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PARTY LINES

Labour and the Conservatives come out of the conference season virtually neck and neck, according to the latest Populus poll for The Times.

http://www.populuslimited.com/poll_summaries/2006_10_09_times.htm

The new poll puts the Conservatives on 36%, 3% up on their performance at last year's general election, and Labour on 35%, 1% below their election share. Though the trend has shown the gap between the parties narrowing slightly in the last few weeks, the Conservatives have led in all but two of the 35 polls published since early April.

At the three main party conferences, Populus presented other poll data showing that only 16% of voters now say they are satisfied with the record of the Labour government and nearly as many (41%) now say that Labour has changed Britain for the worse since 1997 as think they have changed the country for the better (48%). But the same polling reveals that only 43% "would rather have a Conservative government than a Labour one". 72% say that though "David Cameron is the best leader the Tories have had in a long time, he has to prove the whole party has changed before most people will be willing to vote for them again". Accordingly more than a third of all voters (35%) are "dissatisfied with the Labour government overall, but would still rather have a Labour government than a Conservative one".

David Cameron told the Conservative conference that his political priority could be summed up in three letters: NHS. The latest Populus poll, conducted the weekend after this speech, found that more voters (50%) think that the Conservative leader "believes in the principles of the NHS and wants to improve it for everyone" than think this is true of Gordon Brown (45%) or Tony Blair (42%).

MESSAGE METERING THE PARTY LEADERS' SPEECHES

In recent weeks Populus has used its interactive Message Meter technology to allow visitors to the Comment Central section of Times Online to rate key sections of Tony Blair's final conference speech as Labour leader and David Cameron's first as leader of the Conservatives. The Message Meter not only records people's reaction to what they are seeing on a second by second basis, it also allows these responses to be broken down by key demographic variables such as age, gender and voting intention. The results are intriguing.

To see what Times Online readers made of the Prime Minister's Gordon Brown/Cherie Blair joke or David Cameron's pledge to keep and even improve the minimum wage visit <http://www.populuslimited.com/TB> for Tony Blair and <http://www.populuslimited.com/DC> for David Cameron.

Populus has developed its Message Meter technology to help businesses gain a better understanding of how key spokespeople come across to the public or influential stakeholders as well as enabling the media to measure reactions to political speeches. If anyone would like more information on the Message Meter, send an email to messagemeter@populuslimited.com.

POLL REVEALS LOTTERY PERCEPTION GAP

The National Lottery has raised more than eight times as much money for the Good Causes as people think, according to a Populus poll.

http://www.populuslimited.com/poll_summaries/nlpu.htm

The poll conducted in advance of National Lottery Day in September. When asked how much had been raised in total since the Lottery's launch in 1994, people's average estimate was £2.3 billion – when in fact over £19 billion has been raised in that time for Good Causes including charities, health, education, sport, the environment and the arts. Nearly half of respondents estimated a figure of less than £1 billion.

People also underestimated by more than half the number of Lottery funded projects and grants. The mean estimate of the number of grants in each postcode area was 32 (compared to the true figure of 79), and the average guess of the total number of grants awarded since 1994 was 99,110 (when in fact 240,000 individual grants have been made).

While 61% of people thought the Lottery had had a positive impact on the UK as a whole, people were less certain that their own community had benefited – 46% thought the Lottery had had a positive impact on “my region of the country”, and only 32% in “my local area”.

ONLINE SHOPPING IN EUROPE

Online shopping is more prevalent in the UK than in any other EU country, according to a major survey of consumer habits recently published by the European Commission.

http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs252_en.pdf

The study found that 69% of UK adults reported making at least one purchase via the internet in the past year, slightly more than in Denmark (66%), the Netherlands (61%) and Sweden (60%).

This is despite the fact that, according to the same survey, there are six EU countries where a higher proportion of respondents have internet access at home than is the case in the UK (53%) and in some of these countries internet penetration is very significantly higher (85% in the Netherlands, 79% in Sweden and 74% in Denmark).

On average, across all EU member states, half of adults have bought something online in the last twelve months. The lowest level of internet shopping is in Lithuania and Cyprus (12% in each case).

The survey also finds more support in the UK than in any other member state for the banning of "all unsolicited commercial advertisements or offers (including all cold call telemarketing and direct web marketing)". More than 4 out of 5 UK adults (86%) support such a ban, well above the EU-wide average of 69%; support is second-highest in the Republic of Ireland, though neither country figures near the top of the list of countries reporting the highest incidence of unsolicited marketing.

ONLINE BETTING IN AMERICA

In the wake of the high-profile arrest in America of two British executives from different online betting firms, the US Congress has just voted in effect to outlaw the processing by banks and credit cards of online betting transactions. But US voters are split virtually 50:50 on whether gambling over the internet should be illegal or not, according to a recent Rasmussen poll.

<http://www.rasmussenreports.com/2006/September%20Dailies/InternetGambling.htm>

The survey found that more than half of Americans (52%) think that internet betting should be regulated more strictly than other forms of gambling, with 40% thinking it should be criminalised and 41% disagreeing. According to USA Today there are now more than 2,000 gambling websites.

MELTING POT?

As Hillary Clinton and Condoleeza Rice reportedly weigh up their prospects as Presidential candidates, a recent Gallup poll may cause them to pause and reflect. The poll, conducted at the end of September, found that 38% of American voters think that the country is “not ready” to elect a woman President and slightly more (40%) that it is not ready to elect a black President.

The acclaimed drama *The West Wing* ended with Latino Congressman Matt Santos narrowly elected President – an unlikely scenario given that Gallup finds that nearly three in five Americans (58%) think that their country “isn't ready” to elect an Hispanic person to the White House.

Mitt Romney, the Republican Governor of Massachusetts, who has recently been mentioned as a credible candidate might also regard the poll ruefully. For he is a Mormon and two-thirds (66%) of US voters think that America is “not ready” for a President of that faith. The position is markedly worse, however, for the faithless: 84% think that the US is not ready to have “an atheist” as President.

BUSH FLAGGING AGAIN

At the last US Presidential election, in November 2004, 86% of those who regarded fighting terrorism as the most important issue voted for George W. Bush, while those who viewed Iraq as the most important voted by almost as big a margin for John Kerry.

For obvious reasons Republican strategists have tried, in recent months, to keep the US political agenda focused on the issue of terrorism. The news from Britain in early August of police thwarting multiple terrorist attacks on transatlantic flights was a significant factor in increasing the salience of the issue in America. Mr Bush's ratings have duly inched up from the low-30s to the mid-40s and Republican prospects in November's key mid-term elections have been generally judged to strengthen accordingly.

All of that momentum has been thrown abruptly into reverse by the discovery that an obscure Florida Congressman, Mark Foley, had been sending inappropriate emails to teenage boys working as messengers on Capitol Hill. The scandal, and the suspicion that Republican congressional leaders may have tried to cover it up, has tipped the party's ratings, and those of the President, downward. Gallup has Mr Bush's approval rating 7% lower this month than last and the latest Newsweek poll finds just 33% approving of the job Mr Bush is doing as President, close to the lowest figure for his Presidency.

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/15167150/site/newsweek>

STATE OF THE PARTIES BREAKFAST BRIEFING

Once again Populus and the City of London are holding a breakfast briefing in the City on the State of the Parties featuring specially commissioned research on voters' attitudes to the three main parties and original analysis from Peter Riddell, Chief Political Commentator of The Times. The event will take place on Wednesday 1 November, beginning at 8.00 for 8.30am and will be held in the City Marketing Suite on the corner of Basinghall Street and Guildhall Buildings behind the Guildhall Buildings in London EC2.

If you or a colleague would like to attend simply email us at briefing@populuslimited.com or call us on 020 7253 9900 to reserve your place.

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