this stark evidence of how disengaged many voters are, the poll reinforced the critical importance of underlying brand perceptions in evaluating what the parties say. Populus also asked whether each of the eight policies made people more or less likely to support the party they thought had put it forward – or if it made no difference either way. The really striking finding from this question is that on some issues, whether a policy attracts or repels voters depends on which party's policy

they think it is. People were twice as likely to say that requiring foreign workers to speak English put them off voting for the party proposing it if they thought that was the Conservatives (12%) than if they thought it was Labour (6%). Similarly those who thought a tax break for married couples was a Conservative policy were slightly more likely to say that it put them off voting Conservative (20%) than that it attracted them to the party (18%). Whereas those who thought it was a Labour or Lib Dem policy viewed it more favourably (18% saying it would make them more likely to vote Labour, against 8% saying it would make them less likely to do so, and 25%/7% among those who thought it was a Lib Dem policy.

Links - <http://populus.co.uk/the-times-the-times-poll-april-2010-120410.html>

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