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Johnson Bounce?

Turbulent times for Gordon Brown recently prompted much media speculation about possible changes of Labour leadership, with Alan Johnson, formerly Health Secretary and now Home Secretary, increasingly spoken of as the most likely replacement, if Gordon Brown were to quit. What can opinion polls tell us about the impact a change of party leader might make?

Polling on the impact potential alternative leaders might have on party support is difficult because most voters have very low awareness of even quite senior Ministers (the same is at least as true of Shadow Ministers) and many find it hard meaningfully to assess how they would react if someone they don't know much about were to become party leader. Furthermore, in normal circumstances, supporters of the party whose leader may be changed are disproportionately more likely than those who don't support that party anyway to say in response to the putative change of leader that they 'don't know' how they would then vote.

In the latest Populus poll for The Times, for example, 91% of those saying they would vote Conservative in an election now, also said that they would do so if Alan Johnson was Labour leader, with 5% saying 'don't know'. But among those who would vote Labour in an election now, 10% said they didn't know how they would vote in that scenario, and only 82% said they would still vote Labour. If Alan Johnson actually were to become Labour leader and was perceived to be doing a reasonable job

and/or enjoyed a honeymoon bounce in support, the likelihood is that many of the 10% who gave the entirely rational answer 'don't know' to the hypothetical question would in fact revert to saying they would vote Labour. But in any event this is only half the equation; the other part of the story – whether a change of leader would alter the voting intention of those who voted Labour at the last election, but currently say that they would not do so now – is not measurable from normal, nationally representative, opinion polls because the sub-sample of this voter type is too small to be meaningfully analysed.

This month Populus therefore conducted a special poll of over 700 people who voted Labour at the last election. Less than half (48%) said they would vote Labour in an election now, but with Alan Johnson as Labour leader instead this rose to 56%. Though some of those who would vote Labour now become 'don't knows' with Alan Johnson posited as an alternative leader, they are outweighed by the fact that nearly one in five (17%) of those who say they would vote for a different party in an election now, and almost half of those who say they don't know how they would vote in an election now, would switch back to Labour if Mr Johnson were to replace Mr Brown.

Links – <http://www.populus.co.uk/the-times-the-times-poll-june-2009-100609.html>

The intensity test

A new study by Populus has demonstrated that many businesses may be misreading the balance of public opinion on key policy issues because they focus on how many people take one view or another without taking into account the strength with which these opinions are held.

Taking as an example the contentious issue of compulsory ID cards, Populus first asked a nationally representative sample of 1,000 adults whether they were in favour or opposed. This produced a narrow majority in support of ID cards: 51% vs. 37%, in line with most published polling on the issue. The orthodox approach to public opinion research would stop there and conclude that on balance the public back compulsory identity cards. Key decisions are often taken by governments, parties and businesses, on the basis of such evidence.

But Populus asked a follow-up question to gauge the intensity with which people held the opinion about ID cards that they had given. Those who had said they were in favour were asked if they would be upset if ID cards were not introduced. Those who had been opposed were asked if they would be upset if ID cards were introduced. This approach reveals an entirely different picture of public attitudes with just 19% firmly in favour of ID cards and 31% resolutely opposed – a clear plurality against ID cards among those with a strong view either way. Half the population will offer an opinion one way or another on the question if pressed for one, but will also make clear if asked that they wouldn't mind much if their view did not prevail. These people are negotiable – liable to be influenced by ongoing

campaigns, media coverage and the overall climate of opinion. They are the equivalent of 'swing voters' in the electoral arena. But you won't know they're there unless you're asking the right questions.

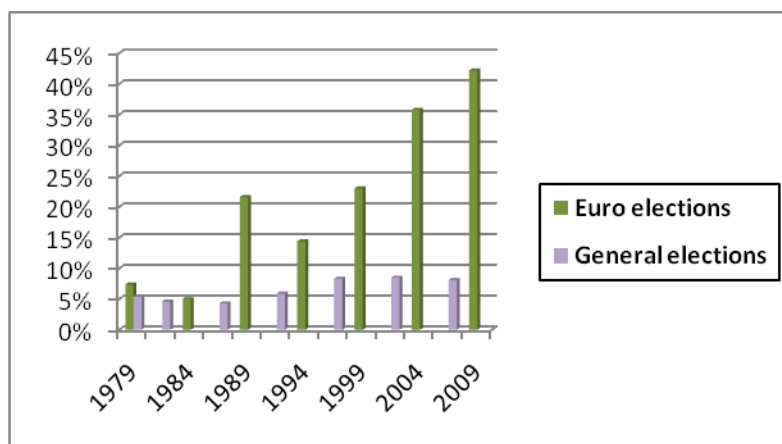
The rise and fall of 'Others'?

As recently as the 1970 general election the Labour and Conservative parties between them amassed 90% of the vote and 'others' (the Scottish and Welsh nationalists and sundry smaller parties) had just 2% between them.

In this month's elections to the European Parliament, twenty times that number – more than four in ten – voted for one of the 'Others'. The biggest beneficiaries of this shift away from the mainstream parties were UKIP, who mustered 17% and pushed Labour into third place, the Greens, who increased their vote share by more than any other party, and the BNP which gained its first two MEPs.

The chart below shows the steep rise in support for 'others' in the last three European elections. It also shows that over the same period the number of people voting for 'others' in general elections has barely changed. Five years ago more than a third of those who voted in the European elections backed none of Labour, Conservative, Lib Dem, SNP or Plaid Cymru. Less than a year later fewer than 5% did so.

The question now is whether the anti-politics mood fuelled by the saga of MP allowances will mean that this time around more of those who voted for 'others' in the European elections will stay away from the three main parties at the next general election too – now less than a year away at most – or if the polls will once again show the steady shrinking of the 'others' vote over the coming months.

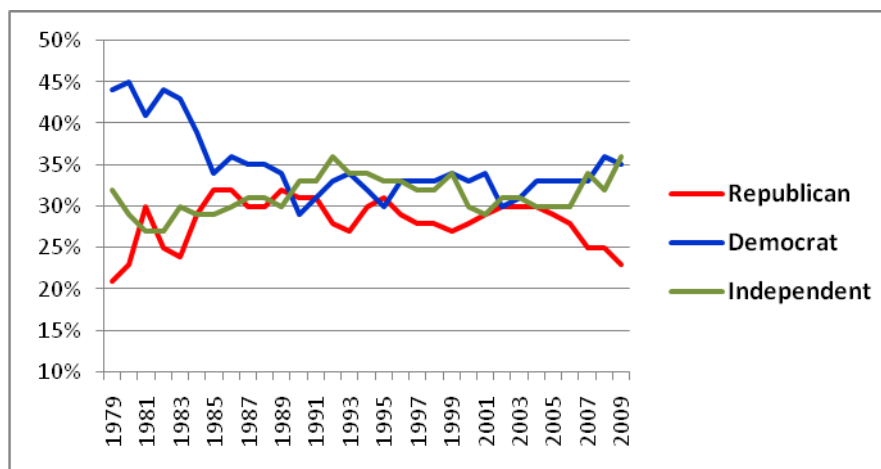


Links – <http://www.populus.co.uk/the-times-political-attitudes-290707.html>

American independents

The proportion of Americans defining themselves as politically 'independent' has risen to its highest level for 70 years, and the number viewing themselves as Republicans has dropped to its lowest level since Watergate, according to new analysis by the Pew Research Centre. 39% of US voters described themselves as independent in the most recent monthly tracking survey, compared with 33% defining themselves as Democrats and only 22% as Republicans.

The chart below, showing the annual averages for party identification, reveals the steep drop during the Reagan years in the number of Americans defining themselves as Democrats and, over the same period, the rise to parity, from its post-Nixon nadir, of Republican identification. Apart from the Watergate period, the number of Americans saying they are Republicans now stands at its lowest level since Gallup started tracking the question in 1939.

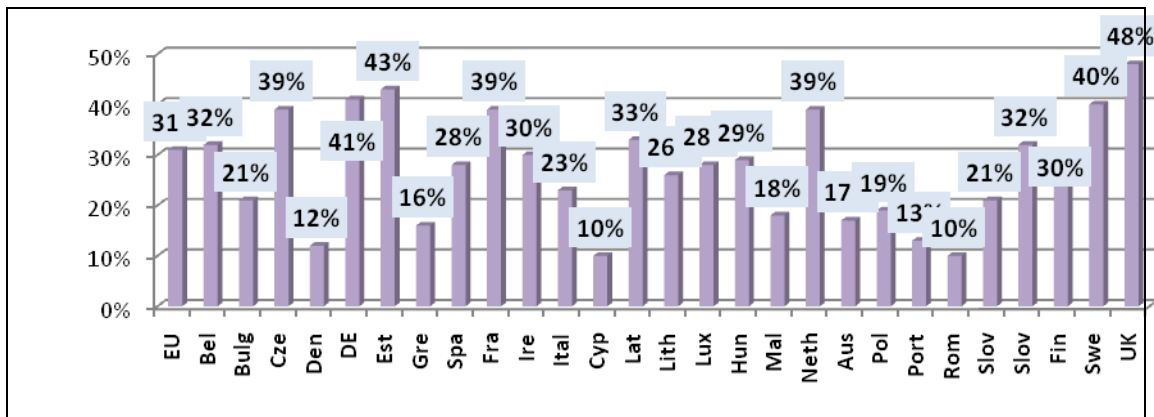


Links - <http://people-press.org/report/517/>

Private optimism/public pessimism across Europe

Populus has noted in the past that British voters are gloomier about the country's economic prospects than about their own. This is not just a British phenomenon: the same is true - to differing degrees - in every single EU member state, according to a survey released recently by the European Commission. The chart below shows the difference in each country between the number saying that the economic situation is having 'very serious' repercussions for their country and those saying it is having similar repercussions for their personal situation. In every case more think their country is being very seriously affected than they themselves are: in general terms recession is perceived across the EU to be happening to other people.

This gap in perceptions of the implications of the downturn averages 31% across the EU, and is wider in the UK (48%) than in any other country and narrowest in Cyprus and Romania (10%).



€ remorse?

The global recession and financial crisis has led to nostalgia for former national currencies among Eurozone countries, according to a recent European Commission study. More than half of voters in Spain, Italy (both 53%) and Cyprus (52%) and more than three in five Portuguese (62%) think their countries would be faring better now if they had not adopted the Euro. Across the Eurozone as a whole opinion splits evenly, with 45% thinking they would be better protected from the effects of the current economic and financial problems if they had kept their previous currencies, with the same proportion disagreeing.

Three of the EU states currently outside the Eurozone take the opposite view. By a narrow margin in Poland (41/39) and a substantial margin in Romania (44/19) and Hungary (61/25), voters think their country would be better protected from the impact of the economic situation if they had the Euro. Disagreement with this view is higher in the UK (28/59) than in any of the other non-Euro EU countries.

Across the EU as a whole (including Britain) the G8 is viewed as most capable (25%) of dealing with 'the repercussions of the financial and economic crisis', followed by the EU (17%), and the US (15%) is judged fractionally more likely to do so than other national governments (14%). More people in the UK (22%) than in any other EU country believe that their national government is best placed to deal with the crisis - and Britons are by far the least likely to view the EU (6%) as best positioned to do so.

Links – http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_311_data.pdf

A short chord on the Populus trumpet

The lower the turnout in any election the harder it is to poll accurately – since most voters are poor at predicting their likelihood to vote and reluctant to admit it when they're likely not to vote. This problem is compounded the more parties there are in the field and the closer they are together. All these factors apply in the European elections, making them among the most challenging for any polling organisation. The result proved especially hard, in polling terms: the BNP and the Greens ended up well within the margin of error of one another and there was a total of less than 3% separating the Lib Dems, Labour and UKIP. There was much debate within the polling world before the elections about these

methodological challenges and Populus was among a number of pollsters to alter question wording and order to try and get the most accurate possible responses.

We are, therefore, delighted to have been much more accurate in our final pre-Euro election poll than almost of our competitors – one of only two polling companies to get the parties in the right order (within the margin of error on all of them).

If you would like to receive Perspective please let us know by e-mailing perspective@populus.co.uk or you can subscribe online at www.populus.co.uk.

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