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Budget Blues

Voters think that last week's Budget is much more likely to make people worse off than better off and makes a recession more likely, not less, according to a snap poll conducted on the evening of the Budget by Populus for The Times.

The poll also found a profound degree of cynicism – and fatalism – among voters. Two-thirds say they don't pay much attention to the Budget 'because you can't believe anything any of the parties say when it comes to tax, public spending and economic statistics'. And over 90% agree that 'whoever is in government, when the Budget comes they give with one hand and take back with the other'. Sixty-six percent think that, in any event, the general state of the global economy has much more impact on Britain's economic position and prospects than anything the Chancellor does.

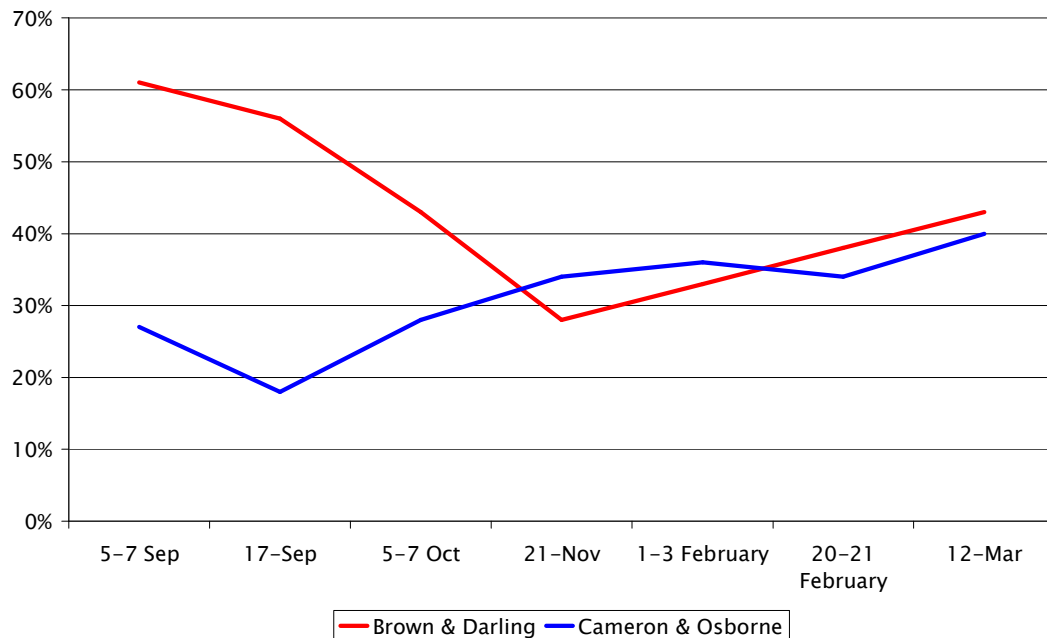
But, however unenthusiastic people may have been about Alistair Darling's first budget, in most respects voters tend to think that a Conservative Budget, if they were in power now, would have been worse. The largest group of voters – more than 40% – thinks that a Conservative budget would have been no different from Labour's in its effect, but a majority of the remainder think that a Conservative budget would have been worse for 'the poorest people in Britain', for small & medium sized businesses, for motorists and 'for people like you'.

Trust in uncertain times

For more than 15 years, Labour's political position has been under-pinned by a strong lead on economic management. Labour's record on the economy was the centre-piece of their re-election campaign in 2005.

There is clear evidence in the polls that Labour's longstanding lead on this issue has been substantially eroded in recent months. Since last autumn, Populus has regularly asked which team - Gordon Brown & Alistair Darling or David Cameron & George Osborne - people would most trust to handle the economy in the best interests of Britain. As the graph below shows, in September the Labour duo had a huge lead (61% to 27%). Following the collapse of Northern Rock and the loss by HMRC of confidential data on millions of taxpayers, this lead fell sharply. It has recovered somewhat since, with 43% favouring Brown & Darling in the latest Populus poll for The Times - the same proportion as in October last year. But then only 28% preferred David Cameron & George Osborne, whereas now 40% do so, with a corresponding drop in the number of people saying that they didn't know who they trust, or that they don't trust either team.

The battle for the voters' trust on the economy will be at the heart of political argument in the coming months since, come general election time, whichever party is most trusted to manage the economy usually wins.



A class apart

A recent Populus poll specially commissioned by the BBC as a centrepiece of its high profile 'White season' has found dissatisfaction across classes about the way the issue of immigration into Britain is being addressed but also some interesting

differences between the working class and middle class about the overall consequences and benefits of immigration.

The majority of both middle (78%) and working class (76%) respondents agree that criticism of immigration or how immigrants conduct themselves will mean they are labelled as racist and 88% of both groups stated they did not object to immigration per se, but that they did object to uncontrolled levels of immigration.

The poll also uncovered strong feelings of under-representation among white working class Britons. When asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement “nobody speaks out for people like me in Britain today” 58% of working class whites said they either somewhat or strongly agreed whereas only 46% of middle class whites felt the same.

The reservations of white working class respondents to immigration in relation to work was significant with over a third (38%) saying they feel that new immigrants have made it harder to get a fair wage for the work they do while only one in five (20%) of middle class respondents feel the same.

The starkest difference between the classes centres on the benefits of immigration. The majority (52%) of working class respondents feel that, on the whole, immigration has been bad for the country compared with only a third (33%) of the middle classes, 62% of whom felt it was, on the whole, good for the country.

The survey also found a number of interesting similarities. For example, a comparable number of working class (48%) and middle class (50%) people felt that they had more in common with someone of a similar class than with someone of the same ethnicity or religion. This could suggest that the class system is still very much in the collective minds of Britons. However, the data suggest that people do not feel their class defines them as individuals with only 27% of working class whites and 22% of middle class whites saying that it is an important factor personally.

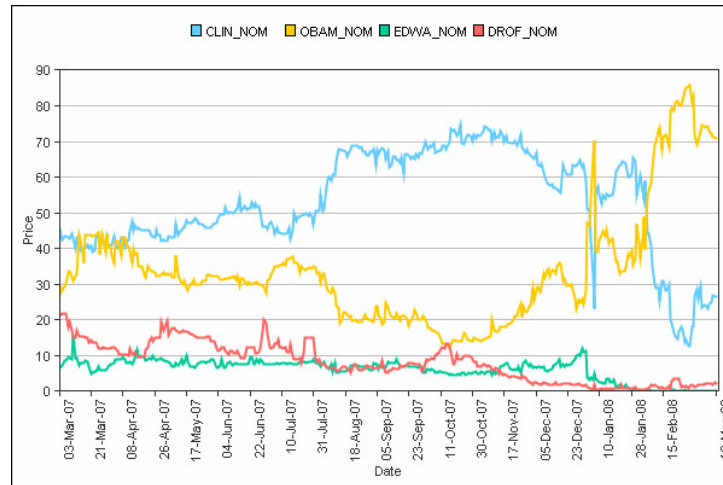
Conventional wisdom

The contest to be the Democratic Party’s candidate for US President in November is increasingly acrimonious – descending in recent days into mutual trading accusations of ‘playing the race card’.

After winning last week’s Mississippi primary, Barack Obama is now ahead of Hillary Clinton by about 100 convention delegates and 750,000 in the popular vote count. Whatever happens in the few remaining primaries it is highly unlikely that Senator Clinton will be able to overturn that lead – not even if Michigan and Florida (where the primary votes were excluded by the Democratic National Committee because of breaches in the rules on timing of the elections) are re-run – but also impossible for Senator Obama to gain enough further delegates to ensure victory.

The Democratic nomination lies in the hands of the so-called ‘super-delegates’ – the party bigwigs from each state who go to the national convention in August, but are

not bound by the result of their state's primary, and can choose who to back. The Iowa electronic market continues to project Obama as the most likely victor.



Hillary Clinton is hoping to sway super-delegates by showing she is the candidate with the momentum, as well as the one who has proved able to win all the biggest states, with a huge victory in Pennsylvania, the last major state to hold its primary, on 22nd March. The demographics of the state make it naturally stronger ground for Mrs Clinton than Mr Obama. Democratic strategist James Carville has described Pennsylvania as “Philadelphia and Pittsburgh with white Alabama in between”. Her poll lead there was 20%+ until a few weeks ago, narrowed in a couple of polls in February to low single digits, but has since widened to an average of about 16%. Victory there looks certain; whether it is enough to make any difference, only time (and super-delegates) will tell.

We're Europeans, right?

Most Europeans are thoroughly confused about what rights they have as ‘EU citizens’, according to a recent survey published by the European Commission.

Over three-quarters (78%) of EU citizens claim familiarity with the term “citizen of the European Union”, but only 41% say they know what it means and less than one-third (31%) consider themselves well informed about what rights they have as citizens of the European Union. More than half (51%) have never heard of the Charter of Fundamental Rights, and of those who have, only 8% claim to have any idea about what it says.

The most widely known of the ‘fundamental rights’ accruing to EU citizens is the right to reside in any member state, with 88% recognition. Nearly as many are aware of the right to make a complaint to the European Commission, European Parliament or the European Ombudsman (85%), the right, when residing in a member state, to be treated as a national of that state (83%) and the right when outside of the EU to ask for help at embassies of other EU member countries, if their own country does not have an embassy there (80%).

However, three in five respondents (61%) wrongly believe that an EU citizen has the right to acquire the nationality of any member state in which they have lived for at least 5 years. Just over half (54%) correctly recognised the right of EU citizens to vote – and stand as a candidate in European Parliament elections – in any member state, but only 37% were aware that they also have the right to vote and stand as a candidate in any member state’s municipal elections. Six out of ten (60%) correctly responded that an EU citizen living in another member state does not have the right to vote and stand in elections to national parliaments, although a quarter (26%) believed that they do.

Furnishing advice

Just under two-thirds (64%) of Concerned Consumers feel that Home and Garden companies are not doing enough to tackle social and environmental issues, according to the most recent Populus Concerned Consumer Index. The results of the survey indicate that issues such as the use of child labour and the chemical content of products are dominant concerns with 89% and 87% of respondents respectively either “very concerned” or “quite concerned”. The effects on local communities seems to be of less relevance with only 18% very concerned whilst 34% were “fairly unconcerned” or “not at all concerned”.

The results suggest that responsible supply-chain management rather than local, community-based projects are the way for the sector to win over this important group of opinion formers.

Overall, B&Q, John Lewis and M&S Home are generally rated highest for their performance in terms of environmental and social issues as well as being the most likely companies that people would shop with or recommend to their friends and family. Ikea and Homebase are also perceived well. B&Q has the best score of 61 for how likely someone would be to recommend it. Habitat, MFI, Magnet and DFS were consistently the four worst perceived companies.

Respondents felt strongly that people are encouraged to buy unnecessary furniture (89%) and, looking later into a product’s life, that retailers should have to help with or be responsible for the disposal of old furniture.

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