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## Conference effects

Polls during the conference season showed each party in turn enjoying its own brief poll bounce. As MPs gathered back in Westminster after the conferences, any overall impact they may have had on the polls was unclear. The average of published polls in the weeks immediately before the party conferences was, as the table below shows, virtually identical to the average of the polls published since the end of the conference season.

	Labour	Conservative	Lib Dem	Lead
Pre-conference	26.7%	41.3%	18.3%	14.6%
Post-conference	27.3%	41.3%	18.5%	14.0%

This would not be surprising – party conference season rarely has any significant net effect on support for the parties – the huge exception in recent years being 2007, when there was a 9% swing from Labour to Conservative over a 10 day period straddling their two conferences. That was the end of Gordon Brown's 'honeymoon bounce' and the Conservative Party has led continuously in the polls since then.

It is too early to tell if this year's conferences will, like most, have no real impact on party support. Though the average of the post-conference polls suggests that nothing much has changed, this average conceals the fact that the first three polls to appear after the conference season indicated a slight narrowing of the Conservative lead, to about 10% (40/30), while the next three, all published within the last week,

showed a clear widening of the lead to 17% (though they were quite far apart on actual levels of support for each party). Polls for the last few months have been much more tightly bunched than this. It may be that in the last week or so there has been a net swing to the Conservatives of 3%–5% of the electorate – if so this is an unusually large movement in a short time–frame. We could, on the other hand, be seeing evidence of volatility in the polls, reflecting a large proportion of voters who are not particularly committed to any party and who, as the election nears, are churning between different options. Only time will tell.

## Party cuts

An overwhelming majority of voters (84%) now believe that 'significant public spending cuts are inevitable whatever the outcome of the next election'. But the question of who can be trusted more to make such spending cuts elicits somewhat different responses depending on whether it is framed as a choice between Labour and Conservative or as a choice between Gordon Brown and David Cameron, according to a Populus poll earlier this month, which split the sample in half, so that equal numbers of respondents were asked about the approach to spending cuts of either the parties or the leaders.

Labour is judged much more likely (47%) than the Conservatives (31%) to cut spending 'in ways that minimise public sector job losses' and also holds clear leads as the party perceived more likely to 'protect frontline services' (net 5% lead), and 'spread the burden fairly to include the best off, not just ordinary people' (net 10% lead). The Conservatives are regarded as much more likely (52% to 29%) 'to cut obvious waste and unnecessary red tape first'.

David Cameron rates higher than his party on all of these questions, by between 4% and 11%. This advantage has the effect that in two important respects – protecting frontline services and ensuring the best off bear their share of the burden – David Cameron leads Gordon Brown, whereas Labour had led the Conservatives.

With the Conservatives committing themselves to a package of specific spending cuts – including a one–year public sector pay freeze – at their conference, Populus polled again on perceptions of how the parties would approach cuts over the weekend following the Conservative conference. This poll found a small shift towards trusting the Conservatives – giving them a lead on the question of which party would make cuts 'with the best interests of ordinary people at heart' and putting the parties neck and neck on 'protecting frontline services'. The exception, where Labour's lead was unchanged (at 16%), was in the perception of which party would cut spending 'in ways that minimise public sector job losses'. Among public sector employees this lead was even higher, at 19% and closer analysis of the data reveals that positive perceptions of how the Conservatives would approach spending cuts are predominantly held by retired people.

Links - <http://www.populus.co.uk/Pre-Conservative-conference-poll-questions-2009>

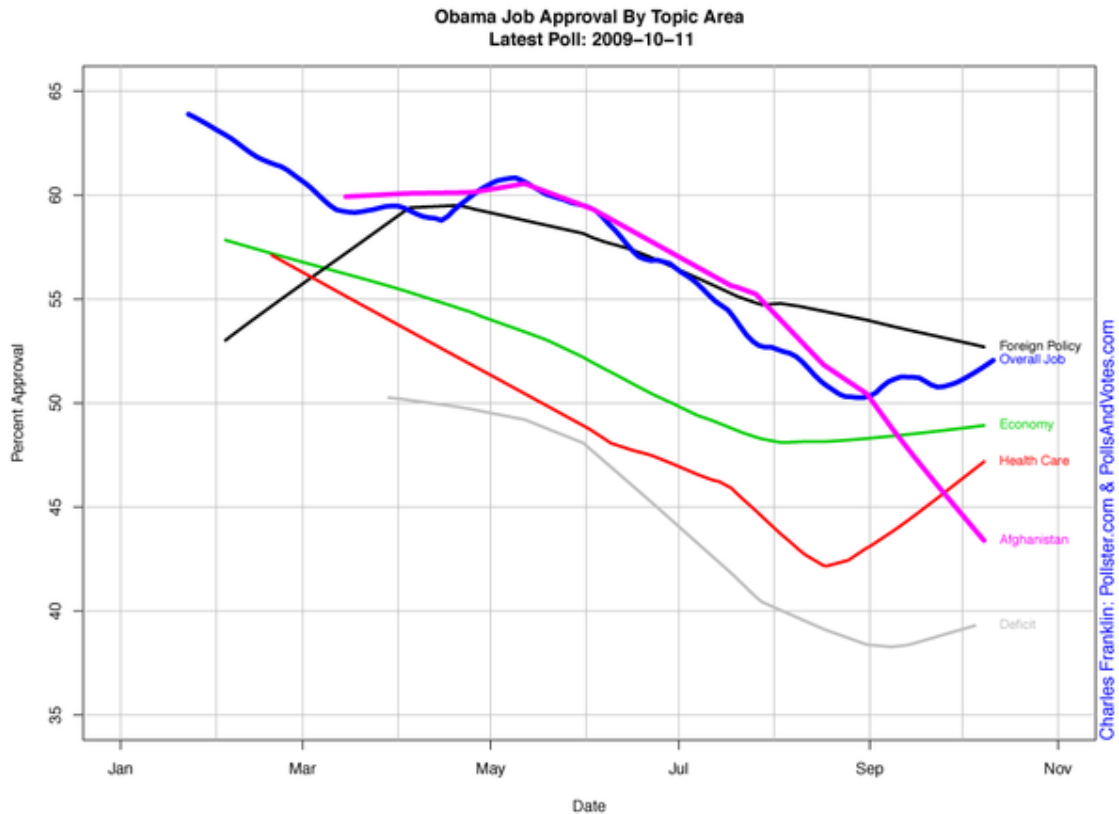
## Struggles of a Nobel Laureate

Barack Obama has been increasingly perceived by US voters to be bogged down on various important fronts and the recent award of the Nobel Peace Prize has accentuated the sense that, nine months into his term, the President has little to point to by way of tangible achievement.

Polls during the summer showed sharp declines in his overall ratings as President and in support for his handling of the economy, the deficit, healthcare and foreign policy. The latest polls suggest that Obama has regained the initiative on domestic policy with opinion moving back in his favour on healthcare and economic recovery - though at a significantly lower level than a few months ago.

But, as the graph below\* starkly shows, confidence in the President's handling of the war in Afghanistan is in free-fall. The irony will not have been lost on the President that his Nobel peace prize comes at a time when he is consulting widely on whether to send tens of thousands more troops to Afghanistan. Polling shows that support for continuation of the war has all but collapsed within his own party and the Democratic Party President relies overwhelmingly on Republican support for continuation of a conflict which more than half of Americans (52%) think "is turning into another Vietnam" according to a CNN poll this week, a view that is likely to grow as the moment nears, in March next year, when US ground troops will have been in Afghanistan longer than they were in Vietnam.

\* From the excellent pollster.com website



## Costs and benefits of the EU

British voters over-estimate the net financial cost to Britain of being in the EU by a factor of more than 100, according to recent research into UK attitudes commissioned by the European Commission. The latest official figures show that Britain's net contribution to the EU budget is 0.21% of gross national income. The average guess of those responding to the European Commission survey, conducted by Gallup, was that 23% of UK national income is transferred to the EU each year. Only 6% estimated the cost at less than 3%.

The survey found 40% believe that the economic costs of EU membership exceed the benefits – slightly more than the 37% who think that the benefits outweigh the economic costs to Britain.

The European Commission study also reveals a sharp generational divide in overall attitude to Britain's EU membership. Those aged 15-24 are substantially more likely (34%) to have a 'consistently favourable' view of EU membership than over-55s (18%), and significantly less likely to have a 'consistently negative' view (9% vs. 34%).

Links – [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/flash/fl\\_274\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/flash/fl_274_en.pdf)

## Clear & present danger

A clear majority of Americans believe that Iran must be prevented from developing nuclear weapons even if that means taking military action, according to a recent poll by the Pew Research Centre. More US voters (82%) regard the prospect of Iran developing nuclear weapons as a “major threat” to American security than think this about the Taliban regaining control in Afghanistan (76%).

Nearly two thirds of Americans (63%) approve of direct negotiations between the US and Iran over its nuclear programme but the same majority believes that negotiations will not work. Nearly four out of five (78%), in that scenario, favour tough sanctions against Iran. But more than half believe that sanctions won't work either. In that eventuality, about a quarter (24%) of US voters think that America should “avoid military conflict even if Iran may develop nuclear weapons” , but more than three in five (61%) think America should “prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons, even if it means taking military action”. Barely half (51%) of Democrat voters take this view, compared with two thirds (66%) of registered independent voters and 71% of Republicans.

Links – <http://people-press.org/report/550/>

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