

## In Pollwatch™ this month:

- Latest monthly poll tracker: Tory average poll lead heads for 10%
- ComRes finds "time for a change" has resonance among the public
- London mayoral contest: the challenge for Boris
- Labour MPs threaten rebellion on new terror law

## MONTHLY POLL TRACKER

The last ComRes/*Independent* poll of 2007 saw a slight narrowing of the gap between Labour and the Conservatives, but the latter still enjoy a double-digit lead.

All the pollsters saw a slight retreat in the Conservative lead between November and January. Perhaps it was Christmas cheer that led to a slight recovery in Labour support, but the gap remains perilously close to the November ComRes high tide mark of the largest Tory lead of any published poll from any pollster since August 1988.

### ComRes/*Independent* Voting Intention December 2007:

Con	41% (+1)
Lab	30% (+3)
LD	16% (-2)
Other	12% (-2)

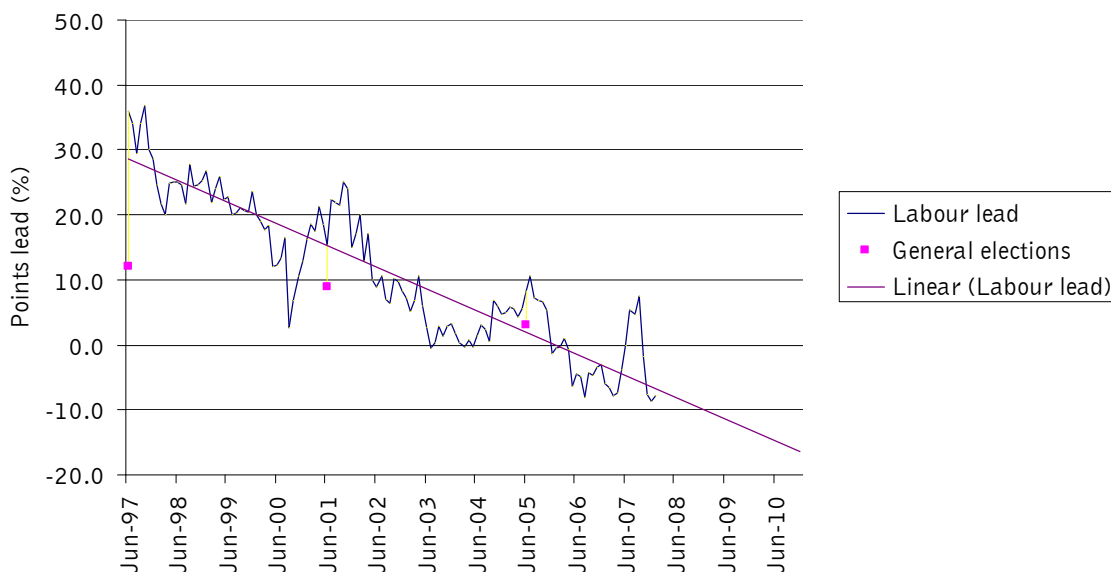
Although there is a distribution of support among different demographic groups that will encourage David Cameron – by gender, age and social group – the level of support for the Conservative Party remains too low for that party to relax. Despite speculation over whether the Conservatives have done enough to gain election victory, the answer is still 'no'.

Labour should be worried though, for two reasons.

First, the long term position remains very difficult for that party. The latest update of our long term analysis plotting average monthly poll results against a 'best fit' line shows the scale of the task facing Gordon Brown (see over page):

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**The Saint Consulting Group**

Labour Lead 1997-2007



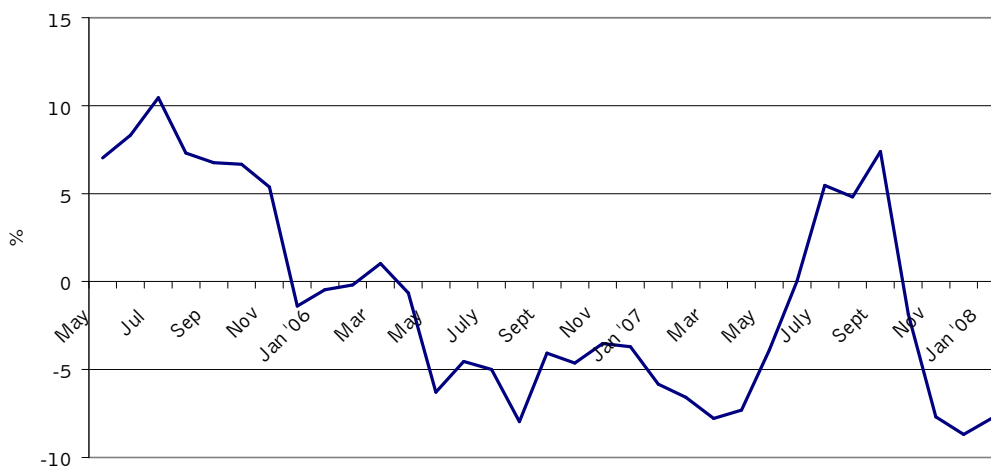
Compiled by ComRes

Particularly significant in looking at the above are that:

1. Labour need to reverse the long term trend or they will lose their majority.
2. This position is made even worse by the gaps between the pink dots (representing their share of the vote at general elections) and the average poll leads. This reflects the continued tendency of polls to over-estimate Labour (and why ComRes's weighting methodology is designed to overcome this).
3. If the long term trend continues, and there's no reason to think it won't, then Gordon Brown will be wishing he'd called that election last Autumn.

In the shorter term, the post-phantom election slide appears to have been halted, as the following chart shows:

Published polls: average Labour lead since 2005 General Election



Compiled by ComRes

Comparisons with previous electoral cycles are of course inevitable. Readers of Alistair Campbell's diaries will recall the nervousness with which Tony Blair and his team pondered their prospects of victory in the lead-up to the 1997 election. The Conservatives knew they were going to lose but weren't say it, while the Labour leadership couldn't bring themselves to believe that they would really win. But we easily forget how commonplace Labour vote shares of more 50%+ had become.

"Medical regulation is a complex policy area. By providing the General Medical Council with valuable data and analysis, ComRes was able to help us understand more fully the level of knowledge of our work and the perceptions of us. This data has already made a significant difference to how we engage with external audiences."  
**General Medical Council**

It is very interesting to compare the vote shares of the three main parties in 1996/7 with those of today. Labour's current position is indeed perilously close to that of the Conservatives ten years ago. Labour's average vote share in polls throughout November and December 2007 was 32.6%. The average share for the Conservatives in the first two months of 1997 was 31.5% - almost ten percentage points lower than their current share.

The Lib Dems are doing better today, too. For every three Lib Dem voters in 1997 there's an additional one today.

But the most striking contrast is between Labour's vote share in 1997 – on average a whopping 51% for the first two months of that year – compared to 32.6% today.

	Today	Jan-Feb 1997
Lib Dems	16.1%	12.7%
Con	41.0%	31.5%
Lab	32.6%	51.0%

The point here is that even with that lead, if Alistair Campbell's diaries are to be believed, Labour's leadership were sometimes plagued by fears of defeat.

The distribution of votes across the country are of course different today. But even so, the Conservatives need another five points on their vote share before they can be too confident.



## Europoll

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## “TIME FOR A CHANGE” STARTS TO RESONATE

It's said that all political slogans at election time boil down to three messages: let us finish what we started, don't let the other side mess it up, and it's time for a change.

The latest ComRes polling for the *Independent* has uncovered that the last of those three messages, and the one used by opposition parties in every election, is starting to have resonance among the electorate:

	%
On balance I'd prefer a Labour Govt to a Conservative one	36
It's time for a change and the next Govt should be a Conservative one	48

- Voters in almost every demographic and regional group think 'it's time for a change'
- Only voters in Scotland and northern England disagree, and voters aged 45-54 are evenly divided
- 41% of Lib Dem voters think the next Govt should be a Conservative one whereas 44% would prefer a Labour Govt
- While Tory supporters largely remain loyal on this question, almost one in five (17%) Labour identifiers think it's time for a change.

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**Cancer Research UK**

### Brown versus Cameron

In December we also polled on perceptions of the two main party leaders, and the results reinforce the pressure that Gordon Brown is facing.

David Cameron is now regarded by more people as the best person to be Prime Minister, albeit by a slim majority, although the Prime Minister is ahead of the Conservative leader in terms of leading the British economy through a potentially difficult time in 2008. Twenty percent more people think David Cameron is the most likeable of the two main party leaders than say the same of Gordon Brown, and the Conservative leader is regarded as having the most able front bench team by more people than the Prime Minister.

	Gordon Brown (%)	David Cameron (%)
Best person to be PM for Britain	37	39
Best person to take the British economy through a potentially difficult time in 2008	44	36
Has the most able front bench team	35	40
Is the most likeable of the 2 main party leaders	31	51

## THE CHALLENGE FOR BORIS

Earlier this month ComRes CEO Andrew Hawkins presented his analysis of the prospects for the forthcoming London mayoral race to a group of senior business leaders.

Entitled 'Can Boris Win?', Hawkins concluded that he indeed could, but probably won't, for one over-riding reason: second preference votes.

### Boris's electoral advantages

There are several reasons why Boris Johnson ought to be encouraged:

"There are two key reasons we work with ComRes. First, they have the best range of specialist research tools on the market. Second, they've worked on the client side too which means they quickly understand our research objectives and can contribute more value to our client support than other research firms."

**Cicero Consulting**

- As outlined above, Labour support nationally appears to be in long term decline. Ken Livingstone may well run a campaign without visible support from the Labour top team, but there will nonetheless be plenty of scope for Boris to remind voters that Ken Livingstone is Labour's mayoral candidate. And London – contrary to some popular perceptions – is fundamentally a more Conservative city than other urban areas.
- The resonance of the 'time for a change' slogan after two terms and eight years of Ken as Mayor. The woes of the London Development Agency are likely to add to the potency of the argument that change is needed.
- The Conservatives are fired up. Since their confidence-boosting Party Conference last October, there has been a confidence in the Party not seen for 15 years.

### The London context

All that said, there remain several powerful reasons why it will be extremely difficult for Boris to win.

First, the electoral maths are stacked against the Conservatives, principally because of the lower likelihood that Labour voters will give the Conservative candidate – especially *this* one – their second preference votes.

Election dates	Lab % (1 <sup>st</sup> +2 <sup>nd</sup> pref)	Con % (1 <sup>st</sup> +2 <sup>nd</sup> pref)
2000	58	42
2004	55	45

At first sight, it seems quite straightforward – all Boris needs to do is close the gap between himself and Ken on the total tally of first and second preference votes, as shown above.

But all is not as it seems. In both the 2000 and 2004 mayoral elections, the Liberal Democrat candidate won more second preference votes than either of the other main party candidates. Not only that, in both elections the Liberal Democrat candidate achieved more second preference votes than either of the other main party candidates.

Some argue that, with a little known Lib Dem candidate this time around (Brian Paddick), it will be more of a two-horse race. But the same could be said in 2000 when Susan Kramer emerged from obscurity to mount a credible campaign in what, you will recall, was a messy race.

"ComRes conducted some excellent research for us, combining a bespoke study among key political stakeholders with their regular MP omnibus to give us some great insight into awareness of World Vision and our work among this important audience."  
**World Vision**

So in 2004 we had the somewhat anomalous situation in which the Lib Dem candidate secured fewer than half the first preference votes cast for the Conservative candidate, but more than double the number of second preference votes.

For Boris to turn this around, where will his support come from? First preference votes may go his way, but can he attract sufficient numbers of first-preference Ken voters and first-preference Paddick voters to give him their second preference? If not, he's toast.

Second, in a regional election personalities are much more important than in national ballots. This could of course favour either of the two main party candidates – both are charismatic, outspoken and more than capable of making the electorate laugh.

Under pressure, though, how will they perform? Ken's weakness could be a propensity to get angry when pushed – especially if he was placed in the novel position of trailing in the polls. Boris's weakness is surely his ability to deliver gaffes.

So what would go down worse with the electorate? Probably Boris's gaffes. Ken can get away with saying 'soak the rich' – even in a city with as many billionaires as London – because he does it with a smile on his face and plays the cheeky chappie. What you can't get away with is making gaffes which alienate entire swathes of the population whose second preference votes you need to stand a chance of winning.

Third, Ken has the incumbency effect on his side. The flip-side to this is that any skeletons found will be blamed on the incumbent (thinking again of the LDA). But Boris recognises the potency of this – he wrote in his final Daily Telegraph article on 10<sup>th</sup> January:

*"...I have to acknowledge that (Ken) is well dug in. Across London he has a hallelujah chorus of groups who are actually paid to praise him. He has hordes of taxpayer-funded spin-doctors who have been trawling through every word I have ever written in the hope of finding something discreditable."*

Fourth, there is the risk that Boris will look like he is going to lose the election at some point and the Conservative High Command drops him like a breeze block on a Merseyside building site. It will be extremely embarrassing for the leader of whichever party comes second in this contest. For David Cameron it would look like the Tory resurgence has been stopped in its tracks. For Gordon Brown it would be another nail in the coffin of his premiership.

So what of the polls? One recent survey suggested Boris and Ken were only one percentage point apart.

Quite simply it's too early to tell. Turnout in 2000 was a paltry 34% and in 2004 was little better at 37%. Yet the most recent poll data were predicated on just 9% of the overall sample who said they would definitely not vote and a further 19% who said they didn't know. Which suggests the poll was based on assumed turnout of more than 70%. Furthermore, some pollsters weight their polls of Londoners according to national demographics rather than those of the capital.

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**College Public Policy**

But aside from its sheer entertainment value, the London mayoral race will be a very important test for both main parties. Pollwatch will bring you further analysis over the coming months.

## LABOUR MPs THREATEN REBELLION OVER NEW TERROR LAW

Only one in three Labour MPs supports the proposal to increase the detention period to 42 days for those held on terrorist offences, according to a new ComRes poll conducted on behalf of Liberty.

The survey results were published on 27<sup>th</sup> December and featured prominently in most national newspapers and formed the basis for the lead story on the BBC's *Today* Programme.

ComRes has been working with Liberty, using a combination of quantitative parliamentary research and focus groups among young Muslim men to understand the impact of, and support for, the Government's latest anti-terrorism proposals.

It was noted in much of the newspaper coverage that on such issues, only 34 MPs need to rebel for the Government to lose its majority of 67. This is just 11% of MPs on the Labour benches.

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