

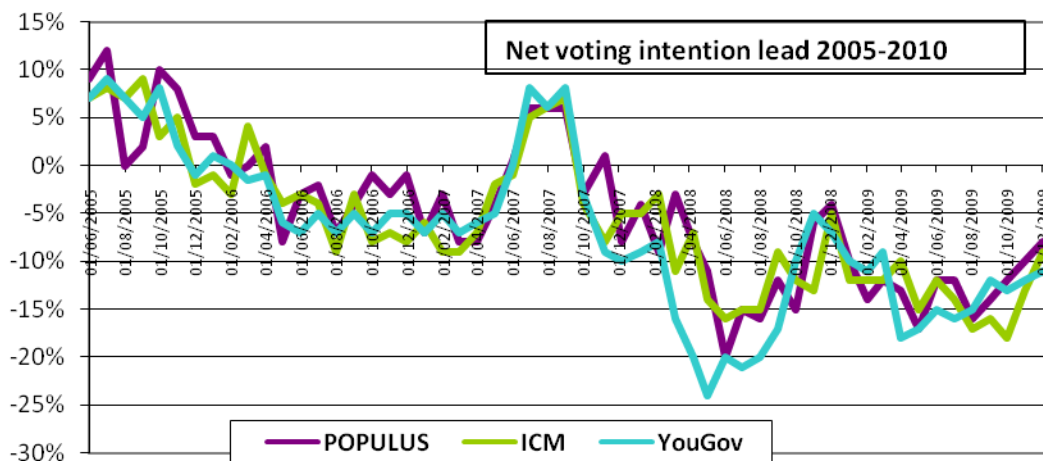
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You can read this issue of Populus Perspective online at www.populus.co.uk.

The end is nigh

As we enter the final 100 days before the expected general election on May 6th, the voting polls continue to tell essentially the same story. As the graph below shows, Populus, ICM and YouGov have followed a close trajectory throughout the Parliament in their estimation of party lead.



Inevitable – usually statistically meaningless – blips from one poll to another should not mask the bigger picture, in which the gap between the parties has changed very little since the end of 2008.

The polls were very accurate at the last general election and unless they have gone fundamentally wrong this time, or something very big happens to cause a lot of voters to reconsider over the next 4 months, the outstanding questions about how the parties will fare on May 6th are narrow ones: Will the Conservatives get just over or just under 40%? Will Labour get just over or just under 30%? Will the Lib Dems get just over or just under 20%? Even such relatively little variation, however, leaves the actual election result more or less unknowable because there are so many variables in trying to extrapolate from percentages of the vote nationally to numbers of MPs in the House of Commons.

Women down on Brown

Women have substantially more negative views about Gordon Brown than men, according to the January Populus poll for The Times. Asked which of various pairs of words, spanning a wide range of personal and leadership attributes, better described each of the three main party leaders, the Prime Minister trails David Cameron by wide margins on every measure but one – and in every case by much more among women.

The one attribute on which Gordon Brown leads is in the perception of whether each leader is 'on the side of ordinary people or on the side of rich people'. This is undoubtedly an important indicator of how voters perceive the underlying motives and values of each man, and would be real cause for concern among Conservative strategists if it were not the case that the Prime Minister is so far behind the Tory leader on the gamut of other measures: 39% behind on strength, 41% on being 'up to the job of Prime Minister', 46% on being in or out of touch and the same on being 'likely to get things done, 56% on being 'decisive' rather than 'dithering'. Even on the two attributes that Labour argues are Mr Brown's strongest suits – being 'substantial' rather than 'lightweight' and having 'clear ideas on how to sort out the economy' – David Cameron leads by 17%, though there is a particularly big gender gap on the latter, with Gordon Brown 1% ahead among men and Mr Cameron 35% ahead among women.

Though this is a bleak read-out for Gordon Brown, it is significantly improved since last autumn (and even more so since the summer of 2008) with almost all of this improvement accounted for by very big shifts in the Prime Minister's favour among people in the DE socio-economic group: semi-skilled and unskilled workers and people dependent on state benefits – further evidence of Labour's core vote solidifying as the election nears.

Links – <http://www.populus.co.uk/the-times-the-times-poll-january-2010-100110.html>

Marriage penalty?

The Conservative Party's commitment to recognise and support marriage, including through the tax system, is opposed by most voters according to the latest Populus poll for The Times.

Overall 40% back the idea, but 57% think "it would be unfair to couples who choose not to marry" and that "it is not the place of government to promote one lifestyle over another". Women and voters under the age of 35 oppose the policy by roughly 2:1, while men and voters over 55 do so only narrowly. The only group among whom a majority (57%) backs the idea is current Conservative voters.

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Corrupt Europe

Almost 8 out of 10 voters (78%) across the 27 EU member states think that corruption is 'a major problem' in their country, according to a newly published survey by the European Commission. There are only three countries where less than half think this – Luxembourg (45%), Sweden (37%) and Denmark (22%).

In the UK 74% think that corruption is a major problem, up from 65% in 2007. The survey probed these attitudes further by asking whether respondents perceived 'the giving and taking of bribes and the abuse of positions of power for personal gain' to be widespread in various spheres. 62% in Britain think this is the case among national politicians in the UK – slightly above the average for all EU countries of 57% – and more than half that it is also true of local politicians. Nearly a third (32%) of British adults think the statement applies to our police force – slightly below the EU average (39%), and nearly a quarter (23%) that it is true of our judiciary (compared with 39% across the EU as a whole). In Finland only 9% think the police give and take bribes and abuse their position for personal gain, while at the opposite extreme 89% think this is true in Cyprus. The Finns are also least likely (9%) to suspect those in their judicial service of such corruption, whereas 82% think this in Bulgaria.

Links – http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_325_sum_en.pdf

Good riddance to the noughties

Most Americans look back on the first decade of the 21st century as 'negative overall', according to a wide-ranging study published by the Pew Research Center at the turn of the year. 50% think this, compared with only 27% whose overall impression of the 2000s is positive – the only decade of the last five, which respondents were asked about, judged negative overall.

The 1980s are viewed, from this distance, as the most positive (56/12) – no wonder Hollywood is currently churning out remakes of, or sequels to, classic 80s films or

TV programmes, with last year's revival of the Star Trek franchise being followed by Wall Street 2, an A-Team movie as well as remakes of the Karate Kid, Nightmare on Elm Street and Ghostbusters.

The Pew survey also invited respondents to sum up the last decade in a word and the one chosen by most respondents was 'downhill', with 'decline', 'turmoil' and 'chaos' also cropping up a lot.

Overall Americans expect the new decade to be better – by nearly a 2:1 margin (59/32), but there are sharp differences within this picture. Democrat supporters overwhelmingly think the 2010s will be better (75/20), while Republicans split much more evenly (49/42) and white Evangelical Christians believe (52/38) that the decade just begun will be even worse than the one just gone.

Links – <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1447/worst-decade-major-technological-communications-advances>

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