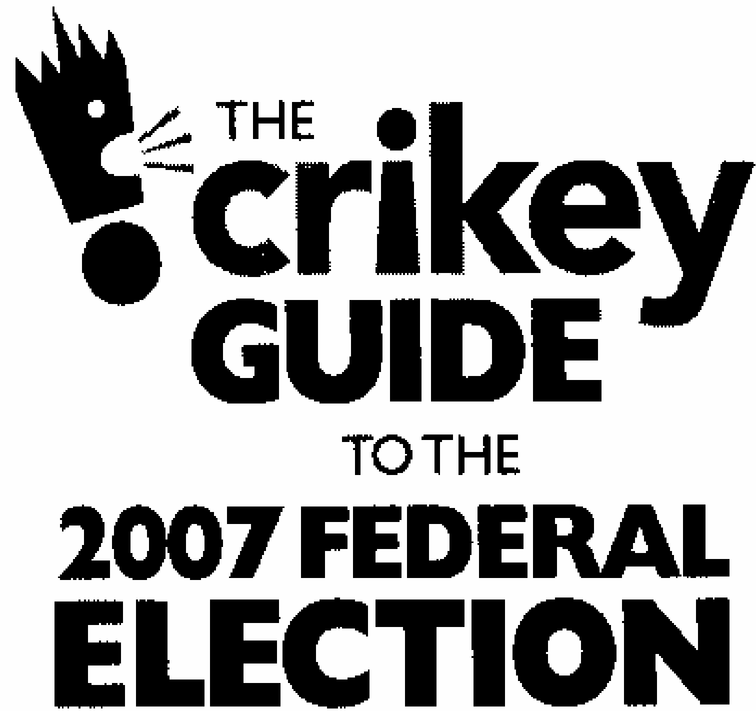
PENGUIN BOOKS



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POLL POSITION

Making Sense of Opinion Polls

There must be some countries more obsessed with political opinion polls than Australia, although they've yet to be found. Our short three-year federal electoral cycle – which means parties are always on a campaign footing – is partially responsible. It might also be due to a national tendency to view politics like a football match. Whatever the reason, major federal political polls come out at least once a fortnight in this country and they are given a gravity they simply do not deserve.

The good news is that when an election is in the air opinion polls become very useful, so it's good to have lots of them. The aim of this chapter is to help political junkies navigate the terrain. We'll touch on the mechanics, the importance of

preferences, the role of journalists and the 'Newspoll wars', before finishing with some handy hints. But first, a lightning-fast history.

While straw polls have been around for centuries, political opinion polls as we recognise them appeared early last century in America. The first big ones were run by the *Literary Digest* magazine, which surveyed its readers who numbered in the millions. In this way, the *Digest* correctly picked the result of every presidential election from 1916 to 1932. However, their strategy collapsed in 1936 when the magazine predicted a landslide win to the Republican challenger against Democrat President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Election day indeed produced a landslide, but in Roosevelt's favour. The poll was wrong because, as massive as the magazine's sample was – almost one in five voters – it was not random. It had simply polled too many Republican voters and not enough Democrat ones.

Enter George Gallup, whose American Institute of Public Opinion surveyed only 5000 people but got the 1936 result right. As well as asking people who they would vote for, Gallup asked other questions, about income, age and education, and fiddled with his polling results to reflect the general population. His way of doing this became known as 'the Gallup method'.

In Australia, political scientist Murray Goot identifies Sylvia Ashby as our first nationwide pollster. When Ashby declined Sir Keith Murdoch's offer of a gig that involved travelling to the US to learn at Gallup's knee, a man named Roy Morgan snapped it up. Roy Morgan Research opened for business in 1941 and still goes strong today, with Roy's son Gary at the helm.

Today the four pollsters you're most likely to see in the

lead-up to the federal election are, in no particular order, Newspoll, Galaxy, ACNielsen and Morgan.

Newspoll is half-owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corp (hence the name) and is published more or less fortnightly in the *Australian*. This regularity, its position in the country's sole national broadsheet, and the paper's muscular assertiveness, give Newspoll its perceived authority amongst the political class. Even writers for rival Fairfax papers often defer to it over their own surveys. In reality, Newspoll is neither the best nor the worst pollster. For decades until April this year, the 'Newspoll boss', as he was invariably described, was Sol Lebovic. He was succeeded by Martin O'Shannessy.

Galaxy emerged seemingly out of nowhere in the lead-up to the 2004 election and its final survey was closest of all to the actual election result. The man in charge of its political surveys, David Briggs, used to work at Newspoll. Galaxy generally appears in News Corp tabloids the *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), *Herald Sun* (Melbourne) and *Courier-Mail* (Brisbane). Unlike the other three, Galaxy is not regularly seen between elections.

ACNielsen belongs to a New York-based conglomerate, and its political polls appear in Fairfax broadsheets the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age*. It has a good record at recent federal elections but, at the time of writing, it's only released about once a month outside of election campaigns. John Stirton runs ACNielsen's political polls.

Morgan turns sixty-six this year – and so does his business. In that time, the 'Morgan Gallup poll' has appeared in all sorts of places, most often and most recently in the late Kerry Packer's *Bulletin*. The *Bully* dropped the pollster after it got

the 2001 election horribly wrong, and since then its polls have been published only on the company's website, although they are reported widely.

This takes us to an important point. Conducting opinion polls isn't cheap, so why does Morgan continue producing them when no one is paying? The answer – and this applies to all the pollsters – is that political polls deliver 24-carat publicity of the sort that money can't buy. All these outfits are market researchers with a wide range of activities, and any company needs to market itself. Being reverently quoted in prime time news and current affairs programs, associated with a topic as important as politics and mentioned by 'people who matter', builds branding in a way that no amount of advertising could.

Putting a face to it also helps. Imagine how much of John Singleton Advertising's business is due to its larger than life front man. Morgan and the recently departed Lebovic, while not quite on the same celebrity lists, are still household names – at least in households that follow politics. Stirton and Briggs, on the other hand, probably go largely unrecognised in Qantas Club lounges, but if you were running your finger down market researchers in the Yellow Pages, you would surely pause on ACNielsen and Galaxy.

Other pollsters who may appear in the election lead-up include TNS, Saulwick, McNair, Quantum, Taverner, the Advertiser Poll and Westpoll.

So much for the pollsters. Now a quick lesson in what they do.

There are two types of polls: qualitative and quantitative. A typical qualitative survey resembles a focus group, where people sit around munching chips and sipping drinks while

discussing various topics under the guidance of the pollster. Their views are then compiled in a report.

Quantitative polling, on the other hand, attempts to quantify opinions; that is, to put them into numbers. This is what we are dealing with in political polls.

Quantitative polling rests on certain assumptions which, using round numbers, I'll describe with an emphasis on ease of understanding over precision. The first assumption is that if you take a large enough random sample from a general population, the characteristics of the people in that sample will be, roughly, in the same proportion as they exist in the total population. You'll have, for example, about the same proportion of redheads, lovers of Scotch, people who enjoy gardening – and supporters of particular political parties.

Second, blessedly, such a sample doesn't have to be very big – for political purposes one or two thousand does the trick. Third, and counter-intuitively, a given sample size is just as good for any 'real' population size. That is, a poll of 1000 people is equally representative of a nation, whether it is Australia, Fiji or the United States.

Fourth, while pollsters aim for true randomness, it is never truly possible, so they 'weight' their samples. The easiest way to do this is by geography and gender, because this information doesn't involve intrusive questioning. Weighting by geography, for example, might mean adjusting the numbers so that urban and rural responses are represented in appropriate proportions.

Finally, there's the error margin, which actually has two parts. Suppose you're in some smart wine bar somewhere and you meet a pollster – let's call him Sol. Sol tells you he has just

surveyed a thousand people and found (after weighting) that 51 per cent of them intend to vote for the Coalition. He adds parenthetically that a poll of 1000 people has a margin of error of plus or minus three per cent, with a 95 per cent confidence interval. You ask him what that means and he says it means the 'true' level of support for the Coalition across the country is between 48 and 54 per cent.

'Are you sure about that, Sol?' you ask, as you try to attract the barman's attention. Sol replies that of course you can never be 100 per cent sure, but he is 95 per cent sure (the 'confidence interval'), and that's pretty darn sure, right? He adds that it means there is one chance in twenty that he's wrong, and that the actual number lies outside that range. Or, looked at another way, about every twentieth poll is wrong.

By now you're sharing a bottle of red, and Sol, warming to the topic, confides that if he had wanted to be only 80 per cent sure, he would have given the error margin as two per cent instead of three. On the other hand, to be really, *really* sure – a 99.9 per cent confidence interval – the error margin grows to five per cent. Sol explains that our statistical betters have settled on 95 per cent as the number to use.

With that 95 per cent confidence level, a sample size of 100 has a 10 per cent error margin, which for a political poll is almost useless. A sample of 10 000 has only a one per cent error margin, which is terrific, but don't forget we're only 95 per cent sure about that, and anyway surveying 10 000 people costs a fortune.

Most pollsters in Australia quite reasonably settle, like Sol, for a thousand or sometimes two.

You'd have heard commentators dismiss a single movement

from one opinion poll to another as 'statistically insignificant'. They are referring to the error margin. For example, if one survey puts a party on 51 per cent support, and two weeks later another puts the same party support at 49 per cent, the change of two per cent is within the error margin.

I believe calling it 'insignificant' is misleading. The 'true' figure isn't just *anywhere* within that six per cent range (three per cent error margin each way). In our 51 per cent example, it is much more likely to be around 51 than near the extremes of 48 or 54. (If you know what a bell curve looks like, think of that.) In any event, a politician would much prefer to read that their support is at 51 than 49 – and so they should.

More important, but rarely mentioned, is the imprecision that comes from rounding. When that 51 first spluttered out of a computer, it would have had at least one decimal place; it might have been 50.6, for example. Pollsters publish a nice round 51 for presentational reasons. So a shift over a fortnight from 51 to 49 might, at one extreme, actually be from 50.6 to 49.4, which is a bit over one per cent, or it might be from 51.4 to 48.6, which is nearly three per cent. I reckon that, with our federal elections generally being close contests, this rounding is problematic. (Sometimes, particularly near election day, numbers are published to the nearest half a per cent.)

Let us step back from the minutiae for an equally important lesson. An individual political opinion poll usually can't tell you much. It's not very accurate. For one thing, the process is highly artificial. In the real world, the Electoral Commission doesn't phone you up one day out of the blue, tell you there's an election on and ask you for whom you'll vote. For another thing, see the error margin above.

On the other hand, the polls are not useless. In fact, they're great if you don't take them literally. They are registering *something*, but it is best if you take them in totality – look at the trend. When a poll is published, you should add it to your bundle of knowledge from all the polls that have come before it.

Polls do become better predictors as the election approaches and the scenario becomes less hypothetical. When the election date is known, the pollsters' questions tend to change from 'if an election was held today, who would you vote for?' to 'who will you vote for on Saturday the [insert date]?' As that Saturday gets closer, the polls get better.

We can expect our four pollsters (and perhaps others) to conduct their final surveys a few days before the election, and publish them on the Friday or Saturday. These polls should be the best individual indicators of how the numbers will fall on election night.

Sometimes during the last week of a campaign, opinion polls 'swing' one way or the other. This happened at the 2005 state election in Western Australia. The weekend before, the Coalition was in front, but the final surveys showed Labor surging ahead and in the end they won comfortably. Most observers interpreted this as the Government 'making ground' in the last week, and pointed to certain developments as the reasons. Perhaps that's what happened, but perhaps (as I believe) the polls just got more accurate, as the waverers eventually decided to do what they nearly always do to a government facing its first re-election – give it another term.

How did our pollsters perform in the dying days of the 2004 federal campaign? That question has an interesting answer, because of their various approaches to preferences.

In 1954, more than 97 per cent of Australian voters put a '1' next to a candidate from one of the major parties (Liberal, Country/National or Labor) and in 1975 the number was 95 per cent. Since then it's been dropping, and at every election since and including 1990 it's been below 90 per cent. In 2004, the figure was 84 per cent.

So major party support has shrunk, which means minor party and independent preferences matter more than they used to, for the simple reason that there are many more of them. This has repercussions for the pollsters. Previously they could arrive at two-party preferred figures any old way (and they often did), and it didn't much matter because compared with the imprecision of polling itself, the distribution of a few per cent in preferences wasn't important. But 16 per cent of preferences is a new ballgame.

Furthermore, preferences at the last few elections have been flowing more and more in Labor's direction, and in 2004 net preferences favoured Labor by 3.6 per cent, the second-largest amount in federal history. (The record of 3.8 per cent was set in unusual circumstances in 1990.) It meant that the ALP could have trailed the Coalition by 3.6 per cent in primary votes and still drawn level after preferences. (Sadly for Labor, the primary vote gap was a whopping nine per cent, which only narrowed to 5.4 after preferences.)

The reason preferences are so favourable to Labor can be put in two words: the Greens. From two per cent support at the 1998 election, the Greens jumped to five in 2001 and seven in 2004. Most Green voters are disaffected Labor voters, or they are to the left of Labor, and under compulsory preferential voting they must at some stage choose between Labor and

Coalition on their ballot paper. About three-quarters of Greens preferences flow to Labor – no ifs or buts, no preference deals required – and this *will* happen at the next election.

Pollsters, therefore, need to understand this new preference world. It seems some understand it better than others, as their various performances at the 2004 election showed.

The startling feature of our four main pollsters' final 2004 surveys is that they were all quite close to the mark in predicting primary vote support but their two-party preferred figures went everywhere, ranging from a close Labor win to a Coalition landslide. The decreasing order of two-party preferred 'accuracy' was Galaxy, ACNielsen, Newspoll and Morgan. The wide range was due to their different preference strategies.

The evolution of Newspoll's strategy is a story in itself. From when they began polling in 1985 until early 1993 – including two federal elections – Newspoll didn't bother with preferences at all, reporting primary figures only. Then they started measuring preferences during election campaigns, but not at other times. In early 2003, they began calculating and publishing a 'notional' two-party preferred all year, every year. The question didn't change, but they estimated two-party preferred figures by assuming minor party and independent preferences flowed, in total, as they did at the previous election, in 2001. It was a reasonable strategy, except that as the make-up of those non-major parties had changed, this generally understated Labor's two-party preferred support.

Then, from early 2004, Newspoll instead asked those respondents who intended voting for minor parties and independents which party would get their second preference, and used that to calculate two-party preferred. This method (which

coincided with the beginning of Latham's leadership) overstated Labor's two-party preferred support.

Of the other outfits, Nielsen and Morgan asked respondents for full preferences, saying something along the lines of 'you must choose between one of the major parties, which will it be?' Galaxy calculated notional two-party preferred numbers using flows at the last election, but did it per minor party, dividing their Green vote up, and their One Nation vote, and so on. This is better than Newspoll's 2003 method, although if Newspoll had not changed methods in early 2004 its final poll probably would have read 52 to 48, like Galaxy's did. It has since returned to that preference method.

Morgan was the biggest mystery, with perhaps the best primary numbers and the worst two-party preferred ones. How their preferences went that way is anyone's guess. Morgan has since changed its strategy: they still ask the preference question, and publish the results on their site, but their headline two-party preferred is calculated, like Newspoll's, by allocating preferences as they flowed at the last election 'in bulk'.

The upshot is that some of the pollsters are having trouble coming to terms with the new preference environment. Which is the best? Ideally, the Nielsen/Morgan strategy of getting preferences direct from the voter would be, but after the 2004 Morgan experience, perhaps the Galaxy strategy is safer. But why Newspoll (and now Morgan) distribute in bulk, rather than by party, is a continuing puzzle.

The legendary American newsreader Walter Cronkite is supposed to have once said about Australia: 'too many reporters, not enough news'. A more specific version might be: too many reporters writing about opinion polls.

Journalists are generally good, smart, hard-working people, and they perform an invaluable function. But they are at their worst when beating a trivial issue into something it isn't, and reporting political opinion polls must rank as one of the more trivial pursuits for the reporter. If news items were given the emphasis they deserve, political polls would not sit on the front page next to the latest Baghdad bombings, but much further back; say, around page eight. They would stand alone in a table with little or no explanation. As an election approached, they would move towards the front, with some words of interpretation.

But opinion polls cost a bomb to produce, so onto page one they must go. Then everyone must pretend that's where they belong, adding several hundred words of interpretation – turning them over, looking for meaning, interpreting them as good or bad for someone or other, pretending you can identify why the numbers moved over a fortnight.

There's something else, also largely determined by logistics. Several decades ago, pollsters decided that once you've got someone on the phone who has agreed to tell you how they'll vote, you may as well throw in a few other questions. How satisfied are you with the Prime Minister's performance? How satisfied are you with the Opposition leader's performance? These numbers get published as well, and are interesting up to a point, but they've mutated in the world of journalists, becoming as important – sometimes more important – than voting intentions.

The facts are these. When you enter the voting station on election day, you are asked to vote for a person or party. There is no 'satisfaction' question. There is a high correlation between

opinion poll voting intentions and election results. As we have seen, we need to look at trends rather than single polls, but the relationship is strong. However, there is absolutely no evidence to support the proposition that an opposition leader with a high satisfaction rating has a better chance of being elected than one with a low rating. Let me emphasise: the evidence for this is zero.

Newspoll has been measuring satisfaction ratings since 1985, in which time there has been only one ultimately successful federal opposition leader, John Howard (1995–96). Yes, Howard attracted good satisfaction ratings but his were never as high as those of Mark Latham (2003–04), Kim Beazley (1996–2001), Alexander Downer (1994–95) or John Hewson (1990–94). In fact, Latham's were the highest on record at the time for an opposition leader, yet he recorded the worst election result for any opposition since 1977. Andrew Peacock's (1989–90) were abysmal, but under him in 1990 the Coalition won more votes than the government, and seats-wise it was the closest election since 1974. At the state level the record is also mixed, with highly approved opposition leaders losing, and little approved ones winning.

One obvious problem with satisfaction rating is that it doesn't differentiate between the majority of voters, who are rusted on to one side or the other, and the 'swingers', who decide elections. More importantly, the question is vague. Approve? Satisfied? In what way? Do you think he's been an effective politician? Is he 'cutting through'? Many respondents put on their commentator's hat.

All political leaders live and die by media pack-behaviour and superficiality, so we shouldn't shed too many tears for

them when things don't work out their way. But Kim Beazley's demise from the Labor leadership in late 2006 was largely due to a strange journalist opinion poll groupthink.

When Beazley returned to the Labor leadership in late January 2005, polls registered no immediate increase in voting intentions over the figures under Latham, but he did get substantially higher satisfaction ratings. However, throughout that year, the Labor vote gradually climbed, until it was often ahead of the Government in two-party preferred terms, while Beazley's satisfaction rating dropped. When the Government's WorkChoices legislation was tabled in parliament in November, Labor hit a considerable lead in all the polls, which it kept and generally improved upon throughout 2006.

But the political class, and most of the population, thought Beazley was doing a bad job while Howard was putting in his usual exemplary political effort. Poll after poll showing Labor ahead didn't sit with what they felt in their gut, so when reporting them they dug for 'yes, buts', which they found in low satisfaction and low primary votes.

Typical examples include the *Herald* describing a Nielsen poll with Labor in front 52 to 48 as 'not good news for Mr Beazley – to put it mildly'. Another one, showing the ALP ahead by eight points, was linked in the online version under the heading 'Labor catching up'. As the most-watched poll, Newspoll became the star in this show, in the *Australian*'s opinion pages.

When you think of Newspoll, you think of two people: Lebovic, the long-standing boss who left this year, and the *Australian*'s political editor Dennis Shanahan. Lebovic (and now O'Shannessy) gathers the numbers, crunches them and flicks them on to Dennis, who crafts words around the tables.

Shanahan himself has noted that he has 'written more newspaper reports and analysis on Newspoll surveys than anyone else on earth'. He has a lot of influence, because what he writes about a particular Newspoll – particularly in the headline and introduction – ripples across the commentariat, starting with early-morning radio.

Shanahan is a fine journalist, but in late 2006 he seemed to read doom for Beazley and good news for the Government in fortnightly polls that in most cases showed Labor in front. The Government ahead 51 to 49 was described as 'an election-winning lead', while 52 to 48 in Labor's favour was 'neck and neck'. Further, 'Voter dissatisfaction with Kim Beazley's leadership is undermining Labor's election-winning lead'.

Shanahan's reporting became an issue in itself, noted in various newspaper columns (including in the *Australian)*, with a veiled reference in parliament from a Labor MP. But he was probably just doing what the press gallery as a unit was doing – turning the polls over and over to find something that fit with his perceptions of how the parties and leaders were travelling. A climax of sorts was reached after one Newspoll showed a drop in Labor support – bringing the two sides to fifty-fifty two-party preferred – which Shanahan triumphed as vindication of all he'd written. *Oz* editorials joined the fray, one preposterously insisting that a large movement in a single poll should be interpreted literally.

Shanahan's defence, assisted by editorial space and a column from Lebovic, was familiar and twofold. One, Beazley's satisfaction rating was low, too low for him to win; and two, Labor's primary vote was generally below the Government's, sometimes under 40 per cent. The two-party preferred figures

were only estimates, and it made more sense to look at primary support. As Beazley's crumbled, Shanahan was joined in this chant of arrant nonsense by commentators in various organs, and soon everybody was on board, including those who had previously questioned his interpretations.

Shanahan's crusade proved self-fulfilling, and that final Newspoll report, along with Beazley's 'Rove McManus/Karl Rove' blunder a few days later, proved the last straw. Beazley was soon gone. The Beazley leadership was actually uncharted opinion poll territory – low satisfaction matched with high voting intentions.

The purpose of this chapter has not been to put you off opinion polls. On the contrary, polls are the best tools we have at our disposal with which to anticipate an election outcome, and they're pretty good. Everybody with a view on the likely election outcome will base it largely on the polls.

So here is a quick round-up of what to look for, and what to ignore:

- Don't get excited about a dramatic movement in any single opinion poll. Each is just an imprecise dip in the ocean. Wait for another, and then another.
- There is always several per cent of undecided voters. Pollsters generally extract them from the numbers, which is the same as assuming they'll vote the same way as everyone else. But will they?
- Bring out your inner Stanislavski: try placing yourself in the shoes of an undecided voter. Why might you be undecided? What might make you go for one side over the other? (My archetypical 'undecided voter' thinks that after almost

twelve years it might just be time for a change – the current mob has had a fair go – but isn't sure if the other side is ready to govern. His or her big question is: are they safe?)

- As election day approaches, polls become more accurate and the undecideds gradually make up their minds. The final ones, published on the Saturday, should be the most accurate.
- Look at the sample size – 500 is a bare minimum. This applies for a poll of one seat or the whole country.
- Look at the question(s). Do they look above-board? Are they designed to elicit a particular response?
- Look at the two-party preferred vote. Examine primary votes of all parties to see if the two-party preferred vote looks realistic, perhaps making your own estimates. If, for example, Family First support starts to grow, give about two-thirds of their preferences to the Coalition and the other third to Labor. It's two-party preferred votes that win elections, so ignore embroidery such as approval rating and preferred prime minister.
- The recent redistribution of electoral boundaries was quite kind to Labor. At the last few elections they've needed 51 per cent or more of the two-party preferred vote to win, but this time they might find anything over 50 is enough.
- Take the reporters' interpretations of opinion polls with a grain of salt, but as the election approaches, and the polls become more useful, so too does the analysis. Look at Crikey.com.au, where I'll be constructing a poll of polls that includes my own calculations of two-party preferred votes.
- Finally, enjoy the polls – they're part of the fun of the campaign. Just don't take them too literally.