



**EMBARGOED UNTIL 00:01 FRIDAY MAY 22**

[www.taxpayersalliance.com](http://www.taxpayersalliance.com)

## **Public attitudes on the EU: Implications for Political Campaigns**

Between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> May 2009, ICM polled a random sample of 1,002 adults (18+) on their attitudes to the EU. Interviews were conducted across the country and the results have been weighted to the profile of all adults.<sup>1</sup>

While many of the questions are considered “normal”, some – like those in many polls done by US election strategists – test various competing arguments using language that could be, or is likely to be, used by different sides in the debate.<sup>2</sup> People may disagree about how arguments are put but we have consulted with those who were involved in the very controversial polling rows concerning the euro and EU in the past, and have sought to use questions that have been used before, in order to provide useful comparisons over time. As Questions 17 and 18 show, questions were intended to help get at the truth and were not designed to produce a particular answer.<sup>3</sup>

It should be remembered that: (a) people register very little EU news; and (b) there has been much less coverage of the EU since 2005 than at any point since the 1980s. People’s attitudes are not as carefully thought through as they are, for instance, concerning the NHS. Since this poll was done before the intensive coverage of MPs’ expenses, it is also reasonable to assume that opinion will now be *more* sceptical of European politicians and political institutions, who are frequently involved in allegations of fraud and the abuse of taxpayers’ money.

---

<sup>1</sup> ICM – Percentages may not round to 100 because of rounding

<sup>2</sup> See James Carville’s polls for Democracy Corps

<sup>3</sup> ICM – “These questions [Q8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 17 and 19] seek to set out two opposing arguments and therefore involve judgements on how those arguments would be expressed, and how they would be responded to by someone with opposing views. The results obtained must therefore be read strictly within the context of the opposing views that have been used.”

## Summary of results

- General Election voting intention: Conservatives 41%; Labour 27%; Liberal Democrat 21%; Other 11%.
- Euro election voting intention: Conservatives 32%; Labour 28%; Liberal Democrat 22%; UKIP 9%; Other 9%.
- People think that the Government spends too much and therefore taxes too much. The argument that people want an expansion of public spending and an increase in taxes is wrong. If the Conservative Party had taken, or does take a seriously new approach to issues such as taxpayer funding of political parties and MP's expenses, then it could take a more robust and popular line on waste in public services.
- There is strong opposition to the Lisbon Treaty / EU Constitution (62 – 28) and strong support for a referendum on all such treaties (75 – 23), including among Labour voters.
- The strongest arguments against the Lisbon Treaty concern the ability to vote out European politicians, power over the economy, immigration and crime. The weakest arguments are those that the Conservative Party made prominent in 2004-5 ("only countries have constitutions", EU Foreign Minister, etc).
- People oppose joining the euro by 75 – 23 (the highest ever No vote since ICM first asked this question in 1995). The economic crisis has *strengthened* opposition to the euro.
- People, especially Conservative voters, think that *none* of the main political parties adequately represents their view on the EU. They do not wish to continue on the path to "ever closer union".
- People do *not* support the Single Market and want Britain to take back powers over trade.
- People strongly support taking back crucial powers, even if this means a fundamental renegotiation of Britain's relationship. They support *unilaterally* taking back powers in the event that an agreement cannot be reached with the EU.
- People are so annoyed by EU rules that they want the British Government to start ignoring them (69%), and to start ignoring EU fines (60%). This is true across social class, voting intention and geographic region, and it is not linked to particular sides on tax and spend.
- There is public support for a fundamentally different approach on the EU from the Conservative Party, one which would actually address the major problems caused by both parties giving away so much power over the past thirty years.



- It is manifestly false that Liberal Democrat voters agree with the strong pro-EU policy of the parliamentary party. The Liberal Democrats are helped by the fact that they have failed to communicate effectively their very pro-EU policies.

To arrange broadcast interviews or discuss the research,  
please contact:

**Mark Wallace**

Campaign Director, The TaxPayers' Alliance

[mark.wallace@taxpayersalliance.com](mailto:mark.wallace@taxpayersalliance.com); 07736 009 548

## 1. Poll results in full

### Voting intention...

**(Q1)** The General Election headline figures are:

- Conservative Party: 41%
- Labour Party: 27%
- Liberal Democrat Party: 21%
- Other: 11%

The biggest problem for the Conservative Party is social group DE voters who prefer Labour by 35 – 29. Those who believe the balance is about right between taxation and spending prefer Labour to the Conservatives by 39 – 30. Those who support 'full integration' with the EU prefer Labour by 37 – 24; those who support 'fundamental renegotiation' with the EU prefer the Conservatives by 52 – 20.

**(Q2)** The European Election headline figures are:

- Conservative Party: 32%
- Labour Party: 28%
- Liberal Democrat Party: 22%
- UKIP: 9%
- Other: 9% (BNP was *not* prompted by the interviewer.)

### Tax and spend...

**(Q3)** Do you think...?

- A. The government spends too much and therefore taxes us too much (52).
- B. The government has got the balance about right (33).
- C. The government spends too little and therefore taxes us too little (10).

There is very little difference between sexes. Support for lower taxes falls as people get older: 18-24s want lower taxes the most (62 – 26 – 7), then 25-34s (57 – 31 – 8). There is not much variation among social class: DEs want lower taxes (48 – 31 – 14).

About 4/10 Labour and Lib Dem voters want lower taxes: Conservatives (67 – 25 – 5); Labour (39 – 46 – 12); Liberal Democrat (39 – 39 – 16).

Opponents of the euro are more in favour of lower taxes than supporters of the euro. Those in favour of 'fundamental renegotiation' want lower taxes (56 – 29 – 11). Those who would *probably* vote against Lisbon in a referendum are identical to the average electorate on tax and spend.

The results suggest that people think that spending cuts and tax rises are necessary in the short-term to deal with the financial crisis. However, in the medium-term, although people do not want cuts in what they see as front line essential services (especially schools and hospitals) they do think vast sums are wasted by politicians and that savings could be made, taxes cut, and without harm to front line services.

This does *not* have to mean harsh 1980s rhetoric attacking public sector workers. It means new language and new arguments. A political party that took a robust line on MPs' pay and expenses, and which made clear it is protecting what the public regards as essential spending, could also take a robust line on cutting spending and taxes.

Part of the Conservatives' problem is that because they have failed to change perceptions of them as much as they should have done (eg by opposing taxpayer funding for parties, cutting MPs' rewards etc), it is *harder* for them to handle tax and spend. Although perception of the brand has changed, Conservative strategists know that the changes are shallow and that suspicion of Conservative motives and competence remains. It goes without saying that all questions of tax and spend are now affected by perceptions of MPs' personal conduct.

### **Arguments over Lisbon / the EU Constitution...**

**(Q5)** In a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, there is a net opposition to Lisbon of 62 – 28.

- Definitely support: 13
- Probably support: 16
- Probably oppose: 20
- Definitely oppose: 42

There is little difference between sexes (women feel less strongly). Opposition rises among older people. C2s and DEs are a bit more opposed than ABs and C1s.

Opposition is stronger among Conservatives but even 1/5 of them would vote for Lisbon. Labour supporters oppose Lisbon 46 – 43 and Liberal Democrats oppose 50 – 42. There is strong opposition among all three tax/spend groups.

**(Q6)** The strongest arguments *against* Lisbon are (in order of strongest to weakest):

- We should be able to change our laws by voting out politicians (63 strongly agree)
- We should give away no more power over the economy (62)
- We should give away no more power over immigration (61)
- We should give away no more power over crime, human rights etc (57)
- If we give the EU more power it will cost us more (56)
- Lisbon would create an EU Foreign Minister and diplomatic service (38)
- Only countries have constitutions... (38)

The main argument made by the Conservatives in 2004-5 against the EU Constitution was that '*only countries have constitutions so the EU should not have one*'. Polling evidence showed then that this was the *least* effective argument against the Constitution and that the strongest arguments concerned control over politicians, the economy/cost, and crime. The Conservative Party did not follow the market research, but it did not matter because France and Holland stopped the Constitution in 2005.

This new poll shows a similar picture. The 2004-5 Conservative line is the least powerful argument and the argument over foreign policy is also much weaker than others. Many in Westminster have concluded that arguments over the EU have no resonance. The message of this poll, and the focus groups we have done over the past few years, show this belief is only partly right.

If arguments over Europe are made in the context of crime, immigration, the economy and cost – issues which immediately concern people – then people are interested and they are hostile to the EU.

**(Q14)** People strongly support a referendum on any EU Treaty by 75 – 23. Labour’s argument that the Conservatives never offered a referendum, therefore one is unnecessary, is dismissed even by Labour voters (69 – 29).

### **The financial crisis has strengthened opposition to the euro...**

**(Q7)** People oppose replacing the pound with the euro by 75 – 23. There is no significant difference between age groups. This is the most hostile result that ICM have got on this question since they started asking it in 1995.

**(Q8)** Asked about the economic crisis, people say:

- More likely to support the euro (14)
- No difference (57)
- Less likely to support the euro (29)

Those who would *probably* vote against Lisbon have a more sceptical attitude than average – just 9% say they are more likely and 25% less likely to support the euro because of the crisis.

Immediately after 9/11 many in the media agreed with those on the left who believed that the event would strengthen support for the euro. Polling evidence for the No Campaign showed that the opposite was the case; 9/11 in fact made people *more* hostile to the euro.

In 2004, the EU used Al Qaeda’s Madrid bombings to relaunch the EU Constitution. Many in the media again agreed with those on the left who thought that the EU’s argument would be effective. But polling evidence once more showed the opposite was the case.

After the financial crisis kicked off in September 2008, many on the Left, such as Will Hutton, thought that the crisis would strengthen support for the euro. They are wrong again.

### **People reject the foundations of the pro-EU case...**

**(Q13)** People think (67 – 28) that *none* of the main political parties adequately represents their view on the EU. Conservative voters think this by 71 – 24. As an example of how complicated people’s ideas are, a fifth of

those who support 'full integration' say the EU is bad for Britain. A third of those who favour 'fundamental renegotiation' say is good for Britain.

**(Q4)** Overall, people think the EU is "bad for Britain" by 47 – 44. (When this was asked in 2004 the answer was 45 – 40.)

### **Little support for the Single Market...**

**(Q9)** Which of the following do you think is more persuasive?

- (a) Common EU rules make trade and business easier, and the Single Market is good for jobs and living standards.*
- (b) We can trade and cooperate with Europe without giving away permanent control over the economy to politicians we can't vote out.*

People support statement (b) by 61 – 35. (When this question was last asked in 2004, the answer was 72 – 24.)

### **People reject the main pro-EU argument of "influence"...**

**(Q10)** Which of the following do you think is more persuasive?

- (a) Giving away power in the hope of influencing the EU has been tried for decades and the EU just gets more power over British life and uses it badly. We should be taking back power, not handing more over.*
- (b) By being part of the EU, we can influence the direction of the EU in Britain's favour and stop it being a superstate. You can only influence the club if you're a member and leaving would be a disaster.*

This argument has been at the heart of the pro-EEC / EU / euro movement for decades. It is not supported by the public. People support statement (a) by 60 – 37. (When this question was last asked in 2004, the answer was 63 – 33.)

## People want to take back powers over trade...

**(Q11)** Which of the following do you think is more persuasive?

- (a) *The EU should handle negotiations on international trade agreements on behalf of all member countries, because Britain gains by joining forces with Europe.*
- (b) *The British Government should handle negotiations on British trade agreements – not the EU – because a British government will best protect our interests.*

People support statement (b) by 73 – 24. (When this question was last asked in 2004, the answer was 78 – 18.)

In the last major survey of business opinion on the euro and EU (ICM, 2004) most businesses also rejected the arguments for the Single Market and Customs Union. Strong support for both is found mainly among a very small number of very large companies which have very different attitudes to regulation than most businesses and much more “political” leaders.

**(Q17)** Surprisingly, people support the free movement of people in the EU by 51 – 47.

**(Q18)** Which of the following do you agree with most?

- (a) *All civilised European countries are part of the European Convention of Human Rights and our membership has been good for Britain. It protects vital civil liberties not just in Britain but across Europe. Withdrawing would be a disaster.*
- (b) *The European Convention of Human Rights has been bad for Britain. Our membership has given power over crucial aspects of policy to people who we cannot vote out and therefore cannot control, so we should withdraw from it*

People support statement (a) by 51 – 44.

Both Q17 and Q18 are surprising in the light of focus group research over a long period of time. In focus groups, people (including Labour, Lib Dem and swing voters) bitterly complain about immigration policy over the past decade, often in terms that would shock MPs and journalists.

However, these views often do not show up in polls, for reasons that are not well understood. The old anti-euro No Campaign found the same thing. Here, the question specifically describes the benefits of the rule to British citizens living abroad which may (partly) explain the higher level of support one would guess from focus groups.

Further, in focus groups people also bitterly complain about “human rights” particularly regarding crime. However, a negligible number of people in Britain understand the distinction between the EU / European Court of Justice (ECJ) / ECHR / Human Rights Act (including many Conservative activists who have mistaken the Conservative promise to repeal the HRA as a promise to withdraw from the ECHR). It is possible that many people answering Q18 did not associate the ECHR with the human rights stories they hear and complain about regularly. Both of these areas need further research to understand the discrepancy between the focus groups and polling.

### **People want a fundamentally different national strategy...**

**(Q12)** Which of the following do you think is more persuasive?

- (a) *We should join the Euro and the Lisbon Treaty and aim for a political union in Europe. This is our most important alliance and our best chance for prosperity.*
- (b) *We should take back powers from the EU and develop our own trade and diplomatic relationship with likeminded countries like the USA, Canada, Australia and others.*

People support statement (b) by 70 – 25. (When an almost identical question was last asked in 2004, the answer was 58 – 35.)

**(Q19)** Which of the following do you think is more persuasive?

- (a) *The current economic crisis shows that Britain would be better off not just in the EU, but also in the euro and with the new EU Lisbon Treaty – a full and influential member of the EU.*
- (b) *The current economic crisis means that Britain must take back control of crucial powers over trade and the economy from the EU even if this means a fundamental renegotiation of our membership.*

People support statement (b) by 67 – 28.

**(Q20)** "If other countries wouldn't let us take back powers or renegotiate our relationship, should the British Government..."

- (a) *Abide by that decision.*
- (b) *Take back powers anyway, regardless of what other countries or the EU say.*

People support statement (b) by 57 – 37.

Conservative supporters: 63 – 34

Labour supporters: 45 – 49

Liberal Democrat supporters: 51 – 45

**(Q15)** People do not think that Britain should always stick to EU rules (69 – 28).

**(Q16)** They also think that Britain should ignore EU fines (60 – 38).

This is true across social class, voting intention, and geographic region. It is true regardless of views on tax and spend. In focus groups, people often say things like, "The French and Italians ignore the rules when it suits them but we're the idiots who stick to them regardless."

## 2. Some conclusions

The period 2005 – 2009 has been very different than 1999 – 2004. Formerly the euro battle, and then the Constitution battle, raged between the Blair Government and a well-funded and visible No Campaign (which deployed many leading businesspeople and celebrities such as Bob Geldof in high impact cinema adverts).

Since 2005, for various reasons, the temperature of the debate has cooled and the old No Campaign has dissolved. Our focus group research – and this poll – suggests that opinion is not very different to 2004/5. Those hostile to the EU, whether in favour of major change or proponents of complete exit, have not used this period to advance the cause. Certain trends have though strengthened without any specific effort (eg the general drip drip of stories about EU rules). The disappearance of so much EU coverage has not made people more positive about the EU.



The Government would have very little chance of winning a referendum on any EU Treaty. People are much more hostile to the EU than they were a decade ago, despite Blair's efforts and intensive pro-EU propaganda. Public hostility to the EU will be a major factor for any future government and there is no force to change this unless the EU undertakes some sort of fundamental reform, comparable in scale to the great leap forward it took under Delors with the Single Market.

People do not buy the fundamental argument that we need to give away control of trade policy and economic regulation in order to trade with the EU. Further still, there is support for taking back powers from the EU – including unilaterally. The Conservative Party has repeatedly been knocked off course by the question – *what will you do if the other countries say 'No' to your demands*. This is because they have not felt able to say, "We think taking back powers over X, Y or Z is so important that we will do it one way or another, even unilaterally if necessary." They have instead said: "we don't plan to fail" or "we won't let matters rest". These are not taken seriously even by their own supporters. The evidence shows that a determined Conservative Party could win public support for a radically different policy.

On the other hand, it is important for opponents of the EU to be realistic. People still do not understand the EU very well. Although they do not like it, and desire a fundamentally different relationship with it, they do not want a Government just to declare that it is leaving. Furthermore, any really serious negotiation would see some big businesses mobilise vast resources to run powerful campaigns, centered around scare stories associated with the leaving or fundamental renegotiation.

Although small and medium-sized businesses could be mobilised against them – as in the euro battle – many businesspeople might feel under enormous pressure not to oppose the EU. Many senior businesspeople told the No Campaign (of 1999 to 2004) that business would be crucified by the EU if they publicly opposed the euro. The Unions would also (rationally from their perspective) oppose leaving; as they realise that the EU is a friend of pro-union labour regulation. It is therefore quite possible that support for a tough stance could fall. In referendums generally, the *status quo* position gains during the official campaign. This dynamic would have helped a "Europe Yes, Euro No" anti-euro referendum campaign but it would hamper a "leave the EU" campaign.



Many in the Conservative Party, including among the leadership, hope that Europe will continue to be a relatively minor issue after a potential General election victory next year. This is very unlikely. Many Conservative MPs and activists care more about the EU than they do about loyalty to the leadership, as they have repeatedly shown. The EU currently affects every significant area of policy, but none of the party leaderships or the media are interested in discussing this. This is likely to change under a Conservative Government because a large proportion of the Conservative Party's members know that EU membership makes it hard or impossible to deal properly with many policy issues. Stories that now appear page 20, if they appear anywhere, will become front page stories when Tory ministers are asked their views: "Regulation X is responsible for business Y closing, what will you do about it...?" Further still, if the Conservative Party leadership accepts the Lisbon Treaty without a referendum (which it may do if it is already law when they take office), not only will the public be hostile, but many of its activists and MPs would vocally oppose the leadership.

In the long-term, it is not sustainable for Britain to continue with people holding the political class in contempt while the political class continues to abdicate control over vast swathes of policy. The Conservative Party made a strategic error of historic proportion when, under Macmillan in the 1950s, it embarked on a major change of national strategy and began trying to negotiate a very unfavourable deal to enter the EEC. If it wants Britain to be a low tax, low regulation economy with a thriving economy and the job creating industries of tomorrow, then it will not be able to continue to be part of an EU structure that is built upon mid-20<sup>th</sup> century ideas about centralised political and bureaucratic control. "Big" is not the answer for Britain – rapid adaptation is the answer and this requires the decentralised information processing enabled by competitive markets. This is impossible within the EU architecture.

Many Conservatives know this. Will the Conservative Party though develop a deeply considered alternative policy that will allow us to disentangle from the EU? Will they commit the intellectual and other resources necessary? Will they be able to communicate such an alternative? Will they be able to sequence the public communication effectively through the tortuous process of a renegotiation, educating the public to the necessity of a major change? It will be extremely hard – much harder than beating Brown at the next election. However, the alternative may well be a re-run of the disastrous infighting of the 1990's. Having made the mistake of joining as it did and



then being suckered by Delors into the Single Market, the Party faces dangerous and difficult paths in all directions on this subject.

The TaxPayers' Alliance will continue to campaign on EU issues, making the case for a radically different approach. We believe in a low tax and low regulation economy. This is incompatible with our current relationship with Europe. This poll suggests that the British public support an alternative approach too, particularly if the Conservative Party were to begin the serious thinking needed to lead the debate in the right way.