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Public Opinion Polls

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This paper examines public opinion polling in Australia and in other jurisdictions. This paper also contains a discussion of the historical background to public opinion polling, an analysis of the limitations of polling, an examination into methodologies used by polling groups and is intended to function as a guide to interpreting opinion polling results.

This research paper is part of a series of papers produced by the Library's Research Service. Research Papers are intended to provide in-depth coverage and detailed analysis of topics of interest to Members of Parliament. The views expressed in this paper are those of the author.

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Glossary of Key Terms

The following glossary offers basic definitions of a selection of key statistical terms which are used in this paper.¹

Margin of error – a statistic which expresses the amount of random sampling error and shows the maximum likely difference between the poll result and that of the voting population at large. A common misconception is that the margin of error includes all possible sources of error, such as experimental and measurement errors (non-sampling errors), however the margin of error only specifies the error introduced by non-deliberative sampling errors.

Non-random sampling – a form of non-probability sampling that does not involve random selection so that not all individuals in the population are given equal chances of being selected. Types of non-random sampling include straw polls, haphazard sampling and convenience sampling, such as in the case of the person-on-the-street interview or ‘self-selected respondents’ where readers of a particular newspaper respond or vote on a particular issue (i.e. they are consumers of that medium, may be motivated by the issue and are not ‘selected’ at random to participate).

Non-sampling error – a statistical error which cannot be attributed to sampling fluctuations and is caused by human error and many other different factors such as poor interviewer procedures, question wording, dishonesty of respondents and so forth. Unlike sampling error, non-sampling error cannot be measured.

Random sampling – a form of probability sampling in which all population groups have an equal and independent chance of being selected so that the sample should reflect population patterns. Probability sampling is the most effective way of obtaining samples that are representative of the population.

Sample – a part or subset of the population, which is selected for the purpose of studying the characteristics of the entire population or group. **Sampling** refers to the statistical practice of selecting a subset of individuals from within a population with the goal of producing generalisations about the wider population.

Sampling error – refers to the error caused by observing a sample instead of the whole population. It is often not practical or possible to undertake a complete study of an entire population and samples are rarely identical in character to the population that they are measuring therefore sampling error is unavoidable except where there is a complete enumeration of the population such as in a census. Sampling error can be reduced by selecting larger samples and by using efficient sample design to ensure that samples are as representative as possible.

Weighting – a statistical technique in which the measurements of particular data are adjusted to take into account or compensate for a distorting factor(s) so that the sample more closely resembles that of the population, such as where a population subgroup may be over- or underrepresented.

¹ These definitions have been derived from various social research resources including the Australian Bureau of Statistics, D.A. De Vaus (2002) *Surveys in Social Research* (Fifth Edition) Crows Nest, Allen & Unwin and W. Lawrence Neuman (2006) *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (Sixth Edition) Boston, Allyn and Bacon.

The so-called science of poll-taking is not a science at all but a mere necromancy. People are unpredictable by nature, and although you can take a nation's pulse, you can't be sure that the nation hasn't just run up a flight of stairs.

*E. B. White*²

The kind of public opinion implied in the democratic ideal is tangible and dynamic... It tries in the clash and conflict of argument and debate to separate the true from the false... It believes in the value of every individual's contribution to political life, and in the right of ordinary human beings to have a voice in deciding their fate. Public opinion, in this sense, is the pulse of democracy.

*George Gallup*³

² E. B. White quoted in the *New Yorker*, 13 November 1948, in E. Knowles (ed.) (1998) *The Oxford Dictionary of 20th Century Quotations*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 326.

³ G. Gallup & S. F. Rae (1940) *The Pulse of Democracy*, New York, Simon and Schuster, p. 8.

Public Opinion Polls

The point is that a country's political mood and opinion is in a constant state of flux, and even the general election only captures that flux at one point of time. Opinion polls are, therefore, trying to predict the position of what is essentially a moving target and that is not easy.

- Vincent-Wayne Mitchell⁴

Introduction

Public opinion polls, particularly those released in the lead up to an election, stimulate considerable debate and speculation amongst the media, the public and politicians. Opinion polls essentially attempt to capture public opinion, or the public's mood, on a given issue at a particular moment in time. Opinion polls are regularly conducted on voting intentions and leadership preferences, but can be undertaken on any social or commercial matter that the polling groups or commissioners of such polls determine. The study of public opinion polling has drawn on journalism and market research and also attracts scholars of history, sociology, psychology and communications.

The primary focus of this research paper is public opinion polling in its political context. The paper is designed as an introduction to the study of public opinion and opinion polling and to provide Parliamentarians with a guide to interpreting and understanding opinion polls, their strengths and limitations. It looks specifically at polling groups in Australia, but also draws on developments and information from other jurisdictions. It cannot, in the space available, provide a comprehensive account of every aspect of this large topic, which has received an extensive amount of research. It does aim to draw on the most salient elements of that research, to assist Members in their duties.

This paper begins in Part A by briefly examining the development of the concept of 'public opinion', which importantly underpins the activity and industry of opinion polling. Part A then provides an overview of opinion polling and its modern development, beginning with the first 'straw' polls conducted in the 1820s. The essential distinction between quantitative and qualitative methods is discussed. Part B examines the many factors - methodological, social and situational - that account for variations in poll results, while Part C provides a guide to the main polling groups in Australia.

Part D examines the impacts of opinion polls in terms of elections, politicians, policy, polling failures and successes, and the role of journalists. This section also briefly looks at other forms of polling, including exit polls, focus groups, and the controversial practice known as 'push polling'. Part D concludes by considering recent developments in measuring public opinion, such as social media, internet polling, real-time debate tracking and betting markets. Members are reminded that the DPS Library Research Service maintains an intranet sub-site devoted to presenting Victorian political opinion poll results.⁵

⁴ V. W. Mitchell (1992) 'Opinion Polls: Right of Wrong? – A Lesson in Social Research', *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, vol. 10, no. 9, pp. 4-9, p. 9.

⁵ Access at: <<http://library.parliament.vic.gov.au/polls.cfm>>.

PART A: HISTORY OF OPINION POLLS

1. 'Public Opinion'

Public opinion is no more than this;
What people think that other people think.
- Alfred Austin, 1887⁶

As Benjamin Ginsberg states, the prominence of opinion polling as a civic institution derives from the significance that modern political ideologies ascribe to the will of the people.⁷ The development of 'public opinion' as a concept is intimately connected to social, political and economic changes that have occurred over centuries.

The development of the printing press, the Protestant Reformation and economic changes allowed for the growth of 'reading publics', which continued with the spread of books and newspapers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and beyond. Enlightenment ideas, such as those espoused by Jean-Jacque Rousseau, David Hume, John Locke and Jeremy Bentham, were influential, as were the ideas of Industrial Revolution thinkers, in contributing to a developing understanding of public opinion.⁸

In the nineteenth century, higher literacy rates, the proliferation of publications and wider readerships meant that 'public opinion ceased to be exclusively a middle-class phenomenon'.⁹ Representative democracy itself was predicated, in part, on the notion of a reading public, which would ultimately express its opinion of government through the ballots. As an area of study, public opinion gained prominence in the twentieth century with George Gallup, Walter Lippman, Herbert Blumer and Paul Lazarfeld. The academic journal *Public Opinion Quarterly* was founded in 1937. In the early twentieth century, the understanding of public opinion varied greatly with some intellectuals presuming that the average citizen was 'unreasoning or too easily led'.¹⁰

English poet laureate and playwright Alfred Austin, cited above, alludes to social and psychological factors that influence public opinion. As a concept, public opinion is difficult to define and, as has been acknowledged, there is no generally accepted

⁶ A. Austin (1891) *Prince Lucifer*, Macmillian, p. 189. English poet laureate Alfred Austin quoted in D. Boorstin (1975) 'How Opinion Went Public' in *Democracy and its Discontents*, New York, Vintage.

⁷ B. Ginsberg (1986) *The Captive Public: How Mass Opinion Promotes State Power*, New York, Basic Books, p. 59. See Chapter 3: Polling and the Transformation of Public Opinion. See also K. Wetters (2008) *The Opinion System: Impasses of the Public Sphere from Hobbes to Habermas*, New York, Fordham University Press.

⁸ H. Childs (1965) *Public Opinion: Nature, Formation, and Role*, New Jersey, Princeton, D. van Nostrand, pp. 12-28, p. 28.

⁹ Phillips Davison (1968) Public Opinion: Introduction in D. Sills (Ed.) *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, vol. 13, New York, The Macmillian Co., p. 196.

¹⁰ N. Meier (1925) 'Motives in Voting: A Study in Public Opinion', *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 31, no. 2, pp. 112-119 cited in K. Bradshaw (2006) "'America Speaks": George Gallup's First Syndicated Public Opinion Poll', *Journalism History*, vol. 31, iss. 4, Winter, pp.198-205, p. 199. See P. Converse (1987) 'Changing Conceptions of Public Opinion in the Political Process', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 51, iss. 4, pt. 2, pp. S12-S25, p. S13.

definition of public opinion.¹¹ In 1965, Princeton professor Harwood Childs identified approximately fifty different definitions of public opinion.¹² Child's analysis drew attention to the 'lack of conceptual clarity' surrounding the term 'public opinion' with some describing it in terms of collective behaviour and others as an individual-level phenomenon.¹³ While Childs referred to public opinion as any collection of individual opinions, he noted that the study of public opinion has inspired 'much more intricate and involved terminology' and that the literature of the field 'is strewn with zealous attempts to find a meaningful and acceptable definition'.¹⁴

George Gallup wrote of public opinion as being 'the pulse of democracy' and co-authored a book with that title.¹⁵ In defining public opinion, Gallup cited James Bryce, writing in 1888, who said:

[...] public opinion is a congeries of all sorts of discrepant notions, beliefs, fancies, prejudices, aspirations. It is confused, incoherent, amorphous, varying from day to day and week to week. But in the midst of this diversity and confusion every question as it arises into importance is subjected to a process of consolidation and clarification until there emerge and take shape certain views or sets of interconnected views, each held and advocated in common by bodies of citizens.¹⁶

Bryce further stated that the power exerted by such views 'when held by an apparent majority', which we refer to as public opinion, becomes 'a guiding or ruling power', and noted that, in the case of America, it was 'the real ruler of America'. Bryce's observation notes the volatility of public opinion and recognises the difficulty in ascertaining such views:

How does this vague, fluctuating, complex thing we call public opinion – omnipotent yet indeterminate – a sovereign to whose voice everyone listens, yet whose words, because he speaks with as many tongues as the waves of a boisterous sea, it is so hard to catch – how does public opinion express itself...? By what organs is it declared and how, since these organs often contradict one another, can it be discovered which of them speak most truly for the mass?¹⁷

In 1951, Emory Bogardus studied what 'makes' public opinion arguing that public opinion does not 'spring fully developed from the head of democracy', nor does it 'just happen', rather he argues that public opinion comes about through a myriad of social, political and psychological factors. Bogardus devotes several chapters to what helps form – or inform – public opinion, such as personal conversations, reading newspapers and education. He also lists stages in the opinion making process and argues that the making of public opinion is a social process.¹⁸

¹¹ Phillips Davison (1968) op. cit., pp. 188-197.

¹² Childs (1965) op. cit., pp. 12-28.

¹³ *ibid.* See J. Geer (1996) *From Tea Leaves to Opinion Polls*, New York, Columbia University Press, p. 59. For a detailed explanation of 'public opinion', see Bauer in Banner (1934) op. cit., pp. 669-674.

¹⁴ See Childs (1965) op. cit., pp. 12, 14.

¹⁵ Gallup & Rae (1940) op. cit., pp. 80-81.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁸ E. Bogardus (1951) *The Making of Public Opinion*, New York, Associated Press, see preface and p. 124.

Likewise, James Best, writing in 1973, projected a developmental model of opinion formation, noting that opinion formation is a process, an individual phenomenon, during which an individual forms opinions through socialisation and exposure to media.¹⁹ Best examined public opinion from both a micro and macro level, looking first at the individual and later at the wider society in examining how and under what circumstances public opinion plays a role in the policy making process.

In contrast to the traditional perception that public opinion is volatile, outlined above, Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro argued in 1992 that public opinion is not 'nonexistent or unknowable or irrelevant', stating: 'An attentive reader of polls and surveys can get a good deal of coherent guidance about policy'.²⁰ It is important to note that many of the above definitions of public opinion belong to what Geer has referred to as the pre-polling era.²¹

Geer, and others such as Blumer, Bogart and Herbst, have identified a conceptual shift in defining public opinion with the advent of public opinion polling itself, noting that as polls became more scientific and credible, 'the uncertainty associated with the concept of public opinion has lessened'.²² Geer cites Bogart who wrote that polls give the 'form and the appearance of measured precision to what was formerly visceral in origin and nebulous in shape'.²³ Again illustrating this development, Geer cites the following observation made by Key:

In an earlier day public opinion seemed to be pictured as a mysterious vapor that emanated from the undifferentiated citizenry and in some way or another enveloped the apparatus of government to bring it into conformity with the public will. These weird conceptions... passed out of style as the technique of the sample survey permitted the determination, with some accuracy, of opinions within the population.²⁴

¹⁹ James Best (1973) *Public Opinion: Micro and Macro*, Illinois, The Dorsey Press. See M. Milburn (1991) *Persuasion and Politics: The Social Psychology of Public Opinion*, California, Brooks/Cole Publishing Company.

²⁰ B. Page & R. Shapiro (1992) *The Rational Public*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, p. 385. See also S. Althaus (2003) *Collective Preferences in Democratic Politics: Opinion Surveys and the Will of the People*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 2-3.

²¹ Geer (1996) op. cit., pp. 58-62.

²² *ibid.*, p. 60.

²³ *ibid.*, p. 60, fn. 22.

²⁴ V. O. Key (1961) *Public Opinion and American Democracy*, New York, Knopf, p. 536 quoted in *ibid.*, p. 61.

2. Opinion Polling

The first known example of an opinion poll is often cited as the local ‘straw’ vote conducted in the United States in 1824 by the *Harrisburg Pennsylvanian* newspaper, regarding who was the preferred presidential candidate. The poll put Andrew Jackson ahead of John Quincy Adams, with 335 to 169 votes respectively.²⁵ A straw poll refers to an unofficial ballot conducted locally as a test of opinion. Unlike most modern opinion polling, which uses random sampling, straw votes use non probability sampling, and remain popular in some states in the US.

However, perhaps the most significant moment in opinion polling history occurred in 1936 in the presidential race between incumbent Franklin D. Roosevelt and Republican challenger Alf Landon. Following previous and successful practice, the *Literary Digest* conducted a poll by mailing out about 10 million postcards, using the details of people listed in the phone book or on registers of car owners. The magazine asked people to indicate which presidential candidate they would vote for and received 2.3 million replies. The magazine indicated a Landon victory of 57 per cent to 43 per cent of the two-candidate popular vote, but at the election it was Roosevelt who won with a landslide, gaining 62.5 per cent of the vote. Following this, the *Literary Digest* lost credibility and became bankrupt, subsequently merging with *Time* magazine in 1938.

In terms of polling, the big winner in 1936 was George Gallup, who correctly predicted the large win by Roosevelt. Gallup indicated a 56-44 win for Roosevelt from his own doorknock poll, which still understated the President’s winning margin, but was much closer to the actual election result. A key to Gallup’s success in 1936 was his method of random sampling to ensure accuracy. As Stephen Mills noted, Gallup would compare this process to a chef tasting a soup, saying, ‘only a teaspoon need be tasted, not the whole tureen’.²⁶ Gallup’s success challenged the then current methodologies used in opinion polling and was particularly significant in the development of survey research techniques, not only in the US, but world-wide.

While the concept of public opinion, discussed above, developed over centuries by political theorists and in response to political and social circumstances, the ‘most immediate ancestors of survey research’ were George Gallup, Elmo Roper and Archibald Crossly who correctly indicated the Roosevelt re-election in 1936.²⁷ Public opinion polling has been studied by a range of disciplines, such as by sociologists, political theorists, social psychologists and historians. It has borrowed from and

²⁵ Adams subsequently won the election, but only after being voted into office by the House of Representatives. See N. Moon (1999) *Opinion Polls: History, Theory and Practice*, Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press; and T. Smith (1990) ‘The First Straw? A Study of the Origins of Election Polls’, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 54, pp. 21-36.

²⁶ S. Mills (1986) *The New Machine Men: Polls and Persuasion in Australian Politics*, Ringwood, Penguin Books, p. 68.

²⁷ J. Converse (1987) ‘The Most Direct Line, Business: Market Research and Opinion Polling’ in *Survey Research in the US: Roots and Emergence 1890-1960*, Berkeley, University of California Press, p. 87.

influenced the field of journalism and market research.²⁸ Indeed, Jean M. Converse notes that opinion polling developed from both journalism and from market research, and that Gallup, Roper and Crossly were ‘market researchers who became straw-vote journalists’.²⁹ Opinion polling in both Britain and Australia drew on Gallup’s methods. Opinion polls in Britain date back to the founding of the British Institute of Public Opinion (BIPO) in 1937. The main polling companies in Britain today are MORI, National Opinion Polls (GfK NOP), Harris, Gallup and ICM Research. According to Mills, in Australia one polling group existed from 1941 to 1971, Roy Morgan Research. Supported by the *Herald and Weekly Times*, Roy Morgan travelled to the US and studied the methods of George Gallup. The first Morgan poll released was in 1941.³⁰ The main polling companies in Australia today are Roy Morgan, Newspoll, Nielsen and Galaxy.

Assessing public opinion on political issues can take the form of quantitative opinion polling or qualitative survey research. Quantitative opinion polling refers to surveys that measure the opinion of a sample of people. These are particularly useful in election scenarios where answers are relatively straight-forward and are restricted to ‘yes/no’ answers. Quantitative opinion polling often involves questionnaires, face-to-face interviews, telephone surveys and online/email surveys. The limitations of quantitative opinion polling are that this method does not usually provide information on how or why respondents think, or react a particular way, nor do they allow the measurement of strength of opinion.

Qualitative survey research typically involves focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and participant observation. Qualitative research is highly useful for internal opinion research by political parties and lobby groups who may be able to more effectively judge the reasons behind the public mood, or how politicians, particular policies or parties are perceived by individuals. A qualitative survey may ask a respondent more information about themselves, which may assist political parties in targeting campaigns and appealing to certain voter demographics. Focus groups are the most commonly used form of qualitative survey research and usually consist of relatively small groups of people who are involved in a moderated and recorded discussion.

While such research can be useful in allowing for greater complexity in responses, rather than the yes/no answers of quantitative polling, the results of such research often remain unpublished.³¹ This paper will focus on quantitative opinion polling, since these opinion polls are usually publicly available, and are therefore part of public debate, unlike qualitative surveys which are mainly used by political parties. Nonetheless, focus groups will be briefly discussed in section 6.

²⁸ For a contrary view see F. R. Coutant (1948) ‘The Difference Between Market Research and Election Forecasting’, *International Journal of Opinion and Attitude Research*, vol. 2, pp. 569-574, p. 572.

²⁹ J. Converse (1987) *op. cit.*

³⁰ See Mills (1986) *op. cit.*

³¹ See T. L. Greenbaum (1998) ‘Focus Groups: An Overview’ in *The Handbook of Focus Group Research* (2nd Ed.), California, Sage Publications, pp. 6-8.

PART B: FACTORS INFLUENCING OPINION POLLS

3. Accounting for Variations in Polls and Election Results

Polls do not predict; they describe the situation of the moment.
- Cliff Zukin³²

There are numerous factors and conditions, constraints and reservations that influence the outcome of opinion polls, such as: the types of questions asked, and the order in which they are asked; the sample size; the methodology employed; the timing of polls in relation to elections or events; the different approaches in dealing with 'don't know' and 'non' responses; and the contemporary situation or context surrounding the poll.³³ This section examines both technical and social considerations that need to be taken into account when interpreting the results of polls and surveys.

Margin of Error

The margin of error (or sampling error) refers to the statistic expressing the amount of random sampling error in an opinion poll's result. As Sarah Miskin states, margin of error is 'the maximum likely difference between the poll result and that of the voting population at large'.³⁴

Most Australian polls have a high confidence level and a relatively low margin of error, generally around 3 percentage points or less.³⁵ A margin of error of 3 percentage points means that a poll result could be off by 3 points in either direction for either candidate. For example, if a poll indicates that a candidate or party is given a lead of 51 per cent, it could mean that actual support for that candidate or party may range from 48 per cent support to 54 per cent support.

Sample Size and Representative Samples

As it is impractical to poll entire populations, polling groups take a random sample of the population, which is intended to be representative of the broader population, essentially making an estimate and generalisation of the wider population based on that sample. Sampling is based on probability theory.

Polling groups undertaking political polls generally have a sample size of around 1,000.³⁶ Results for a survey for which the sample consists of 1,000 respondents or 20,000 respondents should be similar provided that the sample is representative.

³² C. Zurkin (2004) 'Sources of Variation in Public Election Polling: A Primer', American Association for Public Opinion Research, viewed 23 September 2010, <http://aapor.org/uploads/zukin_election_primer.pdf>.

³³ Mitchell (1992) op. cit., p. 4.

³⁴ S. Miskin (2004) *Interpreting Opinion Polls: Some Essential Details*, Research Note no. 52, 24 May, Parliamentary Library, Commonwealth of Australia.

³⁵ Miskin (2004) op. cit.

³⁶ For market research a 'stable' sample size is often cited as much lower, see New Zealand Market Research Company Research Solutions (2010) Sample Sizes, Synovate, viewed 23 September 2010, <http://www.researchsolutions.co.nz/sample_sizes.htm>.

Samples are not representative if they cannot obtain the participation of large numbers of a population group, such as young people or people who don't speak English.³⁷

Obtaining representative samples is quite difficult. Declining response rates has made it difficult to survey certain groups, who may preference particular parties. In Britain, Mitchell suggests that Conservative voters are more likely to refuse participation in surveys and be unresponsive to opinion polling.³⁸ Likewise, voters from non-English speaking backgrounds may be missed in surveys due to communication and translation difficulties. It should also be noted that there is a correlation between areas with high levels of informal voting and high proportions of residents from non-English speaking backgrounds.³⁹

Another factor that affects representative samples is that telephone interviewers are more likely to find that relying on surveying households with landline phones may result in sample distortions. Changes in technology have resulted in declining landline rates and an increase in mobile phone-only households. Extensive research has now been conducted into the effect of mobile phones in survey research.⁴⁰ Certain demographics, such as young people, are more likely to be mobile phone-only households, meaning that they may be underrepresented in polling research.⁴¹ According to Zurkin, a registration based sampling of individuals (drawn from lists of registered voters) in the United States may miss people who have unlisted telephone numbers or have recently moved, meaning they could miss, for example, approximately 30 per cent of those with landline telephones in New Jersey, who 'tend to be younger, more urban and more Democratic in their voting behaviour'.⁴²

Another issue in respondent selection is that in calling a landline, studies have shown that women who are older are most likely to answer the phone. Telephone interviews conducted during the day may be more likely to interview those who are unemployed or are stay-at-home parents.⁴³ Some interviewers may try to randomise respondent selection by asking to speak to particular persons in the household or perhaps the

³⁷ S. Herbst (1993) *Numbered Voices: How Opinion Polls Has Shaped American Politics*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, p. 125.

³⁸ Mitchell (1992) op. cit., p. 6.

³⁹ See Parliament of Victoria, Electoral Matters Committee (2009) *Inquiry into Voter Participation and Informal Voting in Victoria: Report to Parliament*, July, Melbourne, Electoral Matters Committee, Parliament of Victoria. See also Victorian Electoral Commission (2007) *Report to Parliament on the 2006 Victorian state election*, July, Victorian Electoral Commission, Melbourne, Parliament of Victoria.

⁴⁰ See A. Leigh & J. Wolfers (2005) *Competing Approaches to Forecasting Elections: Economic Models, Opinion Polling and Prediction Markets*, Discussion Paper No. 502, November, Centre for Economic Policy Research, The Australian National University, p. 1. See also A. Kohut & S. Keeter (2008) Ways of Coping with a Growing Population Segment: The Impact of "Cell-Onlys" on Public Opinion Polling, 31 January, *Pew Research Center Report*, viewed 16 May 2011, <<http://people-press.org/http://people-press.org/files/legacy-pdf/391.pdf>>; S. Keeter (2007) How Serious is Polling's Cell-Only Problem?, *Pew Research Center Report*, 20 June, viewed 16 May 2011, <<http://pewresearch.org/pubs/515/polling-cell-only-problem>>, and P. Lavrakas & C. Shuttles (2005) Statements on Accounting for Cell Phones in Telephone Survey Research in the U.S., Presentation at the Cell Phone Sampling Summit II meeting, New York; AAPOR (2010) 'Do Cell Phones Affect Survey Research?' viewed 23 September 2010, <http://www.aapor.org/Do_Cell_Phones_Affect_Survey_Research_/2438.htm>.

⁴¹ See also Leigh & Wolfers (2005) op. cit., p. 1.

⁴² Zurkin (2004) op. cit., pp. 2-3.

⁴³ Mitchell (1992) op. cit., p. 5.

person in the household who most recently had a birthday. Such sampling distortions are intended to be overcome through weighting, which will be discussed below.

Dealing with Uncommitted Responses

Polling groups take different approaches to dealing with 'don't know'/uncommitted and non responses. Some groups exclude from their calculations these responses, while others may decide to allocate responses according to the respondents' political leaning. Some polling groups will also allocate 'don't know' responses in voting-intention polls in proportion to the stated estimate of support for each party, rather than political leaning.⁴⁴

Gallup identified several shortfalls in public opinion surveys, such as:

- Respondents may not have any knowledge whatsoever of the issue being surveyed;
- No distinction is made between people who give 'snap'/'off the top of the head' judgements as opposed to those who have actually weighed the pros and cons of an issue;
- Responses are usually categorised into 'Yes' and 'No' answers whereas some complex issues cannot be reduced to a single, dichotomous question.⁴⁵

In terms of public polling to assess election outcomes, excluding uncommitted and non responses may make particular sense in jurisdictions where voting is not compulsory, since it is less likely that people who don't have an opinion or have no interest in politics will vote. However, in jurisdictions where voting is compulsory, such as Australia, excluding uncommitted and non responses could result in a significant disparity between opinion polling results and actual election outcomes.

Gallup proposed that those who have no 'familiarity with the topic' be excluded from polls. In facilitating this, Gallup developed a 'quintamensional' approach to question design, which was based on five categories of questions in gauging opinion, the first of which was a 'filter' question that attempted to exclude those who had no familiarity with the topic. Other categories aimed to gauge intensity of opinion and the reasons for those opinions. Gallup sought to overcome many of the criticisms associated with public opinion surveys, such as: by excluding those who give 'snap' judgements; by testing that respondents understand the questions asked; by understanding why respondents hold certain views; and, by considering the intensity with which opinions are held.⁴⁶

On the issue of lack of knowledge of a subject, and the capacity for this to skew or vary results, Murray Goot examined polls in relation to the Mabo case in the 1990s. Goot states that one of the reasons why the polls in the Mabo case were able to generate varying, and even contradictory responses, may well have been due to the fact that many respondents had little or no information on which to base a judgement,

⁴⁴ For example, if the ALP have 48 per cent of the vote, 48 per cent of 'don't knows' will be allocated to the ALP. Personal communication with Dr Denis Muller, 6 June 2011.

⁴⁵ G. Gallup (1947) 'The Quintamensional Plan of Question Design', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 11, no. 3, pp. 385-393, p. 386.

⁴⁶ See Gallup (1947) op. cit., pp. 385-393.

and when forced to choose an answer might have been easily led.⁴⁷ Goot referred to Gallup's method of excluding those with no familiarity with a topic, stating that 'those with no opinion, as the cliché has it, have no opinion to represent'.⁴⁸ Influential French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu was also of the opinion that 'no answers' should be eliminated in opinion polling since 'That's what is done in an election where there are blank or void voting slips'.⁴⁹

Strength of Opinion

Quantitative opinion polls often do not take into account the strength of opinion a person may hold towards a subject or candidate. Opinion polls compile opinions into categories, and often respondents are only able to select one of two or more answers. By seeking to categorise people and their opinions, John Dryzek states that opinion surveys reduce those studied to objects with bundles of attributes, in order to produce an instrumental result.⁵⁰

In dealing with political party questions, polling groups may prompt respondents to decide which party they may have a greater 'leaning towards', in order to avoid uncommitted responses. Respondents may select an option; however their responses are weighted equally with persons who may feel very strongly about a political party.

Polling groups in jurisdictions where voting is not compulsory face additional challenges. Polling groups may attempt to counter potential discrepancies by asking respondents if they intend to vote prior to ascertaining their opinion; however the respondent may be intending to vote and still be undecided and/or may be highly responsive to political rhetoric in the final days of a campaign. Furthermore, polling groups often report that there is a discrepancy between respondents' self-reports of intentions to vote and actual turnout.⁵¹ As noted earlier, polls – election polls included – capture only a snapshot of the public mood at a certain moment in time.

Weighting

After polls are conducted, polling groups may realise that certain demographics are over- or under-represented in surveys and will therefore often adjust data to offer a more accurate reflection of wider society. 'Weighting' refers to the adjustments that are made to ensure that the surveys are representative of the population, with regard to demographics, gender and age, often using Census data. This can assist in overcoming issues such as when people refuse to take part in the survey, or cannot be included because they do not have a landline.

⁴⁷ M. Goot (1993a) 'Polls as Science, Polls as Spin', *Australian Quarterly*, Summer, vol. 65, iss. 4, pp. 133-156, pp. 152-153.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p. 153.

⁴⁹ P. Bourdieu (1979) 'Public Opinion Does Not Exist' in A. Mattelart & S. Siegelau (eds.) *Communication and Class Struggle*, New York: International General. For a review of Bourdieu's critique see S. Herbst (1992) 'Surveys in the Public Sphere: Applying Bourdieu's Critique of Opinion Polls', *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, Autumn, vol. 4, no. 3.

⁵⁰ J. Dryzek (1990) *Discursive Democracy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press in S. Stockwell (2005) *Political Campaign Strategy: Doing Democracy in the 21st Century*, Melbourne, Australian Scholarly, p. 91.

⁵¹ Zukin (2004) *op. cit.*, p. 6.

An aggregate of recent phone polls may also be used in ‘weighting’ by some polling groups to ‘smooth the ups and downs’.⁵² Polling groups will often take additional information into account so that raw numbers can be adjusted to better match the profile of the public. For example, gathering information not only on voting preferences and behaviour but also information on the respondents’ age and gender might be compared with census data in order to reflect the population as a whole.

Another complicating factor in relation to the weighting of responses is the circumstance of preferential voting systems. These can pose difficulties for polling groups, particularly during elections where minority party preferences result in major party candidates being elected who did not gain the most first-preference votes.⁵³ In calculating their two-party-preferred vote, some polling groups ask voters who state they intend to vote for a minor party or independent candidate, who they intend to give their second preference to.

Question Design

Question design is a key factor that can potentially result in differences between the results obtained by various polling groups on the one hand, and between opinion polls and actual election outcomes on the other. Gallup wrote in 1947 that too much attention had been directed towards different sampling techniques to describe variations in results and too little towards question design.⁵⁴ Gallup also noted that question wordings are not always understood by everyone to mean the same thing.⁵⁵

There are many issues concerning question design, including: the phrasing and tone of questions asked; the number of questions asked; the order in which questions are asked; the use of key words, including emotive, biased or suggestive language; and the values inherent within the questions asked, to name just a few. Opinion polls tend to ask targeted questions, related to a specific issue, which may or may not be of importance to the interviewee, but by their very asking, may influence respondent’s attitudes about the value and prominence of such issues.

As Murray Goot notes, ‘People may speak through the polls but only when the polls ask them, only in response to questions framed by the polls and only through the words allowed by the polls; in short, only on the polls’ terms’.⁵⁶ Australian opinion pollsters Gary Morgan and Michele Levine note that many commissioned and commercial market research surveys are ‘worthless because of biased questions’.⁵⁷

Neutral Questions

A related issue to question design is whether a question that is posed can ever be truly neutral. For Schuman and Presser no attitude question can be completely neutral ‘since the mere act of inquiring about a subject may sharpen the definition of it as an “issue”’.⁵⁸ As P. Bourdieu stated, ‘putting the same question to everyone assumes that

⁵² *ibid.*

⁵³ Beed (1977) *op. cit.*, p. 225.

⁵⁴ Gallup (1947) *op. cit.*, p. 387.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, p. 386.

⁵⁶ Goot (1993a) *op. cit.*, pp. 152-153.

⁵⁷ G. Morgan & M. Levine (1988) *Accuracy of Opinion Polling in Australia*, conference paper, 9th Australian Statistical Conference, Melbourne, Australian National University, 17 May, p. 2.

⁵⁸ H. Schuman & S. Presser (1981) *Questions and Answers in Attitude Surveys*, New York, Academic Press. See Chapter 7: Balance and Imbalance in Questions.

there is a consensus on what the problems are, in other words that there is agreement on the questions that are worth asking'.⁵⁹

Nonetheless, Schuman and Presser use examples to illustrate how questions can be *more or less* neutral in the way they are posed. Questions that offer a brief statement of an issue can be compared with more loaded questions which may contain 'both a question and an influence attempt'.⁶⁰ Demonstrating the impact of question design and the difficulty in ensuring a question's neutrality, Scott Keeter cited the example of a 1992 *New York Times* poll which asked respondents if they favoured spending more money for 'welfare', to which only 23 per cent said yes. However, when asked if they favoured spending more on 'assistance to the poor', nearly two-thirds of respondents said yes.⁶¹

Stephen Mills identified in his 1986 book, *The New Machine Men*, that polling can change people: 'poll respondents can be flattered by the attention, annoyed by the interruption, threatened by the challenge of a poll, each of which may influence the answers they give'.⁶² They may also be educated by the information they are given about the issues contained in the polls.⁶³ An extreme example of an 'influence attempt' can be seen in 'push polling', which is discussed in further detail below.

Interviewer Bias

Oskamp and Schultz cite several problems in public opinion polling related to the effect the interviewer may have on responses, including: lack of personal sensitivity, inadequate training, variations in their reading of questions (from one interview to the next and among different interviewers within the same polling group), variations in reacting to respondent's answers, interviewers expectations and interviewers' attitudes, age, race and gender.⁶⁴

Timing

As expressed in the quotes preceding the introduction of this paper, the mood of the nation can vary from day to day and predicting the nation's mood can be somewhat like shooting a moving target, particularly when certain political issues arise or sudden changes occur. However, it is generally agreed that for opinion polling on voting intentions, the closer the poll is taken to the actual election the more accurate the poll is likely to be. In the recent Victorian election for example, polls taken immediately prior to the election detected a swing to the Coalition; earlier polling had the ALP ahead.

Voter Turnout

Another factor that has accounted for variations in the accuracy of political opinion polling is voter turnout. While Australian polling groups are confronted with many issues that affect the accuracy in gauging public opinion, Australian polls have generally maintained greater accuracy in indicating election outcomes than other jurisdictions where voting is not compulsory. Beed noted that not only do polling

⁵⁹ Bourdieu (1979) op. cit., p. 149.

⁶⁰ Schuman & Presser (1981) op. cit., Chapter 7: Balance and Imbalance in Questions.

⁶¹ S. Keeter (2008) 'Poll Power', *The Wilson Quarterly*, vol. 32, iss. 4, Autumn, pp. 56-62, p. 59.

⁶² Mills (1986) op. cit., p. 76.

⁶³ *ibid.*, p. 77.

⁶⁴ S. Oskamp & P. Schultz (2005) *Attitudes and Opinions* (3rd Ed.), Mahwah, New Jersey, Erlbaum, pp. 128-129.

groups in the United States and Great Britain have to cope with the variables and factors that affect voting intentions, and which have been outlined in this paper, in addition they must also take into account voter turnout.⁶⁵

Numerous factors can influence voter turnout on the day of the election, factors that operate at both an individual 'micro-level' (such as income, education, interest in politics) to the 'macro-level' of the political system. Other variables include the weather on the day, the location of polling stations, voter registration procedures and what day of the week the election is held.⁶⁶

Other Factors

Noted public opinion scholar, Herbert Blumer said that public opinion 'gets its form from the social framework in which it moves'.⁶⁷ As demonstrated above, numerous factors inherent in the opinion polling process can influence the result of opinion polls. More than technical aspects and issues in communication and comprehension, research on mass communications, social psychology, behavioural psychology and market research has revealed that many psychological and social factors also affect opinion polling.

Recent research has examined the influence of opinion polls on expectations, suggesting that voters may base their decision in voting in elections 'not only on [their] own preference but on expectations of what other voters will do'.⁶⁸ For example, voters may vote for a candidate they believe is 'viable' or 'electable' rather than their preferred candidate, who they may perceive will not receive enough support to be elected.⁶⁹ Galen Irwin and Joop Van Holsteyn state that these considerations and calculations made by voters (which are based on expectations that may be 'wishful thinking' or may be formed cognitively, such as from information acquired from opinion polls themselves) are a form of strategic or tactical voting.⁷⁰

In addition to voting 'strategically' in elections, people therefore may also respond to polls 'strategically rather than truthfully'.⁷¹ Participants may, for example, express certain views in opinion polls to convey dissatisfaction with certain policies and hence send a message to political parties, which may or may not reflect their true voting intentions.⁷² Indeed, as Vincent-Wayne Mitchell identifies, the consequences are different for participants responding to opinion polls, as opposed to answering the ballot form questions.⁷³ Mitchell states 'opinion polls reflect opinions, and elections reflect the country's wishes for government, and that these need not be, and at many times are not, the same'.⁷⁴

⁶⁵ See International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) (2002) *Voter Turnout Since 1945: A Global Report*, Stockholm, International IDEA.

⁶⁶ See International IDEA (2002) op. cit., p. 116.

⁶⁷ H. Blumer (1948) 'Public Opinion and Public Opinion Polling', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 13, pp. 242-249.

⁶⁸ G. Irwin & J. Van Holsteyn (2002) 'According to the Polls: The Influence of Opinion Polls on Expectations', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 66, no. 1, pp. 92-104.

⁶⁹ Broughton (1995) op. cit.; F. Teer & J. Spence (1973) *Political Opinion Polls*, London, Hutchinson.

⁷⁰ Irwin & Van Holsteyn (2002) op. cit., p. 92.

⁷¹ Leigh & Wolfers (2005) op. cit., p. 5.

⁷² See Stockwell (2005) op. cit., p. 92.

⁷³ Mitchell (1992) op. cit.

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, p. 4.

Political scientist Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann examined the effects of the media and public opinion in 1973, arguing that the mass media had a powerful effect on the forming of opinion and an individual's perception about where public opinion lies. According to the 'spiral of silence', which is her theory that asserts that individuals will be inclined to remain silent if they believe their opinion is in the minority, individuals have a 'fear of isolation', a fear of being rejected by society and in response are constantly observing the behaviours of those around them and seeing which ideas and behaviours gain approval and disapproval from society. It is worth noting that Noelle-Neumann defined public opinion as 'controversial opinions that one *is able* to express in public without becoming isolated'.⁷⁵

In the United Kingdom, many polling organisations have, in the last two decades, reported a 'spiral of silence' phenomenon. In British politics 'the shy Tory effect', and, more recently, the 'shy Labour effect' have been terms used by many journalists to describe the phenomenon whereby people seek to conceal unpopular attitudes towards those parties.⁷⁶ For example, Andrew Cooper, director of Populus, the polling group for *The Times*, noted in 2004 that a shift had occurred in what was politically 'fashionable':

... in place of Shy Tories we now have Bashful Blairites, people unwilling to admit to pollsters or their friends that they will support the Prime Minister. Once so fashionable, new Labour has now gone out of fashion.⁷⁷

In such instances, raw polling data is compromised and may 'produce a substantially different picture of the political balance'.⁷⁸ In countering this effect, polling groups will often adjust data to accommodate for 'shy voters'. However, as Daniel Finkelstein identifies, it can be increasingly difficult to assess which way such data should be adjusted.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Noelle-Neumann (1977) op. cit., p. 145.

⁷⁶ See also Moon (1999) op. cit., pp. 134-170.

⁷⁷ See A. Cooper (2004) 'Goodbye to the shy Tories, hello to the bashful Blairites', *The Sunday Times*, 11 May.

⁷⁸ *ibid.* See also D. Finkelstein (2008) 'Astonishing Tory poll lead... but is it accurate?' *The Times Online*, 9 May, viewed 26 August 2010, <<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/?CMP=KNGvccep1-TimesOnline>>, J. Glover (2006) 'Things can only get better – or Labour hopes they can', *Guardian*, 25 October.

⁷⁹ D. Finkelstein (2008) op. cit.

PART C: AUSTRALIAN POLLING GROUPS

4. Polling Groups

The modern national pollster is far more than an objective data collector or mere engineer or statistician. He is an analytic interpreter, a grand strategist, and to some, a Delphic oracle.

- Larry Sabato⁸⁰

Leading up to an election, many journalists, politicians, academics and the general public want to know which polls have a proven record for accuracy. Studies have reported that polling error has been declining with advances in sampling and survey research. For example, the US National Council on Public Polls (NCPP) have analysed polling results from presidential election campaigns from the past 50 years. The NCPP report that, when compared with election outcomes, average polling error has been declining, with an average poll error of 1.9 percentage points per candidate between 1956 and 1996. Importantly, most of these polls surveyed were taken just prior to the election.⁸¹ Some journalists and bloggers have also begun compiling track records of polling groups.⁸²

However, as this paper has demonstrated, notwithstanding the most meticulous sampling, it is quite difficult to make such assessments given the fluid and unpredictable nature of polling and of human behaviour. The 'polling disasters', such as the 1980 Australian election 'polling disaster', cited below, provide examples of how difficult it is to form judgements as to the most reliable and accurate polling group. Basing one's assessment on past polling group accuracy does not necessarily provide a reliable indication since, as Rodney Tiffen states:

... the past is never a perfect guide to the future. In both economics and politics we are dealing with complex and, even more importantly, open systems... In reviewing polling, by its nature we are dealing with probabilities and juggling uncertainties, and caution is called for.⁸³

Many commentators have noted that polls are reported widely in the media with little attention given to their limitations or margin of error, perhaps due to a lack of understanding of the pitfalls of opinion polls. In fact, Leigh and Wolfer suggest that

⁸⁰ L. Sabato (1981) *The Rise of Political Consultants: New Ways of Winning Elections*, New York, Basic Books, p. 321.

⁸¹ NCPP (date unknown) 'How accurate are the polls?', viewed 19 October 2010, <<http://www.ncpp.org/?q=node/6#6>>. The NCPP was established in 1969 to promote better understanding and reporting of public opinion polls. The NCPP also has a Polling Review Board which monitors the conduct and reporting of polls. See NCPP (date unknown) 'About NCPP', viewed 23 September 2010, <<http://www.ncpp.org/?q=node/1>>.

⁸² See Good Magazine (2008) Poll Position Transparency, Issue 010, 23 April, viewed 15 October 2010, <http://www.good.is/post/poll_position/>. See also *The Telegraph* (2010) 'Poll Tracker: UK General Election 2010 Opinion Poll Tracker', viewed 19 October 2010, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/election-2010/7511352/Poll-Tracker-UK-General-Election-2010-Opinion-Poll-Tracker.html>>.

⁸³ R. Tiffen (2010) 'Polls, elections and Australian political history: a primer', *Inside Story*, 6 August, pp. 1-8, p. 8.

polling groups should provide more guidance to their clients as to their '(in)ability to forecast election outcomes' and propose that polling groups should double their margin of error.⁸⁴ However, as David Broughton states, 'However imperfect polls may be, they will retain the status of an indispensable tool whose performance at elections is undoubtedly an important aspect of their value'.⁸⁵

Comparing polling organisations

Sarah Miskin and Greg Baker from the Commonwealth Parliamentary Library note that it is difficult to compare the different polling organisations as they differ in the frequency in which polls are published. For example, Miskin and Barker state that ACNielsen polls are not published as regularly as those of Newspoll and therefore 'do not allow the cross-time tracking that is possible with Newspoll'.⁸⁶ Furthermore, they note that direct comparison is difficult due to the differences in the questions asked by the main polling organisations.⁸⁷

Other factors that inhibit the comparison of polling results from different polling groups include differences in methodologies used, sample sizes, and in approaches to dealing with 'don't know', uncommitted and 'non' responses.⁸⁸ Nonetheless, while it may be impossible to compare one poll with another, the polls can be compared against the actual election result. The section below offers a brief summary of the different polling organisations and how they generally conduct their polling.

Roy Morgan

Roy Morgan Research was founded by Roy Morgan in 1941 and had a monopoly on media polling in Australia until 1971, when the Saulwick poll began.⁸⁹ Roy Morgan Research is the only Australian-owned independent polling company that is not owned by a media organisation. The results of the Morgan Poll are published by newspapers, magazines, television, the Internet, radio and online subscription services, such as Crikey.

Roy Morgan Research broadly follows the Gallup model.⁹⁰ The Morgan poll predominately uses face-to-face polling, unlike the other three major Australian polling groups which conduct their polling by telephone.⁹¹ Gary Morgan states the Morgan poll's reason for preferring face-to-face polls is that their 'interpretation has always been that telephone polls measure the "mood" or the "emotional" response to an issue, whereas face-to-face polls measure the more considered response'.⁹² He notes that as respondents' vote on the day will be a considered one, face-to-face opinion polling best measures the electorate's considered response.⁹³

⁸⁴ Leigh & Wolfer (2005) op. cit., p. 19.

⁸⁵ Broughton (1995) op. cit.

⁸⁶ S. Miskin & G. Baker (2004) *Opinion Polls: Issues and Preferred Party, and Preferred PM*, July 2004, Research Note no. 2 2004-05, 12 July, Parliamentary Library, Commonwealth of Australia, p. 1.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*

⁸⁸ *ibid.*

⁸⁹ See Roy Morgan Research, 'Background to Roy Morgan Research', viewed 28 June 2010, <http://www.roymorgan.com/documents/Background_to_Roy_Morgan_Research.pdf>. The Saulwick Poll is Irving Saulwick's poll in association with the University of Melbourne's Political Science Department and *The Age*. Personal communication with Dr. Denis Muller, 6 June 2011.

⁹⁰ Mills (1986) op. cit., pp. 70-71.

⁹¹ Roy Morgan has conducted telephone polls in the past with one on 7-8 October 2004.

⁹² See Roy Morgan Research (2001) Finding No. 3472, 13 November.

⁹³ *ibid.*

Roy Morgan excludes ‘uncommitted responses’ and urges those who say they are ‘uncommitted’ to name the party they lean towards.

Newspoll

Newspoll Market Research is an Australian company that was established in 1985 as a joint venture between News Limited and Yann Campbell Hoare Wheeler. Newspoll is half-owned by Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp and generally publishes federal political opinion polls fortnightly in News Limited’s *The Australian*.

State political opinion polls for Victoria and New South Wales are usually published bimonthly, while opinion polls for other jurisdictions, such as Western Australia, Queensland and South Australia, are published quarterly. Opinion polls for Tasmania and the Northern Territory are published occasionally, usually in the lead up to an election. The frequency in polling for all jurisdictions increases during the election campaigning period.⁹⁴ Newspoll also conducts polling on political issues, such as asylum seekers, troop deployment in Afghanistan and environmental issues.

Like Roy Morgan, Newspoll broadly follows the Gallup model.⁹⁵ Newspoll’s surveys are typically conducted on the telephone by trained interviewers. Telephone numbers and the person within the household are selected at random. An example of the questions asked by Newspoll in Victorian voting intentions polls from March-April 2010 are:

- If a State election for the Lower House was held today, which one of the following would you vote for? (Labor, Liberal, Nationals, Liberal/Nationals, The Greens, Others). If “uncommitted”, to which one of these do you have a leaning?;
- Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way Mr John Brumby is doing his job as Premier? (Satisfied, Dissatisfied, Uncommitted);
- Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way Mr Ted Baillieu is doing his job as Leader of the Opposition? (Satisfied, Dissatisfied, Uncommitted);
- Who do you think would make the better Premier? (Mr John Brumby, Mr Ted Baillieu, Uncommitted).

Like Roy Morgan, Newspoll also excludes uncommitted responses and tries to encourage respondents to name the party they lean towards.

Nielsen

The Nielsen Poll, formerly known as the ACNielsen Poll (and prior to this, AGB McNair), monitors federal and state voting intentions and is conducted exclusively for Fairfax newspapers, including *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*. The Nielsen Poll is conducted by telephone nationwide.

ACNielsen is a global marketing research firm which was founded in Chicago, Illinois in 1923 by Arthur C. Nielsen, Sr, and has its headquarters in New York.⁹⁶ ACNielsen now operates in more than 100 countries and predominately undertakes

⁹⁴ See Newspoll website, viewed 20 July 2010, <http://www.newspoll.com.au/index.pl?action=adv_search>.

⁹⁵ Mills (1986) op. cit., pp. 70-71.

⁹⁶ See Nielsen (date unknown) ‘Our History’, viewed 13 September 2010, <<http://au.nielsen.com/company/history.shtml>>.

market research. While Morgan and Newspoll exclude uncommitted responses, ACNielsen redistributes them.⁹⁷

Galaxy Research

Galaxy Research is an Australian market research company which also provides opinion polling for state and federal politics.⁹⁸ Galaxy emerged prior to the 2004 federal election.⁹⁹ David Briggs, previously at Newspoll, runs Galaxy's political polls. Galaxy Polls are published in News Limited tabloid newspapers, including the *Herald Sun*, *Courier-Mail* and the *Daily Telegraph*.¹⁰⁰ Galaxy does not usually conduct opinion polls between elections.

Galaxy surveys are generally conducted by phone interviews of a sample of around 800 voters. The data is weighted and projected to reflect the Australian population.¹⁰¹

Overseeing Polling Organisations

Several organisations and associations exist to monitor and oversee polling organisations, to provide guidelines for polling groups and to offer guidance to journalists who may be reporting on the results of polls. In Australia, there is the Australian Market and Social Research Society and the Australian Press Council (APC), which is the self-regulatory body of the Australian print media. The APC issues guidelines outlining certain details that should be published in opinion poll reports. The APC's most recent guidelines were published in July 2001, which include:

- The identity of the poll sponsor (if any) and the name of the polling organisation;
- The exact wording of the question(s) asked;
- The sample size and method;
- A definition of the population from which the sample was drawn; and,
- Which of the results are based on only part of the sample (e.g. men or women; adherents of particular political parties; and the base number from which percentages were derived).¹⁰²

They note that information relating to how and where the interviews were carried out, the date of when the interviews were carried out and who carried out the polls is information that may be included. They also note that in reporting opinion polls it should be made clear if the results were generated by self-selected respondents (such as where people are invited to call in to register a vote) or proper statistical sampling (such as where people are randomly phoned and asked their opinion).

The APC states that in the case of polls with a 'marked political content' more information is needed so that the public is 'able to judge properly the value of the poll

⁹⁷ Miskin, (2004) op. cit.

⁹⁸ See Galaxy Research website, viewed 20 July 2010, <<http://www.galaxyresearch.com.au/index.php?page=political-polling>>.

⁹⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ See P. Brent (2007) 'Forget the election contest, look at the pollsters', *Crikey*, 10 April, viewed 28 June 2010, <<http://www.crikey.com.au/2007/04/10/forget-the-election-contest-look-at-the-pollsters/>>.

¹⁰¹ See Galaxy Research website, viewed 20 July 2010, <<http://www.galaxyresearch.com.au/index.php?page=political-polling>>.

¹⁰² Australian Press Council (2001) 'Reporting guidelines: opinion polls', General Press Release No. 246 (iv), July, viewed 28 June 2010, <<http://www.presscouncil.org.au/document-search/guideline-246-v-opinion-polls/?LocatorFormID=677&FromSearch=1>>.

being reported'.¹⁰³ The APC does not advocate limitations on media reporting on opinion polls at politically sensitive times, believing that the public has a right to know and a right to speak and comment freely.¹⁰⁴

The American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR), the World Association for Public Opinion Research (WAPOR), the British Polling Council (BPC) and the European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research have also codified a set of disclosure standards for pollsters and journalists.¹⁰⁵ The Canadian Association of Market Research Organizations and the Canadian Advertising Research Foundation also developed self-regulating rules in 2000 which became part of the *Canada Elections Act* of 2000, which states in Article 326:

The first person who transmits the results of an election survey must provide the following with the result: the name of the sponsor, the name of the person or organization that conducted the survey [pollster];... the period during which the survey was conducted; the population from which the sample of respondents was drawn; the number of people who were contacted... and, if applicable, the margin of error.

¹⁰³ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ AAPOR, which was founded in 1947, is the leading professional organisation of public opinion and survey research professionals and publishes the *Public Opinion Quarterly*.

PART D: THE IMPACTS OF OPINION POLLS

5. Elections, Politicians, Policy and Influence

Polls and Elections

As already noted, there is significant potential for opinion polls to influence voting intentions and behaviour. Extensive research has been conducted into the social psychology of opinion formation, and the impacts of opinion polling on voter behaviour. Many commentators argue that a ‘bandwagon’ effect can take place, when polls indicate a clear leader, which suggests that some voters may be inclined to vote for ‘the winning side’ and therefore vote according to the party or individual with majority support. Likewise, other commentators have suggested a reverse effect can occur in the same situation. Often referred to as the ‘underdog’ effect, this sees voters supporting the party or individual that is lagging behind in the polls and not performing as well.¹⁰⁶ Yet another theory, termed the ‘backlash effect’, holds that voters may not want to see a government elected with a very large majority, and therefore may vote against a party that is leading in opinion polls by a large percentage. This could be said to have the same outcome as the underdog effect, but via a different motivation.¹⁰⁷

From another perspective, opinion polling has also been seen as creating voter apathy or pre-determining results. Scott Keeter from the Pew Research Center suggests there is a suspicion that polls induce political passivity by telling people what they think.¹⁰⁸ Attesting to ‘poll power’, several countries restrict or ban the publication of pre-election opinion polls for this reason. As Catherine Marsh notes, the idea that opinion polls might affect what people think is ‘threatening to this individuated notion of public opinion, and is threatening to the claim of pollsters that the opinion polls *reflect* public opinion...’¹⁰⁹ Clearly the relationship of opinion polling to voter behaviour is highly complex and a contested area of research.

Opinion polls don’t just affect the views of individuals, but are also capable of impacting on the behaviour of parties in an election context. Australian pollsters Gary Morgan and Michele Levine see the Morgan Gallup Poll’s inability to correctly indicate the winning party (the National Party) for the 1986 Queensland election as due to the National Party changing strategies after seeing unfavourable results of an

¹⁰⁶ See B. Kay (1997) ‘Polls and the Bandwagon Effect on the Electoral Process?’, *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, vol. 19, no. 4, Winter, pp. 20-25; M. Goot (1993b) ‘Coming from Behind: Underdog Polls, Underdog Parties’, *Current Affairs Bulletin*, vol. 69, no. 11, April, pp. 25-27; H. A. Simon (1954) ‘Bandwagon and Underdog Effects and the Possibility of Election Predictions’, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 18, pp. 245-253; R. Henshel & William Johnston (1987) ‘The Emergence of Bandwagon Effects: A Theory’, *The Sociological Quarterly*, vol. 28; I. McAllister & D. Studlar (1991) ‘Bandwagon, Underdog, or Projection? Opinion Polls and Electoral Choice in Britain’, 1979-1987’, *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 53, pp. 720-741. P. Hitchens (2009) *The Broken Compass: How British Politics Lost its Way*, London, Continuum.

¹⁰⁷ See Moon (1999) op. cit., p. 207.

¹⁰⁸ Keeter (2008) op. cit.

¹⁰⁹ C. Marsh ‘Do Polls Affect What People Think?’ in C. F. Turner & E. Martin (eds) (1984) *Surveying Subjective Phenomena*, vol. 2, New York, Russell Sage Foundation, pp. 565-591, p. 565.

opinion poll that was conducted 11 days prior to the election.¹¹⁰ They state, ‘The Queensland election remains probably the best example of how a political party can, after seeing results of a political poll, change their complete strategy and successfully turnaround what seemed to everyone to be inevitable failure’.¹¹¹

Since polls do have the potential to influence politics and election results several countries ban the publication of polls immediately before elections.¹¹² In 2003, F. Spangenberg from The Foundation for Information released a report into the freedom to publish opinion polls. This report found that 46 per cent of the countries covered had embargos on the publication of poll results on or prior to election day. The main reason identified for restricting the publication of polls was to ‘protect the dignity of the democratic process’.¹¹³ Other reasons included the right of privacy and national security. The report cited that in Cyprus, which had an embargo of seven days before an election, regulations were also proposed that completed questionnaires should be submitted to a committee of Members of Parliament together with methodological and sample details before any results of polls are published.¹¹⁴ Greece introduced an embargo of 15 days, but allowed politicians to still commission opinion polls during the period as long as the general public were not allowed access to the results.¹¹⁵

Spangenberg’s report notes that for years in France the results of polls prior to elections were allowed to be reported in other countries but not in France. France recently reduced its embargo on the publication of opinion polls from seven days to the day before an election since French citizens were able to access the results of French polls on foreign websites.¹¹⁶

Australia has no laws prohibiting or regulating the publication of opinion polls.¹¹⁷ However, in Victoria the publishing of exit poll data is banned during voting hours (see below ‘Exit Polling’).

Politicians, Policy and Polls

In 1940, Gallup and Rae argued that polls would help the politician to better represent the general public since they allowed politicians to gauge majority views and avoid ‘the kind of distorted picture sent to them by telegraph enthusiasts and overzealous pressure groups who claim to speak for all the people, but actually only speak for themselves’.¹¹⁸ Another advantage to polls that politicians have reported is that polling on issues has been useful for breaking down the isolation they may experience within their electorate.¹¹⁹ Prior to opinion polls, politicians essentially had either to guess the public’s opinion on issues, or conduct their own ‘straw polls’ of

¹¹⁰ G. Morgan & M. Levine (1988) *Accuracy of Opinion Polling in Australia*, conference paper, 9th Australian Statistical Conference, Australian National University, 17 May, p. 4.

¹¹¹ *ibid.*

¹¹² F. Spangenberg (2003) *The Freedom to Publish Opinion Poll Results: Report on a Worldwide Update*, World Association for Public Opinion Research (WAPOR), The Foundation for Information, Amsterdam, ESOMAR/WAPOR.

¹¹³ *ibid.*, p. 6.

¹¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹¹⁷ See G. Orr (2004) *Australian Electoral Systems – How Well Do They Serve Political Equality?*, Report No. 2, Democratic Audit of Australia, ANU, pp. 53-56.

¹¹⁸ Gallup & Rae (1940) *op. cit.*

¹¹⁹ Mills (1986) *op. cit.*, p. 64.

constituents; hence, as Geer notes, polls have systematically changed the behaviour of politicians.¹²⁰

Opinion polls can offer immediate feedback to politicians about their party's, or their individual performance. There are numerous instances where public polls, or internal party polls, have influenced decisions by, and concerning, party leaderships. Stephen Mills cites the example of the extraordinary 75 per cent approval rating for Prime Minister Bob Hawke, early in his prime ministership, which, he said, resulted in a 'dangerous decision' to call an early election, which reduced his majority.¹²¹ Both public and internal political party polls have also been influential in leadership changes and changes to election policies. Mills commented that personal popularity polls can be self-defeating as they can generate pressures out of proportion to their real significance.¹²²

As Gosselin and Petry note, 'Polls give the public a voice in which to speak directly to policy-makers and also ensure that politicians cannot go against the will of the public for long or claim support that they do not have'.¹²³ Similarly, David Broughton notes that polls can 'tell ordinary people what others are thinking, rather than people having to rely on what politicians *assert* about the public mood'.¹²⁴

However, Bogart suggests that polls may also 'make politicians self-conscious about the views they express' and hence may constrict public debate.¹²⁵ On the one hand, politicians are often accused of being opinion poll-driven rather than policy-driven.¹²⁶ On the other hand, politicians who do not pay attention to public opinion can be accused of being arrogant, of not listening to their constituents, or not being 'in touch' with voters.¹²⁷ Nevertheless, in modern culture, with national constituencies often comprising tens (if not hundreds) of millions of people, opinion polling does provide, at the very least, a potential conduit or context within which politicians as representatives can engage their publics in debate, across a range of matters, beyond just the electoral cycle.

By charting the mentions of opinion polls in news articles, the Pew Research Report, *But What Do the Polls Show?*, demonstrates the rise in the influence of, and reliance on, opinion polls in reports by newspaper and wire services. The Pew Research Report graph shows that the surveyed news sources only made mention of opinion polls a few times in the 1960s. However, by the 2000s, mentions of opinion polls in the media had jumped to between 6,000 and 8,000 per annum.¹²⁸ The same Pew

¹²⁰ Geer (1996) op. cit. See also J. Geer (1991) 'Critical Realignments and the Public Opinion Poll', *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 53, pp. 434-453.

¹²¹ See Mills (1986) op. cit., p. 64.

¹²² *ibid.*

¹²³ T. Gosselin & F. Petry (2009) 'The Regulation of Poll Reporting in Canada', *Canadian Public Policy*, vol. 35, no. 1, pp. 41-57, p. 42.

¹²⁴ D. Broughton (1995) *Public Opinion Polling in Britain*, Hertfordshire, Harvester Wheatsheaf, p. 13.

¹²⁵ Bogart (1972) op. cit., p. 7.

¹²⁶ Miskin (2004) op. cit., p. 1.

¹²⁷ M. Goot (2005) 'Politicians, Public Policy and Poll Following: Conceptual Difficulties and Empirical Realities', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 40, no. 2, June, pp. 189-205, p. 189.

¹²⁸ See Figure 9.1 in A. Kohut (2009) *But What Do the Polls Show? How Public Opinion Surveys Came to Play a Major Role in Policymaking and Politics*, Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, Pew Research Center, 14 October, viewed 15 October 2010, <<http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1379/polling-history-influence-policymaking-politics>>.

Research Report tracks several key moments in which opinion polls have influenced American politics, noting that public opinion probably ‘restrained’ the Reagan administration’s intervention in Nicaragua, leading some to argue that the Reagan administration was poll-driven.¹²⁹ Another notable example of opinion polls affecting politics is the ‘Lewinsky affair’.

While under attack from his political opponents and under threat of impeachment, the approval ratings for President Bill Clinton actually rose in polls by Gallup, Pew Research Center and other national surveys. These polls indicated that the public was more upset by the way the media and his opponents had treated President Clinton than by his alleged misbehaviour, which ‘led to a transformation of the Washington establishment’s judgment of his political viability’.¹³⁰ Andrew Kohut, author of the Pew report, stated:

The public stood by Clinton through each chapter of the saga: his grand jury testimony, his admission of lying, the revelations of the Starr report, and ultimately the Republican vote to impeach him. He ended the year with a 71% approval rating. His party actually picked up eight seats in the House of Representatives – an unusual occurrence for a second-term president, let alone one about to be impeached. It is inconceivable to think that public opinion could have had such an impact in an era prior to the emergence of the media polls.¹³¹

Though difficult to measure, several studies have indicated that public opinion affects public and social policy. In America, Page and Shapiro found congruence between changes in preferences and in policy, stating that ‘public opinion is often a proximate cause of policy, affecting policy more than policy influences opinion’.¹³² However, Page also notes, ‘when opinion and policy correspond, it is extremely difficult to sort out whether public opinion has influenced policy, or policy has influenced opinion, or there has been some mixture of reciprocal processes; or, indeed, whether an outside factor, by affecting both, has produced a spurious relationship’.¹³³

Polling – Failures and Successes

With so many factors influencing voting intentions, the media, politicians and pollsters often have great difficulty forecasting election results. Analysis of polls following elections often suggest numerous and multifaceted reasons for over- or under-estimating voting intentions. However, there have been certain elections that have been referred to as ‘polling disasters’ due to the inability of polling organisations to indicate election results.

United States

Perhaps the most famous of all ‘polling disasters’ was the US 1948 presidential election, the result of which surprised and embarrassed polling groups, journalists and

¹²⁹ D. Ignatius & M. Getler (1986) ‘Reagan’s Foreign Policy: Where’s the Rest of It?’, *Washington Post*, 16 November.

¹³⁰ Kohut (2009) op. cit.; P. Lavrakos & J. Holley (Eds) *Polling and Presidential Election Coverage*, Newbury Park, Sage Publications.

¹³¹ Kohut (2009) op. cit.

¹³² B. Page & R. Shapiro (1983) ‘Effects of Public Opinion on Policy’, *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 77, iss. 1, pp. 175-189.

¹³³ B. Page (1994) ‘Democratic Responsiveness? Untangling the Links Between Public Opinion and Policy’, *Political Science and Politics*, March, vol. xxvii, iss. 1, pp. 25-29.

newspapers. Polling groups and newspapers were so convinced that Republican candidate, Thomas E. Dewey, would defeat incumbent President Harry S. Truman that early editions of newspapers had already been printed with headlines announcing Dewey's victory.¹³⁴ Stephen Mills, in his account of this polling disaster cites the famous election-night photograph (see below) of the winner of that election, Harry S. Truman, holding a *Chicago Daily Tribune* with its front page headline declaring 'Dewey Defeats Truman'.¹³⁵

Fig. 1: 'Dewey Defeats Truman' 1948



Source: Chicago Tribune.

United Kingdom

Similarly, in the 1970 UK general election three out of four opinion polls indicated a clear Labour victory, but failed to detect a late swing to the Conservatives, which won the election by three percentage points.¹³⁶ Nonetheless, the UK general election of 1992 is regarded as the worst polling disaster in the history of polling in the UK, where over 50 polls were conducted and errors were 'far in excess of expected sampling variation'.¹³⁷ Four polls published on the morning of the election were significantly out in their indications, with average support for the Conservatives indicated at 38 per cent (actual result was 42 per cent), Labour at 39 per cent (34 per cent actual) and the Liberal Democrats at 19 per cent (18 per cent actual).¹³⁸

The 1992 UK experience led to a two year inquiry by the Market Research Society of Great Britain, which found four factors had contributed to the under-estimation of the Conservative vote: Conservative voters were 'more reluctant to be interviewed or to say how they would vote than Labour voters'; the sample of people chosen for interview were 'skewed too much towards traditional Labour voters'; Labour voters failed to go to the polls; and, there was a late swing to the Conservatives.¹³⁹

¹³⁴ Mills (1986) op. cit., pp. 68-69.

¹³⁵ *ibid.*

¹³⁶ I. Crewe (1997) 'The Opinion Polls: Confidence Restored?', *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol. 50, iss. 4, pp. 569-585.

¹³⁷ T. M. F. Smith (1996) 'Public Opinion Polls: the UK General Election, 1992', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, Series A (Statistics in Society), vol. 159, Part 3, pp. 535-545; Crewe (1997) op. cit.

¹³⁸ R. Bell (1997) *Polls Apart: The 1997 UK Election: Accuracy of Predictions*, Research Note 48 1996-97, Canberra, Parliamentary Library, Parliament of Australia; R. M. Worcester (1995) 'Lessons from the electorate: what the 1992 British General Election taught British pollsters about the conduct of opinion polls', *International Social Science Journal*, vol. 47, iss. 4, December, pp. 539-52; and Curtice, J. 'What future for the opinion polls? the lessons of the MRS Inquiry' (1996) in M. Thrasher, D. Farrell, D. Denver & D. Broughton (1996) (eds) *British Elections and Parties Yearbook 1995*, London, Frank Cass, pp. 139-156.

¹³⁹ Bell (1997) op. cit. See also Moon (1999) op. cit, p. 128.

The many and divergent reasons proffered as the cause of this polling ‘disaster’ does underscore the limitations and challenges which polling groups inevitably face in indicating election results. Indeed, Rosemary Bell from the Australian Commonwealth Parliamentary Library notes that the 1992 UK experience led the main polling companies to make significant changes to the way they conduct their polls. Three companies (MORI, NOP and Harris) decided to stick with quota sampling, but to seek more representative samples, while some other companies decided to ask respondents how they had voted previously.¹⁴⁰ Gallup and ICM partly or wholly switched from quota to random sampling and now interview over the telephone rather than face-to-face.¹⁴¹

Australia

Australia’s most commonly cited ‘polling disaster’ occurred in the 1980 federal election, when public opinion polls ‘committed the ultimate sin of indicating the wrong winner’.¹⁴² Polls had consistently shown the ALP ahead of the Coalition, yet Malcolm Fraser won his third general election in a row. While the polls indicated the wrong winner, David Butler reminds us that this error needs to be kept in perspective, noting that the Morgan poll suggested a 51 to 49 division in favour of Labor, which was only 1.4 per cent from the actual result.

Furthermore, in the 1950s and 1960s when the Morgan poll ‘acquired its enviable reputation for accuracy’ the Morgan poll’s indications had an error of over three per cent for four elections in a row. Butler also stated that the worst poll indication in 1983 came from the Irving Saulwick’s *Age* poll, which had had the best record of accuracy through the 1970s. Butler writes that most of these polls were based on interviews that were taken a week prior to the election.¹⁴³ He notes that ‘the polls themselves may have had a significant impact’, stating:

As the forecasts of a Labor victory struck home, there may well have been some swing back to the Liberals by cautious voters who did not wish to risk a change in government. In Britain there has been good reason to suppose that the polls have had a self-falsifying quality in recent elections, with a significant number of people switching their vote in order to cut down on the majority of the party which the polls show to be ahead. It is plausible that this also happened in Australia in 1980.¹⁴⁴

Butler states that the 1980 election may be remembered for the impact of the polls as much as for their error. He states:

The fact that the polls got the 1980 result wrong will not mean that they are abandoned next time... Australian polls are unlikely to be damaged by this disaster

¹⁴⁰ Bell (1997) op. cit.

¹⁴¹ *ibid.*

¹⁴² D. Butler ‘Introduction’ in Penniman (1983) op. cit., p. 4.

¹⁴³ *ibid.* Dr Denis Muller, who worked with Irving Saulwick on the Saulwick Poll from 1984 to 1993, stated that one of the factors in 1980 was that polls were conducted face-to-face, which was labour-intensive. Some polls were done over the last two weekends before polling day, meaning that half the data was two weeks old by the time the results were published. Dr Muller noted that during the 1987, 1990 and 1993 federal election campaigns, the Saulwick *Age* Poll conducted its last pre-election poll between 6pm and 9pm on the eve of the election, with the results in *The Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* the next morning, providing greater accuracy in part because they were taken so close to the election. Personal communication with Dr Denis Muller, 6 June 2011.

¹⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p. 5.

any more than the American polls were damaged by an even greater disaster in 1948. The simple fact is that there is nowhere else to turn.¹⁴⁵

Butler concluded that, 'Nowhere in the world has a debacle for the polls diminished their use in subsequent elections'.¹⁴⁶

Many commentators have been more interested in discussing opinion polling disasters, perhaps because the factors that can contribute to their imprecision are numerous, some of which offer fascinating insights into individual and group psychology. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that opinion polling and survey research has made significant improvements since its beginnings and many opinion polls have offered remarkable accuracy, notwithstanding the limiting circumstances in which they are conducted. For example, in the lead up to the Victorian state election, the main opinion polling groups indicated a late swing to the Coalition and all the main polling groups had a high level of accuracy, all being within 1.6 per cent of the actual election result, well within the sampling margin of error.¹⁴⁷ Table 1, below, shows the results of two-party preferred polling undertaken by four polls in the final days before the 2010 Victorian state election, with the final row showing the actual election result.

Table 1: 2010 State Election – Victoria: Two-Party Preferred as predicted by major polling organisations

Polling organisation, date, source	ALP	Liberal/Nationals Coalition
Newspoll, 23-25 Nov, <i>The Australian</i> ¹⁴⁸	48.9	51.1
Age/Nielsen, 24-25 Nov, <i>The Age</i> ¹⁴⁹	48	52
Roy Morgan, 22-25 Nov ¹⁵⁰	49	51
Galaxy, 23-24 Nov, <i>Herald Sun</i> ¹⁵¹	50	50
Actual result	48.4	51.6

Source: Lesman, Macreadie & Gardiner (2011)

Journalists and Polls

Most people hear and receive information on the results of surveys and polls through news reports, either via print or electronic media. In whatever form of media, journalists play an important role in reporting and interpreting the information contained in polls to the public, and are thus in a relatively powerful position. These news reports may inform the public of approval ratings of political leaders, or on other social issues, such as what the public thinks about crime in society, or

¹⁴⁵ Butler (1983) op. cit., p. 5.

¹⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁴⁷ See B. Lesman, R. Macreadie & G. Gardiner (2011) The 2010 Victorian State Election, *Research Paper*, No. 1, Melbourne, Parliamentary Library Research Service, Parliament of Victoria.

¹⁴⁸ The Newspoll poll was conducted on Tuesday 23rd to Thursday 25th of November from a sample of 1451. See M. Rout (2010) 'Hung parliament looms as Baillieu gets his nose in front on election eve', *The Australian*, 27 November, pp. 1, 4.

¹⁴⁹ The Age/Nielsen Poll conducted by telephone, interviewed 1533 voters. Maximum margin of sampling error is approximately 1.7 per cent. See P. Austin (2010) 'Late surge to Liberals', *The Age*, 27 November, pp. 1, 4.

¹⁵⁰ 990 voters. Roy Morgan Research (2010) 'Baillieu set to win a close Victorian Election with late surge', *Finding No. 4607*, 26 November, Roy Morgan Research.

¹⁵¹ Galaxy Poll of 800 voters state-wide. Maximum margin of error, plus or minus, 3.5 per cent. See S. McMahon (2010) 'Poll says it's Labor – by a whisker', *Herald Sun*, 26 November, p. 4.

unemployment. Reports of this nature not only inform the public, and potentially influence the agenda of politicians, they also influence the agenda setting of newspapers and media outlets themselves, which can use polls to gauge the issues that are important to the public, and thus help sell the newspapers or media source.¹⁵²

Opinion polls that are reported publicly are predominately commissioned or sponsored by newspapers and other media sources. As mentioned earlier, newspaper polling has been traced back to the 1820s.¹⁵³ Polls have been used by journalists for market research and to provide the basis for news stories.¹⁵⁴ As noted by Sheldon Gawiser and G. Evans Witt, the use of poll data in journalism is, however, controversial. Some commentators argue that journalists have used polls to shape news coverage, a practice that is compared to politicians adjusting their stances to fit public opinion.¹⁵⁵ Leigh and Wolfer argue that the media needs to display caution in interpreting changes from one poll to the next, noting, 'Journalists who write about changes in poll movements without discussing the margin of error may well be guilty of misleading their readers'.¹⁵⁶ Leigh and Wolfer also argue for less poll dominated journalism overall, stating that would be a boon to Australian election commentary, creating space for more substantive discussion of policies.¹⁵⁷

As noted in the above section, organisations that oversee the reporting of polls encourage journalists to recognise the limitations of polls and to include details of the methodology used in obtaining survey results and the poll's margin of error. Gawiser and Witt have produced a comprehensive guide for journalists to assist them in assessing a poll's merits, including 20 questions that a journalist should ask to help them decide how to report on poll results, which include: who did the poll?; who paid for the poll and why was it done?; how many people were interviewed for the survey?; how were those people chosen?; what area or what group were these people chosen from?; are the results based on the answers of all the people interviewed?; who should have been interviewed and was not? or do response rates matter?; when was the poll done?; how were the interviews conducted?; what is the sampling error for the poll results?; what other kinds of factors can skew poll results?; what questions were asked?; and, in what order were the questions asked?¹⁵⁸

¹⁵² S. Gawiser & G. E. Witt (1994) *A Journalist's Guide to Public Opinion Polls*, Westport, Conn., Praeger.

¹⁵³ J. Fenton (1960) *In Your Opinion*, Boston, Little, Brown, and Co., p. 7; C. Robinson (1932) *Straw Votes*, New York, Columbia University Press. See also I. Crespi (1980) 'Polls as Journalism', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 44, pp. 462-476.

¹⁵⁴ Gawiser & Witt (1994) op. cit.

¹⁵⁵ *ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁵⁶ Leigh & Wolfer (2005) op. cit., pp. 20, 22. See also Kay (1997) op. cit., p. 23; Tiffen (2010) op. cit., pp. 1-8.

¹⁵⁷ Leigh & Wolfer (2005) op. cit., p. 22.

¹⁵⁸ S. Gawiser & G. E. Witt '20 questions a journalist should ask about poll results', (3rd Ed.) NCPP, viewed 23 September 2010, <http://www.ncpp.org/files/20%20Questions%203rd%20edition_Web%20ver_2006.pdf>.

6. Other Polls – Exit Polls, Focus Groups and Push Polling

Exit Polling

An exit poll refers to an opinion poll taken immediately after voters have exited the election polling station. Exit polls have been used in some jurisdictions as a safeguard against election fraud and corruption, in offering another set of results, which are expected to closely resemble the final election results.

The publishing of exit polls has been criticised in some jurisdictions, such as in the United States, where results of exit polls on the east coast have been reported before election polling stations have closed for voting on the west coast, which may influence voting behaviour and thus the result. In New Zealand and Singapore exit polls are banned. It is a criminal offence to release exit poll figures before polling stations have closed in some countries, such as in the United Kingdom and Germany. In Victoria, the publication of exit poll information during the hours of voting is banned under section 155 of the *Electoral Act 2002*.

While it might be assumed that exit polls should bear a close resemblance to election poll outcomes, exit polls still face a number of constraints and limitations, particularly as many voters have been reluctant to disclose their voting behaviour, even post-voting. A particularly revealing example of this phenomenon was evident in the 1992 UK general election, referred to above. Two exit polls indicated a hung parliament, however, as mentioned, the actual result saw the Conservative Party retain government. In reference to the 1992 UK election, Robert Harris noted in the *Sunday Times*: ‘I have reached the reluctant conclusion that ours is a nation of liars. People lied about their intentions up to the moment of voting, and went on lying even as they left the polling station’.¹⁵⁹ As Moon notes, if people had lied to the pollsters about the 1992 UK election, it would be virtually impossible to detect this as they would most likely lie at recall interviews.¹⁶⁰

For British statistician T. M. F. Smith, the 1992 ‘statistical disaster’ can only be explained by biases ‘specific to the context of the 1992 election’ since previous election results had provided greater accuracy.¹⁶¹ Nonetheless, elections are often held in unique contexts and all analyses of polls, including exit polls, or elections, for that matter, have to be retrospective. Indeed, Mitchell notes that in order to fully explain all the many factors that influence expressed political opinion and electoral behaviour ‘one would require several volumes of text and consideration of many examples, not only of previous elections but also of future elections’.¹⁶²

Private Polling - Focus Groups

While opinion polling can be used to gauge how many people will vote in a certain way, focus groups are intended to draw out the reasons, thought processes and motivations behind *why* people vote in a certain way. Focus groups have been used since the 1940s by companies testing products, advertising slogans and target audiences to understand not only their position commercially but also how to improve

¹⁵⁹ R. Harris (1992) ‘We are a nation of liars’, *Sunday Times*, 12 April.

¹⁶⁰ Moon (1999) op. cit., p. 128.

¹⁶¹ See T. M. F. Smith (1996) op. cit., pp. 535-545.

¹⁶² Mitchell (1992) op. cit., p. 4.

their image and accessibility. Many scholars have reported that there is a growing trend of political parties moving away from a ‘product-oriented approach’, that is, a political product based on ideology, to a ‘consumer-orientated attitude’.¹⁶³ A principle distinction between opinion polling and focus groups is that the latter tend to be conducted privately and the results are not publicly available. The methodologies used in focus group research also differ to those used in opinion polling.

In recent decades, Australian political parties have used focus groups, not only to ascertain voter sentiment, but also to develop and test key messages, policies and slogans. Stephen Mills notes that ‘political candidates need to know not just the state of public opinion but how to respond to it, how to exploit it, how, sometimes, to manipulate it’.¹⁶⁴ The use of ‘strategic pollsters’ by political parties was already well established in the 1970s, as Mills identifies in a chapter devoted largely to Rod Cameron, who was Labor’s chief pollster from 1972, and George Camakaris, who conducted research for the Liberal Party since 1973.¹⁶⁵

Writing in 1986, Mills wrote that ‘discussion groups’, as focus groups were formerly referred to, sidestep many of the issues of quantitative research as they capitalise ‘on the inevitability of human intervention’ since strategic researchers, serving political candidates, ‘do not seek to be impartial scorekeepers’.¹⁶⁶ While quantitative polls are usually published, focus group results are often kept private with moderators acting as ‘partisan problem solvers’ with the ‘aim to provide the candidate with strategic advice’.¹⁶⁷ Mill noted, ‘Instead of being the scorekeeper, [focus group researchers] have become involved in the game; indeed, they sit in the coach’s box’.¹⁶⁸

On the influence of focus groups, former US President Bill Clinton reportedly said, ‘There is no one more powerful today than the member of a focus group. If you really want to change things and you want to get listened to, that’s the place to be’.¹⁶⁹ Nonetheless, Thomas Greenbaum identifies that focus groups can be used incorrectly and in ways that do not accomplish research objectives, such as where they are used as a ‘cheap alternative’ to quantitative research and where they are used to produce data that they are not intended to generate.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶³ M. Phipps, J. Brace-Govan & C. Jevons (2010) ‘The Duality of Political Brand Equity’, *European Journal of Marketing*, vol. 44, no. 3/4, pp. 496-514, p. 498; P. Reeves, L. Chernatony & M. Carrigan (2006) ‘Building a Political Brand: Ideology or Voter Drives Strategy’, *Journal of Brand Management*, vol. 13, no. 6, pp. 418-428; P. Baines, P. Harris & B. Lewis (2002) ‘The Political Marketing Planning Process: Improving Image and Message in Strategic Target Areas’, *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, vol. 20, no. 1, pp. 6-14.

¹⁶⁴ Mills (1986) op. cit., p. 78.

¹⁶⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 18-42. More recently, UMR has been the primary pollster for the ALP, while Crosby/Textor conducts research for the Liberal Party. See UMR (2008) ‘Successful and Experienced Political Opinion and Strategy Company’, viewed 23 September 2010, <<http://umresearch.com.au/16.html>>; Crosby/Textor (2007) ‘Our record: the lessons of politics and political campaigns’, viewed 23 September 2010, <http://www.crosbytextor.com/About_Record.htm>.

¹⁶⁶ Mills (1986) op. cit., p. 77.

¹⁶⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ *ibid.* See also D. Kavanagh (1995) *Election Campaigning: The New Marketing of Politics*, Oxford, Blackwell.

¹⁶⁹ D. Mattinson (2010) ‘The power of the focus group’, *Total Politics*, 20 August, viewed 17 May 2011, <<http://www.totalpolitics.com/email/life/5183/the-power-of-the-focus-group.thtml>>.

¹⁷⁰ See Greenbaum (1998) op. cit.

Political commentators, such as Michelle Grattan and George Megalogenis, have been critical of the use of focus groups, arguing that relying too heavily on focus groups affects party leadership, values and ideologies.¹⁷¹ Marketing Professor Pascale Quester from the University of Adelaide stated: ‘the use of focus groups in politics is actually the death of the conviction politician’ and that reliance on focus groups to devise strategies means politicians ‘have no ideas of their own, no ideology of their own, no underlying principles’.¹⁷² Numerous articles, including several editorial pieces, have featured in Australian broadsheets expressing criticism of political groups’ dependence on focus groups and market research.¹⁷³

However, focus groups have been useful in helping candidates decide whether to run, what issues are important to the electorate, to assess their image, to identify key subgroup breakdowns of likely supporters, inform resource allocation (where to advertise) and to measure the progress of a campaign.¹⁷⁴ In the wake of the criticism following the 2010 Australian federal election, several market researchers defended the use of such groups arguing that they had the potential to provide useful analysis on how campaigns were being received by electorates. Simon Webb, the research director for Parker & Partners, a bipartisan public affairs firm, noted that the criticism directed towards focus groups is undeserved. He said that policymakers are increasingly short of time and separated from the community at large and that focus groups provide a way for political leaders to engage with the community ‘without having that conversation hijacked by vocal minority interests or by the media’.¹⁷⁵ For Webb, focus groups provide an understanding about what is on the public mind but these groups should not be used to set the policy agenda. He called for better use of focus groups to prevent problems, such as reading a group too literally, asking the wrong questions and/or not delving deeply enough into the issue at hand.¹⁷⁶

Push Polling

‘Push polling’ is a term used to describe an election technique by which a poll appears to be taken and participants are asked to participate in a survey in which the questions are, as the British Polling Council notes, ‘thinly-veiled accusations against an

¹⁷¹ M. Grattan (2010) ‘Poll-driven Labor urged to return to basic values’, *The Age*, 3 November, viewed 17 May 2011, <<http://www.theage.com.au/national/poll-driven-labor-urged-to-return-to-basic-values-20101102-17ce7.html>>; M. Grattan (2011) ‘No laughing matter’, *The Age*, 31 March, p. 19; G. Megalogenis (2010) ‘Trivial Pursuit: Leadership and the End of the Reform Era’, *Quarterly Essay*, vol. 40, November, pp. 1- 83; T. Soutphommasane (2011) ‘Too many politicians, not enough leaders’, *The Australian*, 26 February, p. 12.

¹⁷² McGuire (2010) op. cit.

¹⁷³ See *The Age* (2010) ‘No shortage of ideas for leaders’, *The Age*, 29 July, viewed 17 May 2011, <<http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/editorial/no-shortage-of-ideas-for-leaders-20100728-10vwj.html>>; *Sydney Morning Herald* (2010) ‘Another poll? Activate fearful focus bunnies’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 August, viewed 17 May 2011, <<http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/politics/another-poll-activate-fearful-focus-bunnies-20100828-13x1b.html>>; *The Australian* (2010) ‘Forget the focus groups, just eyeball the voters’, *The Australian*, 28 December, viewed 17 May 2011, <<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/opinion/forget-the-focus-groups-just-eyeball-the-voters/story-e6frg71x-1225976813031>>.

¹⁷⁴ B. Altschuler (1982) *Keeping a Finger on the Public Pulse: Private Polling and Presidential Elections*, Westport and London, Greenwood Press, pp. 168-188.

¹⁷⁵ S. Webb (2010) ‘Everyone wins when more focus groups are used’, *The Age*, 27 August, viewed 17 May 2011, <<http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/society-and-culture/everyone-wins-when-more-focus-groups-are-used-20100826-13u39.html?comments=17>>.

¹⁷⁶ *ibid.*

opponent'.¹⁷⁷ Push polling and opinion polling should not be conflated. The British Polling Council state:

The purpose of “push polls” is to spread rumours and even outright lies about opponents. These efforts are not polls, but political manipulation trying to hide behind the smokescreen of a public opinion survey... The focus here is on making certain the respondent hears and understands the accusation in the question, not in gathering the respondent’s opinions. “Push polls” have no connection with genuine opinion surveys.¹⁷⁸

Kathy Frankovic, Director of Surveys for CBS News states, ‘... a push poll isn’t a poll at all. A push poll is political telemarketing masquerading as a poll’.¹⁷⁹ Notable examples include the 2000 United States Republican Party primaries, where it was alleged that George W. Bush’s campaign used push polling to influence the campaign of John McCain. Voters in South Carolina were reportedly asked, ‘Would you be more likely or less likely to vote for John McCain for president if you knew he had fathered an illegitimate black child?’ While the poll’s allegation were untrue (McCain and his wife had adopted a child from Bangladesh), the question was intended to garner support for Bush from voters in the South, particularly the religious right.¹⁸⁰

There have also been examples of push polling in elections in Australia. George Williams cites an example from the Northern Territory in which the Opposition alleged that a poll was taken two days before the 1995 territory election in which voters were asked if they would change their votes if they knew certain ‘facts’ about the Opposition, such as that if the Opposition were elected they would ‘introduce two sets of laws – one for blacks and another for whites’.¹⁸¹ Williams stated:

When undertaken at the close of a campaign, perhaps within 48 hours of voting, push polling can have a devastating effect. The planting of a seed of doubt about the integrity of a candidate, particularly when the information is given a veneer of authenticity by its inclusion in a supposedly independent poll, can be highly effective in swinging a person’s vote from one candidate to another.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁷ British Polling Council (date not given) A Journalist’s Guide to Opinion Polls, viewed 14 July 2010, < <http://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/questions.html> >.

¹⁷⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ K. Frankovic (2000) ‘The truth about push polls’, New York, *CBS News*, viewed 28 June 2010, < <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2000/02/14/politics/main160398.shtml> >.

¹⁸⁰ C. Cillizza (2010) ‘The five nastiest South Carolina races ever’, *Washington Post*, 10 June, viewed 28 June 2010, < <http://voices.washingtonpost.com/thefix/governors/the-five-nastiest-south-caroli.html> >; B. Knowlton (2000) ‘Republican says Bush panders to the ‘agents of intolerance’: McCain takes aim at religious right’, *The New York Times*, 29 February, viewed 16 May 2011, < http://www.nytimes.com/2000/02/29/news/29iht-bush.2.t_9.html >.

¹⁸¹ See G. Williams (1997) *Push Polling in Australia: Options for Regulation*, Research Note 36 1996-97, Parliamentary Library, Canberra, Parliament of Australia.

¹⁸² *ibid.*

7. Further Developments in Measuring Public Opinion

Social Networking

Other developments in technology, communication, social networking and market research are influencing the development of public opinion polling and the forecasting of elections. For example, in Japan and the United Kingdom, polling groups are now analysing ‘Tweets’ on social networking site Twitter to examine how social media influences public opinion. In the 2009 Japan general election, a study by software engineers and PhD graduates from Tokyo University found that in the majority of constituencies, the most mentioned candidate in Tweets was successful in winning the seat.¹⁸³ Japan’s cabinet banned candidates from using Twitter in their election campaign, citing the Public Officers Election Law which prohibits online campaigning.¹⁸⁴ Politicians are permitted to have personal web sites but are prohibited from updating them during an election campaign.¹⁸⁵

Following the Japan study, UK polling group Tweetminster has begun to use data on Twitter to understand public opinion and whether there are correlations between word-of-mouth on social media and election results.¹⁸⁶ The rise of blogs and other social networking and media sites have given politicians more material with which to discern the public mood and public opinion. Research into the effect of social networking media on public opinion and the political process is currently being undertaken by governments, academics, lobby groups and market research groups.

Media Monitors Group communications manager, Patrick Baume, has argued that social media is a better qualitative tool than any focus groups.¹⁸⁷ Baume states that there are significant limitations in the methods used in focus groups, since it is very easy to get the answer you want to hear from a focus group. He notes that social/participatory media, such as talkback radio, letters to the editor, blogs and social networking websites are already ‘a massive focus group, providing constant qualitative and quantitative feedback on the issues of the day and what messages are cutting through... which issues are connecting with people and which aren’t’.¹⁸⁸

Self-Selecting Samples

Newspapers, internet sites and other media outlets often conduct ‘instant’ polls based on viewer or reader feedback. These polls usually consist of self-selected respondents since they require consumers of certain media to respond to the news source or internet survey. An example is a news report on *The Age* website which allows viewers to vote and register their opinion on the content of the article. *The Age* website offers the disclaimer that the poll results are ‘not scientific and reflect the

¹⁸³ Market Research Industry Online (2010) ‘UK Election: Do Tweets Spell Success?’, *news release*, Market Research Industry, 31 March.

¹⁸⁴ A. Slodkowski (2009) ‘Politicians tap Twitter to tweak profiles’, *The Japan Times*, 29 July, viewed 16 May 2011, <<http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20090729f1.html>>.

¹⁸⁵ See C. Masters (2009) ‘Japan’s Twitter-Free Election Campaign’, *Time Magazine*, 18 August, viewed 16 May 2011, <<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1917137,00.html>>.

¹⁸⁶ Market Research Industry Online (2010) *op. cit.*

¹⁸⁷ P. Baume (2011) ‘Broadly speaking, the answer’s in the ether’, *The Australian*, 7 March, p. 27.

¹⁸⁸ *ibid.*

opinion only of visitors who have chosen to participate'.¹⁸⁹ Thus, self-selected surveys are non-probability samples (and in this sense are similar to the traditional non-probability straw poll). Stephen Stockwell states that self-selected respondents are 'consumers of that particular medium, they are motivated by the issue and they may even be making multiple calls at the behest of a campaign – so the outcome of these polls have no claim to represent the actual state of public opinion'.¹⁹⁰

Internet Polling

It is often assumed that an advantage to computer surveys is that they may eliminate interviewer bias and be more able to capture the views of those who are reluctant to express them in telephone or face-to-face interviews.¹⁹¹ This is based on the idea that people are more 'honest' towards computers than to humans, an idea challenged in a recent study that examined human-computer interaction, which found that participants were 'polite' to computers as well.¹⁹²

YouGov, which is a research and consulting organisation in the UK that uses the internet to collect market research data on political opinion, has been quite successful in indicating election results, such as in the 2001 and 2005 UK general elections, and the 2008 London mayoral elections. As with telephone polling, not everyone has access to the internet, therefore YouGov has a representative panel which they use to weigh their polls and surveys to reflect the national audience. During the 2008 London mayoral elections, YouGov was criticised by incumbent mayor, Ken Livingstone, after a YouGov poll placed contender Boris Johnson 13 points ahead of Livingstone.¹⁹³ Livingstone argued that the poll was flawed and was an attempt by the *Evening Standard* and YouGov to give Boris Johnson a more credible lead.¹⁹⁴ A later YouGov poll had Johnson, who eventually won the election, leading by 6 points.¹⁹⁵

Tracking Real-Time Audience Responses to Debates

Advances in technologies have recently allowed for public opinion to be tracked and monitored instantaneously in response to leadership debates. Television channels broadcasting leadership debates, such as Channel Seven and Channel Nine, have used polling groups and technology consultants to track real-time audience responses to debates. Channel Seven uses the Roy Morgan Reactor technology in their PolliGraph. In measuring audience responses to the Henry Tax Review debate in May 2010 in the lead up to the 2010 federal election, Roy Morgan sourced participants for their studio audience who had previously been interviewed by Roy Morgan Research as part of a

¹⁸⁹ See *The Age* (2010) 'Federal Election Poll: In Limbo', 24 August (poll closed 26 August 2010) *The Age*, viewed 26 August 2010, <<http://www.theage.com.au/polls/federal-election/unity-government/20100824-13kli.html>>.

¹⁹⁰ Stockwell (2005) op. cit., p. 92; D. Johnson (2002) 'Elections and Public Polling: Will the Media Get Online Polling Right?', *Psychology & Marketing*, vol. 19, no. 12, pp. 1009-1023.

¹⁹¹ D. Finkelstein (2008) op. cit.

¹⁹² C. Nass, Y. Moon & P. Carney (1999) 'Are People Polite to Computers? Responses to Computer-Based Interviewing Systems', *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, vol. 29, iss. 5, pp. 1093-1109.

¹⁹³ Market Research Industry Online (2008) 'Mayor Blames YouGov 'Flaws' for Poll Slump', *news release*, Market Research Industry, 7 April.

¹⁹⁴ See R. Ryan (2008) 'Mayor makes complaint against YouGov over polling', *The Guardian*, 7 April, viewed 16 May 2011, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2008/apr/07/livingstone.boris1>>.

¹⁹⁵ Market Research Industry Online (2008) 'Boris and YouGov Triumphant', *news release*, article no. 8311, Market Research Industry, 6 May, viewed 16 May 2011, <<http://www.mrweb.com/dmno/news8311.htm>>.

‘statistically representative sample’.¹⁹⁶ The audience consisted of Sydney electors, half of which were ALP aligned and half Coalition aligned. Roy Morgan used their Reactor Online application which captures data four times per second to track audience response.¹⁹⁷

In another federal election debate, the health debate held in March 2010, Channel Nine used ‘The Worm’ to track real-time audience responses. Nine used market research firm Ekas to source an online panel which selected self-identified undecided voters to operate the ‘worm handsets’. IML Australia provided the technology to monitor audience responses. The worm tracks the opinion of voters by giving audience members electronic handsets with voting buttons on which they register approval/disapproval or neutral feelings through the debates. The information of each audience member is collated and displayed instantly on-screen. The BBC’s Nick Bryant comments that the worm:

...prefers nice to nasty. It responds well to personal anecdotes and stories. It heads in an upward trajectory when it hears words and phrases like ‘fairness’ and ‘working together,’ and does not much like ‘tax’ or personal insults.¹⁹⁸

The worm is useful in allowing political parties to pinpoint phrases and words that are particularly successful in connecting with voters, to gauge the popularity of speeches and to identify moment-by-moment opinion shifts. IML also allows for voters to be grouped by age, sex and region to enable the simultaneous tracking of multiple demographics.¹⁹⁹ Seven used PolliGraph to track the March health debate, however both Seven and Nine’s tracking systems produced different results which may be attributed to different audiences (Nine used ‘undecided voters’, while Seven used a partisan weighted cross section of all voters) and the different technologies used (Seven (Morgan Reactor) uses a handset with a dial while Nine (IML) uses button technology).²⁰⁰

In the past there has been some controversy over Nine’s use of the ‘worm’. In a leadership debate in October 2007, Nine had their feed of the live debate pulled by the National Press Club after reportedly breaching an agreement with the political parties by which the worm would not be used. Channel Nine argued that it was blatant political censorship, while representatives from the National Press Club stated that the

¹⁹⁶ Roy Morgan Research (2010) ‘PolliGraph dissects Kevin Rudd’s and Tony Abbott’s response to the Henry Tax Review’, Finding No. 4488, 3 May, Roy Morgan Research, viewed 16 May 2011, <<http://www.roymorgan.com/news/polls/2010/4488/>>.

¹⁹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁹⁸ N. Bryant (2010) ‘Televised election debates: Lessons from Down Under’, *BBC News*, 13 April, viewed 16 May 2011, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/election_2010/8615126.stm>.

¹⁹⁹ IML UK (2010) ‘IML supports the live leaders’ debates’, *media release*, 16 April, viewed 16 May 2011, <http://www.imlaudience.com.au/news_and_events/news_at_iml/leaders_debates.aspx>;

IML Australia (2010) ‘The Worm – IML’s on-screen opinion tracker’, viewed 11 October 2010, <<http://www.imlaudience.com.au/products/the-worm/the-worm.html>>.

²⁰⁰ See Possum Comitatus (2010) ‘When the Worms Turn – The inside info on audience response’, *Pollyticks, Crikey*, 24 March, viewed 8 July 2010, <<http://blogs.crikey.com.au/pollytics/2010/03/24/when-the-worms-turn-%E2%80%93-the-inside-info-on-audience-response/>>.

Parties set the terms and conditions of the debate.²⁰¹ The worm in this instance was controlled by 90 ‘uncommitted’ voters watching the debate from Nine’s studio in Sydney.²⁰²

Election Betting Markets

Another method of forecasting election results is through betting markets, by which people place money on the candidate they believe will win the election, or on what the winning margins will be. Betting can be conducted on which party will form government or on individual candidates, which may provide more detail on the forecasted outcome for specific seats, than may otherwise be gathered by polling groups.²⁰³

Some betting markets have proved to be remarkably accurate, and are increasingly studied, alongside opinion polls, by politicians, researchers and political scientists in the lead-up to elections.²⁰⁴ The 1988 US presidential election, in which Republican George H. W. Bush defeated Democrat Michael Dukakis, was the first time election markets were used by researchers to indicate results.²⁰⁵ The betting odds are most often set by the bookmakers themselves, in which case bookmakers may analyse particular information sets in deciding betting odds.²⁰⁶ Bookmakers may also adjust prices according to risks. Betting odds can also be set through punters betting against each other.²⁰⁷

In Australia, election betting has been cited as the biggest growth area for betting markets with most bookies now accepting election bets.²⁰⁸ With regard to betting on politics in the state of Victoria, in February 2010 the Victorian Commission for Gambling Regulation’s executive commissioner, Peter Cohen, extended the scope of gambling in Victoria by approving betting on state elections after the commission was satisfied that there were ‘no unmanageable integrity risks in Australian state

²⁰¹ See L. Millar (2007) ‘Channel Nine breached worm agreement: Press Club’, *ABC AM*, radio transcript, 22 October, viewed 8 July 2010, <<http://www.abc.net.au/am/content/2007/s2065591.htm>>.

²⁰² See D. Cooke (2007) ‘Worm to wriggle on Nine’, *The Age*, 18 October, viewed 16 May 2011, <<http://www.theage.com.au/news/federalection2007news/worm-to-wriggle-on-nine/2007/10/18/1192300927606.html>>.

²⁰³ Centrebet (2008) Australian Federal Election Betting, 17 June, viewed 10 May 2011, <<http://www.centrebet.com/australian-federal-election>>; Sydney Morning Herald (2010) Plunge on August 21 poll, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 July, viewed 10 May 2011, <<http://news.smh.com.au/breaking-news-national/plunge-on-august-21-poll-20100715-10bzy.html>>.

²⁰⁴ J. Berg et al (2001) ‘Results from a Dozen Years of Election Futures Markets Research’ in C. Plott & V. Smith (eds) *Handbook of Experimental Economic Results*, Amsterdam, Elsevier; A. Leigh (2004) ‘Bookies are a better bet than pollsters’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 September, p. 17.

²⁰⁵ S. G. Kou & M. E. Sobel (2004) ‘Forecasting the Vote: A Theoretical Comparison of Election Markets and Public Opinion Polls’, *Political Analysis*, vol. 12, no. 3, pp. 277-295, p. 278.

²⁰⁶ *ibid.*, p. 279.

²⁰⁷ See D. Nason & L. Vasek (2010) ‘Punters reckon on hung parliament’, *The Australian*, 21 August, viewed 10 May 2011, <<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/punters-reckon-on-hung-parliament/story-fn59niix-1225907978025>>.

²⁰⁸ With Sportsbet and Centrebet the two main betting agencies. E. Lutton (2010) ‘Betting scandal: Party loyalty runs second for gambling insiders’, 1 August, *Brisbane Times*, viewed 10 May 2010, <<http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/federal-election/betting-scandal-party-loyalty-runs-second-for-gambling-insiders-20100731-110e9.html>>.

elections'.²⁰⁹ Prior to this, Victorians were able to legally bet on Australian federal elections and the US presidential elections.

The growth in election betting markets has also resulted in a growth in research monitoring campaign developments through election markets. For example, the Iowa Electronic Market is an on-line futures market which is operated for research and teaching purposes and was established by political scientists at the University of Iowa in 1988.²¹⁰ The Iowa Electronic market has provided remarkable accuracy in indicating US election results, perhaps because, as many researchers, such as Justin Wolfers and Andrew Leigh have identified, the betting markets focus 'on the underlying dynamics of the race' and are able to respond rapidly to changes during the campaign.²¹¹

Wolfers and Leigh have monitored betting markets during both the 2001 and 2004 Australian federal elections, noting that Centrebet started betting on the 2001 federal election in February 2001, nine months prior to the election.²¹² For Wolfers and Leigh, Centrebet betting in 2001 provided 'an intriguing daily history of the path of the campaign', through showing fluctuations and immediate responsiveness to events such as the Queensland state election, and the Tampa incident.²¹³ A key feature of betting markets is that they are often highly and immediately responsive to events, leaders' debates and policy changes. Following the 2010 Australian federal election, betting markets remained, as noted by Sportsbet spokesperson Haydn Lane, 'unusually volatile', with speculation over who would form government.²¹⁴ Centrebet's odds had four reversals in punter sentiment in the two weeks following the election.²¹⁵ It was reported that within minutes of announcing at a press conference that he would support Ms Gillard, Tasmanian independent Mr Andrew Wilkie 'sparked a mini-avalanche of bets on Labor' causing Centrebet to suspend its election market for several hours.²¹⁶

While studying election markets can be valuable for indicating electoral outcomes, political scientists S. G. Kou and Michael E. Sobel note that opinion polling should not be abandoned.²¹⁷ In their study of election markets and public opinion polls, they state that more than simply offering a forecast, polls provide a study into the relationship between voter characteristics and electoral preferences. They can also provide an important source of information for market participants.²¹⁸

²⁰⁹ J. Dowling (2010) 'Polling punts now a sure thing in Victoria', *The Age*, 11 February, viewed 10 May 2011, <<http://www.theage.com.au/national/polling-punts-now-a-sure-thing-in-victoria-20100210-nsh3.html?skin=text-only>>.

²¹⁰ See Iowa Electronic Market (2010) About the IEM, University of Iowa, viewed 10 May 2011, <<http://tippie.uiowa.edu/iem/about/index.html>>.

²¹¹ See A. Leigh & J. Wolfers (2007) 'Prediction Markets for Business and Public Policy', *The Melbourne Review*, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 7-15.

²¹² J. Wolfers & A. Leigh (2002) 'Three Tools for Forecasting Federal Elections: Lessons from 2001', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 37, no. 2, pp. 223-240, p. 234.

²¹³ Leigh & Wolfer (2005) op. cit., p. 234.

²¹⁴ M. Davis (2010) 'Political punters taken on wild roller-coaster ride', *The Age*, 3 September, viewed 10 May 2010, <<http://www.theage.com.au/federal-election/political-punters-taken-on-wild-rollercoaster-ride-20100903-14tfe.html>>.

²¹⁵ *ibid.*

²¹⁶ *ibid.*

²¹⁷ Kou & Sobel (2004) op. cit.

²¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 293. See also Wolfers & Leigh (2002) op. cit., p. 238.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to provide a guide to Parliamentarians in interpreting opinion polls through examining the history, development, application and growth in the prominence of public opinion polling. As this paper has shown, developments in technology and surveying techniques have allowed for greater accuracy since the early days of survey research and straw polls. Nonetheless, polling is still susceptible to numerous technical and methodological factors which may account for the variations between polling indications and election results. Furthermore, research is increasingly identifying a range of human factors, psychological and social, which also influence the results of opinion polls.

Further developments in measuring public opinion have emerged in keeping with technological advances, such as election betting markets, social networking and internet polling. It can be assumed that polling, as well as alternative ways of measuring public opinion, will continue to evolve and respond to an ever-changing social, political and technological environment.

Regardless of the limitations of the polls, Goot suggests that we ‘reject the idea that the polls are in pursuit of some pure, unmediated, pre-existing entity called public opinion and think of the polls instead as guides to what the public is likely to think about an issue given their exposure to certain sorts of information’.²¹⁹

²¹⁹ Goot (1993a) op. cit., p. 153.

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Leigh, A. & J. Wolfers (2005) *Competing Approaches to Forecasting Elections: Economic Models, Opinion Polling and Prediction Markets*, Discussion Paper No. 502, November, Centre for Economic Policy Research, The Australian National University.

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