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Tilted battleground?

There is now less than three months to go before the presumed general election date of May 6th. The polls have continued to show a slight rise in Labour support – mainly coming from the fringe parties; the proportion of people who voted Labour in 2005 who now say they would vote Conservative has remained steady, at about 12% for the past year or more.

Labour have got back to about 30%, from their trough of 23% last May. But the Conservatives remain 9% ahead in the average of published polls – and all the available evidence indicates that the swing is larger in the key marginal seats than it is nationally.

No party has ever lost a poll lead of remotely that size held this close to an election. Of elections in living memory the one that the current poll position most resembles is 1987, when the Conservatives had an 11% margin over Labour that produced a Commons majority of 102; ordinarily we should be at this stage be able confidently to predict a clear Conservative victory.

The fact that the election is instead widely viewed as too close to call is, of course, because of the bias in the electoral system.

The standard rule of thumb is that, other things being equal, on a uniform national swing (i.e. one in which the same swing from Labour to Conservative occurs in every

constituency) the Conservatives need to be about 11% ahead of Labour in terms of vote share in order to get an overall majority of just 1 in the House of Commons. On that basis most of the recent published polls indicate the prospect of a hung Parliament.

We can, however, say with certainty that a) other things won't be equal, and b) the swing will not be uniform. There will be numerous variables that will together determine the result – including the effectiveness of each party's targeting, regional factors, differential turnout, tactical voting and, perhaps, anti-incumbency (in the latest Populus poll nearly a third of voters say they will vote against an MP who has had to repay expenses, regardless of any other factors). By some analysis the Conservatives could win a clear majority with a national vote share lead of 'only' 5%. But we won't know until after the fact what the required margin actually was. An overall Labour majority looks extremely unlikely, but a range of other outcomes remains possible and even if we could be certain what percentage of the vote each party will get, we still wouldn't be much closer to knowing how this translates in terms of numbers of MPs.

Climate change on climate change?

There has been a sharp rise in scepticism about climate change, according to a new Populus poll for BBC News. Last November, just before the Copenhagen summit, Populus tested British attitudes to the general theory of climate change in a poll for The Times and found 83% believing 'that the Earth's climate is changing and global warming taking place' and half (50%) of those taking that view – 41% overall – also thinking that 'it is now an established scientific fact that climate change is largely man-made'. Last week Populus asked exactly the same questions again in a nationally representative poll of 1,000 adults, and found that the number thinking the climate is changing has fallen to 75% and that now only one third of this group (34%) – 26% overall – believe that climate change is man-made.

It is not clear what has prompted this large apparent rise in scepticism about climate change – though it may be connected with the fact that 83% of those polled were aware that Britain has reportedly been through 'the coldest winter on record'. Three fifths (61%) had seen media coverage of the Copenhagen summit and nearly as many (57%) had seen news coverage of controversy about the treatment of climate data by scientists.

Links – <http://www.populus.co.uk/bbc-bbc-poll-on-climate-change-040210.html>
<http://www.populus.co.uk/the-times-the-times-poll-november-2009-081109.html>

Going to the dogs?

The measure of the Conservative Party's failure to (as they put it) 'seal the deal' is succinctly captured in the February Populus poll for The Times. The poll asked a

range of questions to gauge the overall mood of the electorate and found that 82% think it is 'time for a change' – but less than half that number (40%) say they would vote Conservative.

Exploring further this mood for change, the poll found that 70% agree with David Cameron's proposition that 'society is broken' and 73% also think that 'politics is broken'. 66% believe that Britain is going in the wrong direction and 68% that 'people who play by the rules always get a raw deal'.

The poll suggests a deep malaise in confidence about the country's future, which politicians will no doubt compete to address as the election approaches. Nearly half of all voters – including a majority of men and of ABs (senior professionals and managers) – believe that 'Britain's best years are behind us'. More than two in five of all adults – and, strangely, half of all Liberal Democrat supporters – say they would emigrate to another country if they could. More than half of all voters (56%) 'hardly recognise the country I'm living in anymore'.

Links – <http://www.populus.co.uk/the-times-the-times-poll-february-2010-070210.html>

Win for the Gipper

Ronald Reagan is the best US President since World War II – and George W. Bush the worst – according to a new survey of American voters by Harris Interactive. President Reagan, who ranked highest among independent voters as well as Republicans, comes just ahead (25%) of Franklin Roosevelt (22%), followed by John F. Kennedy (15%) and Bill Clinton (11%). When the list is expanded to include all US Presidents, not just those since 1945, President Reagan (25%) drops to second place, behind Abraham Lincoln (32%). FDR (22%) is third in this all-time ranking, followed by George Washington (19%), JFK and Bill Clinton (both 17%).

Views on who has been the worst President are more clear-cut: twice as many Americans (31%) name the second President Bush as any other President. Barack Obama, prematurely at least, is rated second-worst (15%) – underlining the growing vehemence of opposition to him among Republicans – followed by Richard Nixon and Jimmy Carter (both 10%).

Links – <http://news.harrisinteractive.com/profiles/investor/ResLibraryView.asp?BzID=1963&ResLibraryID=36145&Category=1777>

It's all in the question

A CBS News/New York Times poll conducted last week provides a timely reminder of the importance of question wording.

The poll asked half its sample whether they 'favour or oppose gay men and lesbians serving openly in the military', something which is not currently allowed under the 'don't ask, don't tell' policy practised by US armed services and which President Obama pledged to reverse in his recent State of the Union address. But the poll also asked the other half of its sample if they were for or against 'homosexuals' serving openly – and found a considerably different picture of public opinion between the two forms of words.

Americans think by the narrowest of margins (44% to 42%) that 'homosexuals' should be allowed to serve openly in the military, but by a huge margin (58% to 28%) that 'gay men and lesbians' should be allowed to do so.

Links –

<http://www.cbsnews.com/blogs/2010/02/11/politics/politicalhotsheet/entry6198284.shtml>

More Liberal Parliament?

A recent study published by Political Quarterly (Volume 80, Issue 3) suggested that ideological balance of Conservative MPs had become more economically 'liberal' at every election since 1992. The trend may be set to continue, according to a new Populus poll.

Alongside the regular survey of its panel of current MPs, Populus also put some questions to what we've termed 'Tomorrowmentarians' – prospective Parliamentary candidates in seats which, on current polling data, they look set to win. This exercise enables us to gain some insight into the extent to which the ideological complexion of the next parliament may differ from that of the current one.

The survey found that among those MPs and candidates likely to be members of the new House of Commons more than half (52%) agreed with the statement 'the freer the market, the freer the people', compared with only a third (34%) of current MPs. The survey also suggests that the new parliament will be more resistant to increasing prices or regulation as a means of addressing climate change and protecting the environment: 71% of 'tomorrowmentarians' support such measures compared with 80% of current MPs.

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