



COVID-19

UK Political Analysis

By Tim Hames, Senior Adviser | 12th February 2021



Call to Arms. The wider impact of the UK vaccination drive so far.

Adverse weather in much of the country has created unanticipated challenges in the final push to reach the first four priority groups to offer them an initial vaccination injection, but it still appears that ministers are likely to reach the target date of February 15th. This is an extraordinary achievement. It also seems to be the case that the infrastructure is in place to allow the next five sections of the public to have their opening vaccination by, or even before, the end of April. Yet the threat of virus mutation remains real and this will probably ensure, if only as a precaution, that there will be a third “booster” vaccination administered before the end of the calendar year. This was signalled by Boris Johnson during an exchange at Prime Minister’s Questions on Wednesday. Such seems to be the enthusiasm of the British for attending vaccination clinics, this may even be welcomed.

It has all been quite a spectacle. What might its wider impact prove to be? There are some intriguing initial possibilities which have emerged through three different opinion polls in the past few days. The first, compiled by YouGov, compares national attitudes towards vaccination across a wide range of countries and continents. The other two are both domestic in nature and their findings provide a provisional assessment on attitudes towards the roll-out drive so far, expectations of how it will proceed as it moves into the next stage and the extent to which the British population sees vaccination as an end by itself to this crisis or holds a more nuanced view as to what can be achieved by vaccines

alone. There is also broader evidence that success with vaccination so far has restored some confidence in the Prime Minister and Government and that will have an effect too.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- International polling evidence, which always indicated that the UK public was amongst the most willing of any nation to volunteer for vaccination, now shows that this sentiment has strengthened and is the highest in the developed world.
- Domestic polling indicates very high approval for the vaccination roll-out to date and with broadly similar attitudes held across all demographic sub-sections.
- Other data also suggests increasing public confidence in the next phase of the vaccination schedule and confidence that the vaccines used in the UK are safe.
- The public does not have an excessively optimistic view of what the vaccination effort can achieve and is thus not demanding the instant easing of lockdown restrictions simply because the official targets for injections are met. There is a widespread acceptance that there will be deep long-term economic disruption.
- Approval of the manner in which the vaccination effort is being managed has had a wider positive effect on the standing of the Prime Minister and Government.
- The sense that Boris Johnson is in a stronger position than he was in the Autumn may mean that he feels less of an obligation to offer concessions to those in his parliamentary party who want to see the lockdown end relatively swiftly. The “roadmap” that the Government has pledged to publish on (or about) February 22nd is likely to be a cautious, conditional, document, not hard commitments.

International attitudes to vaccination.

Opinion polls across countries and their national attitudes to vaccination have been taken for several months now but with more intensity as vaccines have emerged. The most comprehensive collection of these surveys can be found via YouGov and covers 24 countries plus Taiwan and Hong Kong across Europe, North America, the Middle East, the Far East and Australia. In almost all cases the polls have occurred in recent weeks.

There is considerable variation in the proportions of those surveyed who state that they are willing to be vaccinated. The UK, which was always at the top end of the spectrum,

has seen a further rise since its vaccination programme started and at 83% expressing a willingness to be vaccinated is the now the most pro-vaccine population in the world (with Vietnam very close behind on 82% and Denmark coming in third at 80%).

The contrast with countries elsewhere is striking. There is a lot of diversity within the EU. Spain (at 74%) and Italy (70%) are comparatively willing to see mass vaccination. Finland (69%), Norway (68%) and Sweden (68%) are bunched together. In Germany (at 61%) the attitude is cooler. It is actively sceptical in France (45%) and really cold in Poland (28%). In the Anglosphere, Canada is the most approving (68%) with Australia not far behind (64%) but the US population (53%) still needs a lot of convincing about vaccination. In Asia, percentages in China, Indonesia and Malaysia essentially cluster (at 60-61%) but the numbers are notably lower in The Philippines (45%), Taiwan (43%) and Hong Kong (36%). There is a large gap between the UAE (73%) and its neighbour in Saudi Arabia (51%).

Nor should these numbers be treated as a one-off. An alternative study with slightly different wording and covering 15 countries commissioned for the World Economic Forum and published this week again put the United Kingdom at the top of the table for willingness to be vaccinated and with an even higher percentage figure (at 89%).

This suggests that the UK is likely to be a vaccination “winner” in more than one sense. Not only is it likely to vaccinate the priority groups faster than many European nations (possibly by a number of months), it is more likely to reach the level of vaccination uptake where an element of herd immunity amplifies the impact on the unvaccinated.

There is, though, a sting in the tail of all of these figures. They reveal how difficult the process of reopening international society will be. The super-vaccinated British may be full of vim at the prospect of travelling overseas, but other countries with lower rates of vaccination and thus more people to whom the vaccinated visitor still may be at some risk of transmitting the virus to (and the most vigorous “English variant” to boot) may be wary of opening their borders up immediately, or will insist that even those who can prove vaccination must have virus tests before arrival regardless. There appears to be no certainty on how any “vaccine passport” might work. This will require innovation and a level of international co-operation and mutual trust on public health not yet in evidence.

Different countries may take different approaches adding more complexity. This explains the tortured language of ministers this week about the wisdom of booking summer trips.

Domestic approval at this stage.

In purely domestic terms, nonetheless, the vaccination drive is clearly seen as being a success with a deep sense of awareness as to the UK's comparative performance. A robust 86% of those surveyed by Ipsos-Mori for the Evening Standard agreed that the Government was "doing a good job in obtaining vaccines for the UK". Some 78% of the public "approved of the pace of the roll-out" and a substantial 75% accepted that the national authorities were "vaccinating the right groups in the correct order" as well.

This is an unusual degree of consensus matched only by some of the polling immediately after the first lockdown was imposed when (somewhat strangely) it proved to be one of the most popular initiatives in political history despite all the inconvenience it triggered. The figures are largely similar across all demographic sub-sections and party loyalties. A whopping 84% of Labour voters, for example, think that the Government has done well in its endeavours to obtain vaccination doses during the first phase of this exercise.

The perception of success appears to stimulate more success. A poll released by Redfield and Wilton Strategies this week suggested that of those who had not been vaccinated at the time that the question was being asked (82% of adults), 78% would seek a vaccine while only 11% would not. Furthermore, 89% of that 78% wanted it as soon as possible.

These are significant statistics in several senses. For a start, they are a large advance on public sentiment a few months ago (September) when the same organisation recorded only 63% stating that they would definitely accept a vaccine if were to be offered. They hint at an ultimate level of vaccination which could reach 80% or even higher. Added to which, there is an interesting age split in the 11% ready to declare that they would not be embracing vaccination. For those aged 65 and over a mere 8% were "refuseniks". In the 18-24 year old bracket, the number was twice as high at 17%. Put differently, the section of the population whom ministers would most want to see take an injection are the most willing to do it, while the segment of adults about whom they can afford to be more ambivalent (because of low hospitalisation and death rates) are the most agnostic.

There are clearly some communities (particularly among ethnic minorities) where there is a level of hostility to these vaccinations, but it is not an issue at scale and so the communication and persuasion campaign can be targeted with forensic intensity.

The public is confident that progress will continue.

The public clearly regards a perhaps unexpectedly effective start to vaccination to be maintained. The same Redfield and Wilton Strategies survey showed that of those who not yet been vaccinated, 52% believed that they would obtain a first injection within the next three months, 25% thought that it would be between three and six months in their case and 23 per cent deemed it probable to be six months or longer. In what will lift the spirits of the Health and Social Care Secretary, the “right” people anticipated the “right” thing in terms of timing in that the older half of those aged 18-70 were overwhelmingly likely to believe that they would be vaccinated relatively soon (which is correct) while the youngest quartile were massively inclined to think they would be injected last (also true).

The UK population seems quite content to trust the medical experts on which vaccine to accept. Some 73% of those who want to be vaccinated had no preference for which type provided that it had been approved by the UK’s own regulator (the MHRA).

Irrational euphoria?

If there is an unstated unease about the vaccination drive in Whitehall it is that it might lead to a false sense that by itself it would bring the coronavirus crisis to a total close. A further batch of questions in the Redfield and Wilton Strategies poll suggests otherwise.

The public does not appear to flirting with irrational euphoria. It is upbeat but also sober about vaccination. When asked “To what extent, if at all, are you optimistic or pessimistic that the UK’s vaccination programme will succeed in ending the coronavirus crisis in the UK?”, only 14% declared themselves to be “Very Optimistic”, 46% went for “Optimistic”, 24% were “Neither Optimistic Nor Pessimistic”, 9% went for “Pessimistic” and 2% for “Very Pessimistic”. This chimes with extensive private focus group research which also suggests that the public expects a vaccination to make life somewhat better but not necessarily to restore social and economic life to where it was about 12 months ago.

There is also acceptance of the limitations on what the UK can do alone. Only 35% believed that a UK vaccination effort by itself could contain COVID-19 in this country. A further 37% thought a substantial international national campaign would be needed to meet that aim. A final 18% asserted that the virus would be a serious menace every year. Only 10% thought the virus could be eliminated in the manner that polio has basically been. A solid 78% thought it was much more likely to be a part of the landscape like flu.

The public is also, if anything, more downbeat about the economy over the next twelve months than the professional commentators. According to Ipsos-MORI, a modest 29% expected the economy to get better during 2021, while 60% thought it would be worse. Ministers do not appear to be faced with the challenge of managing down expectations.

Wider policy implications.

All of the above has wider policy and political implications. The standing of both the Government and the Prime Minister in terms of their handling of the pandemic has improved notably in the past few months. Back in October, the Government was seen as doing “well” by 30% of the public and “badly” by 50%. Those figures, according to Ipsos-Mori, are now 38% and 46% respectively. The numbers for the Prime Minister personally have followed in a similar direction. In October, he was suffering from a deficit of 28% to 52% in his own handling of matters. As of this poll the margin was far lower (39%-46%).

Of perhaps even more significance to him is his relative standing with Sir Keir Starmer. When asked who they were prefer to be at the helm between now and the cessation of the crisis, the public opted for Mr Johnson over the Labour leader by a 44% to 27% lead. When asked to look further ahead still and who they would want to oversee managing the recovery from the pandemic, the PM had a very similar advantage (44% to 29%). The very public difficulties that the EU has endured in framing its vaccination strategy and its alleged desire to attempt to acquire supplies earmarked for the UK has also plainly done the Government no harm and distracted from what have been bumpy weeks post-Brexit. Labour’s past apparent willingness to keep the UK in the European Medicines Agency has also meant an awkward few weeks for its leadership.

The sense of the standing of a Prime Minister has real consequences in UK politics. In the Autumn, Boris Johnson's approval ratings were tumbling, he appeared to be veering erratically between a national policy on the virus and a complex set of regional tiers and within his Cabinet he looked as if he was ceaselessly attempting to split the difference between the "health first" and "economy first" factions within the Conservative Party. Some openly speculated whether he had the stomach to stay on in 10 Downing Street.

Matters could move again but for the moment he looks in much better political shape. He also seems to be, from his comments at press conferences and in Parliament, more confident of his own mind as to how best to approach the lifting of the lockdown. Having been undone in the recent past by the strength of the second wave that started to show itself last September, the impact of the "Kent" mutation on his (now forgotten) COVID-19 Winter Plan and the new unknown quantity that is the South African variation, he is tacking back toward his scientific advisers and echoing their increasingly explicit caution.

The "roadmap", or, as he perhaps revealingly described it this week, "the beginnings of a roadmap", which the Prime Minister has said that he will reveal on (or around) February 22nd, is likely to be more an indication of in what order and spheres the lockdown might be eased than a set of fixed targets to which he is totally committed. This will be a source of controversy within his own party, but he is in a better position to impose his outlook. Some schooling may return (probably partially) in March. Not a lot else will be changing.

Tim Hames

Senior Adviser

Strategic Communications

Tim.Hames@FTIConsulting.com



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