

In This Issue

- Party Time
- Who to trust on the economy?
- Banking meltdown
- The glums
- US polls: perfect storm?
- Obama pulls away

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Party time

Each party gained some bounce in the polls from its own party conference, but as the new political season opens against the extraordinary backdrop of banking failure, financial chaos and economic gloom, the basic dynamics of British politics seem largely unaltered. The voting polls suggest that a small number of voters – perhaps 3%–4% have reverted to Labour from the Lib Dems and smaller parties. The Conservatives retain a strong overall lead.

There is, however, mounting evidence that Conservative support is soft and potentially squeezable by the other parties. The Populus party conference poll for The Times found that nearly half of those saying they would vote Conservative in an election tomorrow would do so not because they positively support the Conservatives, but just as a vote against Labour; around half (mostly the same half) also say that they do not regard themselves as strong supporters of the Tories and may well end up voting differently. Among voters as a whole, 70% think that ‘David Cameron hasn’t really changed the party’ and that ‘the Conservatives are doing better mainly just because Labour has become so unpopular’.

Links – <http://www.populus.co.uk/the-times-party-conference-poll-2008-070908.html>

Who to trust on the economy?

The polls also indicate that the Conservative Party is yet to convince many voters that it would do a better job than Labour in managing the economy through these difficult times. Historically when the economy is perceived to be weak, the opposition party generally holds a strong lead on the issue: at this point in the 92–97 Parliament, for example, net economic optimism was at minus 17% and the Labour opposition held a 15% lead as best party to manage the economy; the Populus economic optimism index (albeit a different measure than was used in the 90s) now stands at minus 59%, but the Conservatives lead on the issue is only 8%.

A year ago over 60% of voters judged Gordon Brown & Alastair Darling as the better team to manage the economy, with just 28% favouring David Cameron & George Osborne. Over the ensuing months the Brown/Darling rating has halved: last weekend Populus found only 31% of voters backing them. But over the same period support for the Cameron/Osborne team has risen only 10%: around a fifth of voters have lost confidence in Labour's handling of the economy over the last year, but now say they don't know who to trust on this issue, or that they trust neither party, rather than backing the Conservatives.

Banking meltdown

Despite the recent drama surrounding the banking world, most people are not worried about the safety of the money they have in banks and building societies, according to the latest Times poll. Populus asked a question posed a few days earlier by Gallup in the United States, to get a direct comparison between the scale of customer anxiety in the two countries. In America 45% are worried about the security of their money, compared with 37% in Britain. 51% of Americans are not worried, compared with 56% of Britons.

Less than one in eight British voters are blaming the UK government for the banking crisis; the same number (12%) holds the US government responsible. Most blame is apportioned to American mortgage lenders (26%), followed by 'the people who took out loans & mortgages that they couldn't really afford' (15%). 11% believe that the British banks themselves are most to blame, with the same proportion blaming the sector's regulator the Financial Service Authority. 4% think the Bank of England is most to blame.

Links – <http://www.populus.co.uk/the-times-the-times-poll-october-2008-051008.html>

The glums

Britain is in a profoundly pessimistic mood – a gloominess that goes far beyond economic anxiety to a bleak fatalism about the country's general situation and its future prospects. This picture emerges from a groundbreaking new study of the national 'zeitgeist' developed jointly by Populus and Philip Gould, long-time strategist for Tony Blair and now Deputy Chairman of Freud Communications.

The 'zeitgeist index' measured 'national mood', 'consumer mood', 'financial mood' and 'inner mood', using a range of different optimism/pessimism indices and a number of unprompted questions.

The survey found that 75% of the public think that 'Britain's best years are behind us', nearly three in five say they would emigrate to another country if they could and 81% feel that the UK 'is on the wrong track'. Most people firmly believe that Britain is 'changing for the worse'.

There is, however, a marked difference between people's perceptions of their own situation and prospects and those of the country as a whole. Despite the spate of bad economic and financial news, the British people are, on average, optimistic about their own life in the future and even more so when it comes to their family's future. But they are nevertheless decidedly pessimistic about the prospects for 'Britain in the future'.

Similarly, most people are also optimistic about their own happiness and well-being, and that of their family, but extremely pessimistic in their estimation of 'the happiness and wellbeing of most people in the UK'. Previous Populus research has found the same gulf between positive personal experience and negative general perception when it comes to the quality of public services in Britain.

Links – <http://www.populus.co.uk/uploads/zeitgeistperspective1008.pdf>

US polls: perfect storm?

New polls are published virtually every day now, plotting the US Presidential race as it moves to its denouement. Behind the scenes, American pollsters are debating three major potential methodological challenges, which jeopardise their chances of accurately tracking a fairly close contest.

American pollsters, like British ones, incorporate in their methodologies steps to try and identify who are the 'likely voters' – an essential process since 40% or more of the sample will end up not voting at all. Respondents are, of course, directly asked how likely they are to vote. But because people tend to overstate their likelihood to

do so, they are asked various other questions, such as whether in general they are someone who votes in every election, or who votes only sometimes or rarely. Different polling companies have their own variations of how to probe the issue. The answers are aggregated into an overall 'propensity to vote' weight that is applied to each person's voting preference.

The US polling pundit Mark Blumenthal recently published an age breakdown of the responses to the questions that Gallup asks to identify the 'likely voters' in its daily tracking poll.

	% registered to vote	% 'given a lot of thought to the election'	% 'always/nearly always vote in Presidential elections'	% rating likelihood to vote as 9 or 10 out to 10
18-29	74%	45%	55%	59%
30-49	87%	70%	78%	78%
50-64	90%	78%	83%	85%
65+	89%	77%	83%	71%

The fact that under-30s score lower on all four questions than older voters means that the voting preference of 18-29 year-olds is significantly down-weighted in the final published figures. But, because the formulae used to calculate this weighting is based, as it has to be, on patterns of turnout at past elections, if Barack Obama really has - as has frequently been reported - inspired more young people to vote than in previous elections, then the pollsters are underweighting this part of their sample, and therefore slightly understating support for Senator Obama.

There is growing evidence that some polls may be further understating the Obama vote by not including in their sample voters who have only a cell-phone and no landline telephone. About 17% of all US adults fall into this category, but around 30% of 18-24s do so. Recent comparative studies have consistently found that 18-24 year-old Americans who only have a cell-phone are more likely to support Barack Obama - and more likely to say they plan to vote - than people in the same age-group who have a landline as well. This means that polls that conduct interviews by landline only, which many still do, are getting an incomplete picture of public opinion and understating Senator Obama's lead by around 3%.

The third methodological challenge facing the US pollsters operates in the opposite direction: the 'Bradley-Wilder effect', which describes the reluctance of white voters to admit that they're not going to vote for a black candidate. This phenomenon is impossible to measure. It will only be after the fact, looking back at the polls when the result is known, that it may be possible to tell if the 'Bradley-Wilder effect' was a factor - though it could simply cancel out the other two problems and leave the polls looking serenely accurate.

Obama pulls away

With more than three weeks to go before the US Presidential election, much could still happen to affect the outcome, but the polls increasingly suggest that it is more likely Barack Obama will win by a big margin than that John McCain will win at all.

Since the crisis in the mortgage market and the banking sector pushed the economy back to the centre of the campaign, the McCain campaign has continued to lose ground. Senator Obama has widened his lead in national polls – which had narrowed significantly in the immediate aftermath of the Republican convention. But much more significantly, polling within the key battleground states reveals that the dynamics of the contest overwhelmingly favour the Democrats.

In the six states won most narrowly by Democrat John Kerry four years ago – far and away John McCain’s best prospects for making gains – Barack Obama has, as the table below shows, established large enough leads to make them safe, barring a dramatic turnaround. This week the McCain campaign ceased ad-spending in Michigan – effectively pulling out of what had been regarded as one of its most important targets – and is reportedly on the brink of withdrawing from another, Wisconsin.

	Michigan	Minnesota	New Hampshire	Oregon	Pennsylvania	Wisconsin
Electoral college votes	17	10	4	7	21	10
2004 (result)	Kerry by 3%	Kerry by 3%	Kerry by 1%	Kerry by 4%	Kerry by 3%	Kerry by 1%
2008 (average of latest polls)	Obama by 8%	Obama by 10%	Obama by 10%	Obama by 12%	Obama by 14%	Obama by 9%

Not only has Barack Obama apparently made virtually safe all of the most marginal states that his party is defending, but he has also opened up a widening lead in eight states won by George W. Bush four years ago, and is running McCain very close in two others, as the table below shows.

	Colorado	Florida	Indiana	Iowa	Missouri	Nevada	New Mexico	North Carolina	Ohio	Virginia
Electoral college votes	9	27	7	7	11	5	5	15	20	13
2004 (result)	Bush by 5%	Bush by 5%	Bush by 11%	Bush by 1%	Bush by 7%	Bush by 3%	Bush by 1%	Bush by 12%	Bush by 2%	Bush by 8%
2008 (average of latest polls)	Obama by 4%	Obama by 4%	McCain by 3%	Obama by 12%	Tied	Obama by 3%	Obama by 7%	Obama by 1%	Obama by 3%	Obama by 6%

The polls suggest that all the other states are set to vote for the same party as last time. The Obama campaign is, therefore, confident of having more or less sewn up all 252 Electoral College votes gained by John Kerry in 2004, whereas the McCain campaign is only able to bank on having 185 of the 286 Electoral College votes that President Bush gained in 2004.

This means that until and unless something major happens to rebalance the election, the decisive phase of the campaign is set to be focused entirely on states that voted Republican four years ago, all of which are currently tilting (or more) towards the Democrats. Instead of spending his campaign funds trying to gain additional states, Senator McCain is on the defensive, having to spend increasingly scarce resources trying to hold onto all the states that backed President Bush in 2004 – including some, like North Carolina, Indiana and Virginia, which are generally regarded as Republican bedrocks – and he now has almost no margin for error. These nine swing states hold 108 Electoral College votes. Other things being equal, Barack Obama needs to win 18 or more to become President, John McCain needs to hold 91 or more to do so. It is clear from the polls which outcome is much the more likely.

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