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# The referenda: pollsters and predictions\*

MURRAY GOOT and TERENCE W. BEED

SINCE FEDERATION the electorate has been asked to vote on 36 proposals to amend the Constitution. During the period of the first 18 (1906-1937) mass surveys of Australian electoral opinion came to be conceived but not conducted. In those days the only poll to matter was indeed the final poll itself. But the last 18 referenda (1944-1977) have seen at least one national opinion poll, and more recently three (Morgan Gallup, McNair Gallup and ASRB)<sup>1</sup> attempting to gauge and publicise public opinion and forecast the referendum's likely outcome.

The repercussions of the development have been widespread. Polling has provided the public with a description of its own political thought and provided the parties with a good deal of data on which to base their campaigns. For the pollsters themselves, referenda have ranked among their more prominent—though not necessarily their best—advertisements.

Morgan Gallup, first into the field over thirty years ago, have conducted surveys of every referendum since 1944. ASRB's only venture into the field was in 1973, while McNair fielded in 1973 and again in 1977. Morgan has a record of 18 referenda and from the start it was a record the firm promoted. Academic researchers have attended to the record much less assiduously. With the notable exception of Leicester Webb, whose *Communism and Democracy in Australia: A survey of the 1951 referendum*<sup>2</sup> is still the only book-length study of an Australian referendum, academic analyses of the performance of the polls in referenda have been few and far between.<sup>3</sup>

In this paper we are concerned, not with a particular referendum, but with the performance of the polls across all Constitutional

referenda since 1944.<sup>4</sup> First we set out the timetable of the parliamentary and electoral process (introduction of the relevant Bill, issuing of writs, date of the poll) against the timetable of the pollsters (number of surveys, dates of first and last). We then move to the survey results themselves; the kinds of predictions they have generated; the fate of these forecasts; and the sources of error. The use of opinion polls by the parties, both published surveys and surveys privately commissioned, is not part of our present concern.

## The polling pattern

Of the proposals to amend the Constitution put to the electorate since 1944, one was put in 1944, one in 1947 and one in 1951; two were put in 1967 and in 1973; three in 1946 (in conjunction with a general election); four in 1974 (also in conjunction with a general election) and four in 1977. Since 1967 the electorate has been asked to cast judgement on two-to-four referendum issues at once. Yet the period between the issuing of the writs—the start of the campaign in some earnest—and the holding of the referendum has shrunk from about 6 weeks (1944-1951) to about three-and-a-half. The time between the introduction of the relevant Bill into the House of Representatives and the vote at a referendum has shrivelled from 6 months (1944-1948) to about 6 weeks (1951-1977). The timetable of the pollsters needs to be seen against this timetable of the parliamentary and electoral process.

During the 1940s the Morgan Gallup Poll was conducted about once a month. In the period of about six months that preceded each of the referenda in the 'forties the Morgan poll was able to conduct five or six surveys on each of the proposals. Of these, two were conducted in the six week period following the issuing of the writ with the last on the weekend prior to the poll.

For the 1951 referendum on Communism and the 1967 referenda on the parliamentary nexus and Aborigines, there were five and eight weeks respectively between the start of the par-

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Table I

Australian referenda, 1944-1977: timetable of legislative events and pollsters' activities

Referendum	Pollster <sup>1</sup>	Date bill introduced in House of Representatives	Date of issue of writ	Date of first survey <sup>2</sup>	No. of surveys conducted	Closing date of last survey	Date of Referendum
Fourteen Powers	MGP	5 Feb. 1944	4 Jul. 1944	Feb. 1944	6	12 Aug. 1944	19 Aug. 1944
Marketing	MGP	26 Mar. 1946	21 Aug. 1946	May 1946	5	21 Sep. 1946	28 Sep. 1946
Industrial Employment	MGP	26 Mar. 1946	21 Aug. 1946	May 1946	5	21 Sep. 1946	28 Sep. 1946
Social Services	MGP	26 Mar. 1946	21 Aug. 1946	May 1946	5	21 Sep. 1946	28 Sep. 1946
Prices and Rents	MGP	19 Nov. 1947	12 Apr. 1948	Dec. 1947	5	22 May 1948	29 May 1948
Communist Party Dissolution	MGP	5 Jul. 1951	10 Aug. 1951	3 Aug. 1951	2	15 Sep. 1951	22 Sep. 1951
Parliamentary Powers	MGP	1 Mar. 1967	28 Apr. 1967	19 May 1967	1	20 May 1967	27 May 1967
Aborigines	MGP	1 Mar. 1967	28 Apr. 1967	19 May 1967	1	20 May 1967	27 May 1967
Prices	MGP	17 Sep. 1973	12 Nov. 1973	6 Oct. 1973	5	1 Dec. 1973	8 Dec. 1973
	McN				2	10 Nov. 1973	
	ASRB				1	24 Nov. 1973	
Incomes	MGP	17 Sep. 1973	12 Nov. 1973	6 Oct. 1973	5	1 Dec. 1973	8 Dec. 1973
	McN				2	10 Nov. 1973	
	ASRB				1	24 Nov. 1973	
Simultaneous Elections	MGP	5 Mar. 1974	20 Apr. 1974	16 Mar. 1974	6	11 May 1974	18 May 1974
Democratic Elections	MGP	5 Mar. 1974	20 Apr. 1974	16 Mar. 1974	6	11 May 1974	18 May 1974
Local Govt. Bodies	MGP	5 Mar. 1974	20 Apr. 1974	16 Mar. 1974	6	11 May 1974	18 May 1974
Mode of Altering the Constitution	MGP	5 Mar. 1974	20 Apr. 1974	16 Mar. 1974	6	11 May 1974	18 May 1974
Simultaneous Elections	MGP	16 Feb. 1977	27 Apr. 1977	12 Mar. 1977	4	14 May 1977	21 May 1977
	McN			6 Mar. 1977	3	14 May 1977	
Senate Casual Vacancies	MGP	16 Feb. 1977	27 Apr. 1977	12 Mar. 1977	4	14 May 1977	21 May 1977
	McN			6 Mar. 1977	3	14 May 1977	
Retirement of Judges	MGP	16 Feb. 1977	27 Apr. 1977	12 Mar. 1977	4	14 May 1977	21 May 1977
	McN			6 Mar. 1977	3	14 May 1977	
Territories	MGP	16 Feb. 1977	27 Apr. 1977	12 Mar. 1977	4	14 May 1977	21 May 1977
	McN			6 Mar. 1977	3	14 May 1977	

Sources: *Australian Parliamentary Debates* for dates on which bills introduced; *Commonwealth of Australia Gazette* (1944, 1946, 1948, 1951) and *Australian Government Gazette* (1967, 1973, 1977) for date of issue of writs. Press releases by Morgan Gallup (1944-1977) and McNair Gallup (1973 and 1977); *The Age*, 6 Dec., 1973 for ASRB.

1. Abbreviations used: MGP—Morgan Gallup Poll; McN—McNair Gallup Poll; ASRB—Australian Sales Research Bureau.
2. Date quoted is the date as precisely as can be given for surveys conducted during 1941-1947. For other referenda, the date signifies the date of commencement of survey fieldwork, in most cases carried out over two successive weekends.

liamentary debate and the decision at the polls. Morgan managed two surveys in 1951, and two in 1967. In 1967 the first survey (unpublished) was conducted via Morgan's consumer omnibus survey, Consumer Opinion Trends (COT);<sup>5</sup> the latter, via the regular Gallup Poll. The final surveys were conducted on the weekend before the ballot.

By the time of the 1973 referendum the Morgan Gallup poll was no longer a distinct operation but had been merged with the once monthly, now fortnightly, COT. At the time of the 1974 referendum, COT was being conducted on a weekly basis with Gallup items being run over two weekends with split samples. As a result the Morgan Gallup poll was able to conduct four to six surveys on the 1973, 1974 and 1977 referenda, including two or three surveys in the period between the issue of the writs and each referendum. The practice of conducting final surveys in the weekend before the poll was maintained.

Early in 1973, the *Herald's* long association with the Morgan Gallup poll came to an end and the paper contracted with McNair Anderson for a public opinion poll. McNair commenced a monthly survey published under a Gallup Poll logotype and entered the referendum field straight away. Their first 1973 survey on the referenda was conducted a month after the Bills had entered Parliament, their second and last was held about a month before the poll. Both samples, incongruously, included 16 to 18 year olds. Their forecast of the national vote—released three days before the referendum but based on a survey conducted three or four weeks earlier—was well out. Though bitten by 1973, McNair was not twice shy. In 1974, it restricted itself to forecasting the general election, but in 1977 the referendum timetable was more happily in phase with its own and McNair was able to conduct two surveys before the issue of writs and another in the final two weekends of the campaign.

By contrast, ASRB has entered the contest only once. In 1973 it conducted its survey of the two referendum issues 10 days before the poll. Since ASRB conducts surveys at intervals of two-to-four months the fact that it has not conducted a referendum survey since can be explained by reasons other than its margin of "error" in 1973.<sup>6</sup>

### Findings

What trends in public opinion did the fieldwork

uncover? In the early Morgan years reporting of results was patchy. For the Marketing referendum of 1946, the Morgan poll only reported the figures for men; on the Employment referendum it failed to report figures for women together with men until its final survey; and on the Social Services referendum it is possible to derive total figures for the first and final surveys but not for those in between. In 1948 Morgan's final figure for No on Rents and Prices was not published until after the referendum; Yes and Undecided figures for 1948 remained unpublished.

Results from the first and final surveys for each of the pollsters on each referendum are reported in Table II. Except for the first surveys on the 1967 referenda, all data come from published sources. The Morgan figures, from 1967 at least, are "weighted" by factors not disclosed. It is unclear whether McNair has adopted the same practice. ASRB does not seem to have done so.

There are 15 referenda for which there are final as well as first results for the voting population as a whole. On eight occasions support at the time of the first survey was greater than 50 per cent and remained so until the last. Only on three referenda do the polls show majority support at the first survey but minority support in the last. There are none of which a Yes minority at the beginning became a Yes majority at the end. On these points the various pollsters were agreed.

Though few Yes majorities had turned to No by the last count, a drift away from Yes (averaging 6 percentage points net) is evident on almost every pair of results.<sup>7</sup> The high point is a 27 point shift in 1951. As this itself suggests, shifts in support were unrelated to the length of time between first and last surveys. Of the few cases which show an increase for Yes, the most marked is the 1977 McNair series on the Retirement Age of Judges which shows a 12 percentage points increase for Yes. But this may have more to do with the asking of a misleading question in the first survey (where the poll actually nominated a precise age) than with any real growth in support.

The obverse of the decline of Yes is the growth of No. Here the average increase is a net seven percentage points with a high of 28 at the last referendum. Again, predictably, the McNair case is the outstanding exception. The other positive exceptions, the decline in No across the two 1967 referenda, may be artifacts

Table II

Net shift in unadjusted voting intentions between first and final surveys following issue of writs for each referendum

Referendum	Pollster	Year	First Survey			Final Survey			Net Shift			Gap first to last survey (approx.)
			Yes	No	Undec.	Yes	No	Undec.	Yes	No	Undec.	
			%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	wks.
Fourteen Powers	MGP	1944	43	36	21	39	51	10	-4	+15	-11	26
Marketing (Men)	MGP	1946	49	41	10	43	51	6	-6	+10	-4	18
(Women)			?	?	25	?	?	?	?	?	?	
Industrial Employment (Men)	MGP	1946	45	44	11	?	?	?	?	?	?	18
(Men & Women)			?	?	?	44	47	9	?	?	?	
Social Services	MGP	1946	62	26	12	59	34	7	-3	+8	-5	18
Prices and Rents	MGP	1948 <sup>1</sup>	53	39	8	?	?	?	?	?	?	21
Communist Party Dissolution	MGP	1951	80	12	8	53	40	7	-27	+28	-1	6
Parliamentary Powers	MGP	1967 <sup>2</sup>	35	56	9	33	51	16	-2	-5	+7	1
Aborigines	MGP	1967 <sup>2</sup>	87	8	5	86	5	9	-1	-3	+4	1
Prices	MGP	1973	64	23	13	55	38	7	-9	+15	-6	7
	McN		70	27	3	70	28	2	0	+1	-1	4
	ASRB					55	40	5	-	-	-	n.a.
Incomes	MGP	1973	48	35	17	41	52	7	-7	+17	-10	7
	McN		49	47	4	48	47	5	-1	0	+1	4
	ASRB					42	52	6	-	-	-	n.a.
Mode of Altering the Constitution	MGP	1974	42	34	24	46	36	18	+4	+2	-6	7
Simultaneous Elections	MGP	1974	56	21	23	43	37	20	-13	+16	-3	7
Democratic Elections	MGP	1974	53	24	23	45	36	19	-8	+12	-4	7
Local Govt. Bodies	MGP	1974	54	22	24	43	37	20	-11	+15	-4	7
Simultaneous Elections	MGP	1977	70	16	14	56	26	18	-14	+10	+14	8
	McN		73	18	9	67	25	8	-6	+7	-1	9
Senate Casual Vacancies	MGP	1977	77	11	12	67	16	17	-10	+5	+5	8
	McN		79	18	3	75	18	7	-4	0	+4	9
Territories	MGP	1977	82	7	11	73	12	15	-9	+5	+4	8
	McN		93	3	4	78	15	7	-15	+12	+3	9
Retirement of Judges	MGP	1977	76	15	9	69	16	15	-7	+1	+6	8
	McN		64	24	12 <sup>3</sup>	76	17	7	+12	-7	-5	9

Sources: Press releases and subscribers' computer sheets by Morgan Gallup (1944-1977), and McNair Gallup; *Age Poll Reprint Series* for ASRB.

1. "No" figure only published after the referendum.
2. First survey (n=814) results were not published. R. Morgan, *Memo to Chief Executives and Editors of Gallup subscribers*, 24 May, 1967.
3. In March, 1977, undecideds equalled 4 per cent; an additional 8 per cent were found to have preferred a retiring age between 60 and 65 years of age. In the May, 1977 surveys this distinction was dropped when respondents' preferences for specific retirement ages were not probed because they were not relevant.

of a sample size which was much reduced in the first of the two surveys.

A drift to No greater than the shift from Yes can only be explained by a drift to No from Undecided. The figures confirm this. The polls show a thinning in the ranks of the Undecided. But despite the use of mock ballot boxes, there were cases of the Undecideds growing: in 1967 (Morgan) and in 1977 (McNair).

### Forecasts

After the Presidential election of 1948, the American Gallup Poll announced that henceforth its polls should be regarded only as statements of "fact". The "interpretation" of the facts, or predictions, would be left to others.<sup>8</sup> Predictably the idea did not get very far. For the press, the public and the pollsters, pre-poll surveys can have but one principal point: predictions.

Final surveys nevertheless need not be final forecasts. A forecast to be comprehensive needs to consider the movement in public opinion likely to occur between the last survey and the referendum itself; the allocation of voters still Undecided; and the fact that to be carried a referendum needs the support of a majority of voters and a majority of States.

*Postcards, phone calls and projections.* Until 1951 the figures on which the Morgan poll based its forecasts were the figures revealed by its last survey. But as early as 1944, in an article published after the Fourteen Powers referendum, the Morgan poll argued that when the Undecideds were allocated to Yes and No, according to the last vote, the result was remarkably close to the referendum result itself.<sup>9</sup>

In 1946, two weeks after it had overestimated support for the Social Services referendum by nearly 9 per cent and underestimated the Yes vote for Marketing by nearly 5 per cent, the Morgan poll set out to establish the source of these errors. Postcards of differing colours were mailed to 285 respondents, comprising three groups of Labor and non-Labor respondents who at the pre-election survey had indicated an intention to vote Yes on two of the three proposals but No on the third. Asked how they had actually voted, the 95 replies confirmed that "a considerable number of people had changed their minds at the last minute regarding the referendum". Their replies also revealed that many Labor voters had decided, probably at the polling booths, to follow Labor's all-Yes ticket with an equal

number of L-CP voters swing to an all-No vote. This confirmed what the poll had discovered but not applied, after the referendum of 1944. A later mailing to 447 of those who had intended voting all-Yes or all-No yielded 144 returns and evidence that whereas Labor voters had stuck to their guns, 12 per cent of L-CP voters in this group had voted Yes on Social Services. This evidence was discounted as "after-the-event band-wagon".<sup>10</sup>

In May, 1948 the Gallup forecast was only three per cent off the exact result and correctly predicted a No vote in every State. There were no post-mortems. But, 1948 was to prove a traumatic year with Gallup in America picking Dewey instead of Truman at the November election. Roy Morgan, working in America with Gallup at that election had persuaded the poll to hand everyone interviewed in the last pre-election survey a How-Did-You-Vote card to be mailed to the Gallup Poll after voting. With the help of these cards Gallup was able to show that polling had stopped too soon and that there had been a shift of opinion to Truman which a later poll might have detected.<sup>11</sup>

Like Gallup, Morgan had hitherto promoted all his surveys as "sample referendums" with findings that "would not differ significantly from a complete referendum".<sup>12</sup> Like Gallup, Morgan was in no position to distinguish "fact-finding" from interpretation and judgement. His only choice was to build a bridge from the final survey to the date of the referendum. This he proceeded to do. In 1951, in the final pre-referendum survey, Morgan interviewers handed out 780 postcards to be returned after voting and an unspecified number to be returned, apparently by voters in the "south-eastern States" during the last week of the campaign. Of the latter 366 were returned.<sup>13</sup> On this basis, at least in part, the poll predicted a Yes vote of 54 per cent instead of the 57 per cent that would have resulted from a pro rata distribution of the 7 per cent still undecided at the last survey.

No further referendum was held for 16 years and by the time it came the postcards, curiously, had been dropped. In the wake of the 1973 referendum, the Morgan poll calculated that two out of three Liberal-Country Party voters who had intended voting Yes to one question but No to the other must have voted No to both. In 1974 the electorate was faced with four questions and the Morgan poll adopted a forecasting strategy that can be

Table III

Pollsters' final forecasts and "errors" in predicting the outcome of Australian referenda 1944-1977

Referendum	Year	Pollster	Outcome		Per cent National Vote Affirmative			Number of States Affirming		
			Actual	Fore-cast	Actual	Fore-cast*	"Error"	Actual	Fore-cast	"Error"
Fourteen Powers	1944	MGP	No	No	46	(44) Pro-rata	— 2	2	? <sup>1</sup>	?
Marketing	1946	MGP	No	No	51	46 Pro-rata	— 5	3	0	—3
Industrial Employment	1946	MGP	No	No	50	49 Pro-rata	— 1	3	?	?
Social Services	1946	MGP	Yes	Yes	54	63 Pro-rata	+ 9	6	4+ <sup>2</sup>	—
Prices and Rents	1948	MGP	No	No	41	38 Pro-rata	— 3	0	0	0
Communist Party Dissolution	1951	MGP	No	Yes	49	54 Method 2	+ 5	3	5	+2
Parliamentary Powers	1967	MGP	No	No	40	40 Pro-rata	0	1	0	—1
Aborigines	1967	MGP	Yes	Yes	91	94 Pro-rata	+ 3	6	6	0
Prices	1973	MGP	No	Yes	44	53 Method 3	+ 9	0	5	+5
		McN	No	Yes	44	(72) Pro-rata	+28	0	6	+6
		ASRB	No	Yes	44	(58) Pro-rata	+14	0	4	+4
Incomes	1973	MGP	No	No	34	40 Method 3	+ 6	0	0	0
		McN	No	No	34	(51) Pro-rata	+17	0	2	+2
		ASRB	No	No	34	(44) Pro-rata	+10	0	0	0
Mode of Altering the Constitution	1974	MGP	No	No	48	46 Method 4	— 2	1	?	?
Simultaneous Elections	1974	MGP	No	No	48	44 Method 4	— 4	1	?	?

Democratic Elections	1974	MGP	No	No	47	46 <i>Method 4</i>	— 1	1	?	?
Local Govt. Bodies	1974	MGP	No	No	47	45 <i>Method 4</i>	— 2	1	?	?
Simultaneous Elections	1977	MGP	No	No?	62	56 <i>Method 3</i>	— 6	3	?	?
		McN	No	Yes	62	56 <i>Method 2</i>	— 6	3	6	+3
Senate Casual Vacancies	1977	MGP	Yes	Yes	73	67 <i>Method 3</i>	— 6	6	?	?
		McN	Yes	Yes	73	66 <i>Method 2</i>	— 7	6	6	0
Territories	1977	MGP	Yes	Yes	78	73 <i>Method 3</i>	— 5	6	?	?
		McN	Yes	Yes	78	68 <i>Method 2</i>	—10	6	6	0
Retirement of Judges	1977	MGP	Yes	Yes	80	69 <i>Method 3</i>	—11	6	?	?
		McN	Yes	Yes	80	68 <i>Method 2</i>	—12	6	6	0

Sources: Morgan Gallup Poll press clippings, releases and subscribers' reports, 1941-1977; Commonwealth Parliamentary Library press clippings, 1967-1977.

\* The forecasts are the last made by each pollster—sometimes published on the day of the referendum itself, if not the day before. The methods indicated in the table as being used by pollsters when forecasting from the survey data are as follows:

*Pro-rata:* Distribution of Undecided in the same relative proportions as those voting Yes or No. Pro-rata adjustments in parentheses are by the authors.

*Method 2:* Distribution of Undecided on basis of empirical evidence of voting intentions gathered by telephone interviews, postcards, etc.

*Method 3:* Distribution of all Undecided voters to No.

*Method 4:* Two-thirds of L-CP voters intending to vote Yes plus two-thirds of all Undecided allocated to No.

1. Excludes prediction apparently made two weeks prior to the referendum that Western Australia and South Australia were the only States likely to vote Yes.
2. Exact number of States affirming not specified.

traced back to its experiences in 1944-1946 and 1973. It now predicted that two-thirds of the L-CP voters who had intended voting Yes would finally succumb to the party line. They, together with two in every three of the undecided vote would vote No.

In 1977 the four referendum proposals were supported by all major parties. Morgan's last survey showed a majority for each of the proposals, including the proposal for simultaneous elections. But in its final press release, the poll extrapolated the trend against this proposal and



announced that it faced defeat.

The Prices and Incomes referenda of 1973 had, of course, seen the entry of two new pollsters, ASRB and McNair Anderson. ASRB completed its single survey 10 days before the poll and stuck to its figures in making predictions. McNair, to its even greater cost, polled three to four weeks before the final referendum. For 1977, the second time around, McNair over-learned their lesson. They interviewed people aged at least 18; tried to determine whether respondents might change their mind; made follow-up phone calls to waverers in Sydney and Melbourne; extrapolated the trend in their own surveys against the Simultaneous Elections proposal, the traditional falling away of support with the approach of polling day, and the further decline in the polling booth itself; and took note of the final burst of campaigning for No, especially in Queensland. In the event they undercut the mark. Their prediction for Yes was a full 10 percentage points below the minimum figure suggested by their last survey.

*The Undecided.* As the preceding discussion may already have suggested only the Morgan poll has been in any way clear about the undecided voter. But the way it has handled the problem has varied. On the evidence in Table III, Morgan may have used as many as five different formulae to distribute the undecided to either Yes or No.

In 1944 the undecideds were left hanging. After the referendum the poll embraced two different methods of allocation, one of which it justified in the Melbourne *Herald*, the other being published in the sheets of findings issued to subscribers.<sup>14</sup> With the first, undecided voters were allocated to Yes and No in the same proportions as those who expressed a preference (i.e. pro rata). The second involved an allocation based on how the undecided said they had voted at the last (1943) election. Labor Party voters were allocated to Yes, others to No.

The first of these formulae is the equivalent of the conventional formula in opinion research whereby the undecided are dropped and the proportions for and against are recomputed to a base of 100. It was adopted by the poll in 1946, though "some allowance" was made for political affiliation,<sup>15</sup> and in 1948. What happened in 1951 is unclear but a pro rata allocation was made again in 1967.

In 1973 there was a clear but unexplained

change with all the undecideds being counted as No. In 1974, on the basis of calculations carried out after the 1973 referendum, Morgan Gallup distributed two-thirds of the undecided to No. In 1977, according to his own account, Roy Morgan (formerly Managing Director, now officially retired) insisted that all the undecided be treated as No.<sup>16</sup> So the poll reverted to the system it had tried in 1973 and dropped in 1974.

Two days after the 1977 referenda, Gary Morgan (now Managing Director) explained the outcome to his father in these terms:<sup>17</sup>

It seems that in States where both parties supported the "Yes" vote, and there were no "How to Vote" cards, the Don't Know went onto "Yes". In Queensland, Tasmania and Western Australia it seems the undecided all went onto "No" (as we found in the past).

Two weeks later he seems to have assessed the situation differently:<sup>18</sup>

There were no "How to Vote" cards anywhere. In the States where there was campaigning for the No case, the Undecided went onto No. In the other States, the Undecided spread in proportion to the "Yes/No" vote.

*The States.* When a referendum gains less than 50 per cent support its fate is sealed. When its support exceeds 50 per cent its fate hinges on the decision in each of the States. As we saw in 1977 a proposal can win 62 per cent of the overall vote and still be defeated by the States. The theoretical limits in this situation are even more extreme. Constitutionally a referendum is less a national poll than six polls in six separate States.<sup>19</sup> Pollsters themselves should be running six polls not one.

With national surveys and sample sizes of around 2,000 the number of interviews in the smallest State, Tasmania, can be as low as 35. McNair have not revealed the size of their State samples, but on Morgan figures, with surveys split over two weekends, the interviews conducted on the final weekend prior to a referendum may not exceed 100 in Western Australia or South Australia either. The problem is compounded by the different postures adopted by parties and campaigners in different States.

Pollsters, of course, have a choice between entering the race and not entering the race. Three firms have taken the plunge; only one, ANOP, has opted out. For those who enter there is a further choice between treating the electorate as a single entity and not treating it as a single entity. With the former the fate of

the pollster rests more heavily with political fortune than would be the case with the latter. Fortune can make life easier or it can make life more difficult.

When popular support for a proposal is less than 50 per cent the principal pressure on a pollster is eased. In so far as the name of the game is picking the winner a defeat can be forecast while the State figures are ignored. This was the strategy adopted, successfully, by Morgan Gallup in 1944, 1946 (Industrial Employment) and 1974. Since there is an additional gain in a successful forecast of State results the Morgan poll has almost as often taken the added risk and followed a different strategy. In 1946 (Marketing), 1948, 1967 (Parliamentary Powers) and 1973 (Incomes) the poll forecast a majority for No but gave the State outcomes as well. ASRB and McNair, at their only opportunity (1973, Incomes) did the same.

While a final survey may show a national figure in excess of 50 per cent the overall trend over preceding surveys may suggest a final Yes of less than 50 per cent. In that event, the pollster is back to square one: the defeat of the referendum can be predicted and the State outcomes ignored. This was the strategy of Morgan Gallup on the Simultaneous Elections proposals of 1977.

More often than not, however, the survey evidence has pointed to a final Yes in excess of 50 per cent. Two strategies are then available. First, to imply—as Morgan did on the other three proposals in 1977—that a sufficient, but unspecified number of States will support the proposal. Or to actually nominate the States which can be expected to carry the proposal. Morgan Gallup did this on only three occasions out of a possible seven and only once (in 1951) were the State-by-State figures published at the time. McNair on the other hand has always published the Yes figure for each of the States; so did ASRB when it conducted its survey in 1973.

### The record

The Morgan poll has always boasted its record of referendum predictions; its rivals have not. Their silence is understandable. The entry of ASRB and of McNair has done little to improve referendum forecasting. As Table III makes clear, Morgan did better than either of its rivals in predicting the overall percentages at the 1973 referenda; and better than McNair,

if only by the narrowest of margins, in 1977. On predicting the States' results, however, the story is a little different. Morgan came a narrow second to ASRB in 1973 on Prices; and in 1977, while McNair nominated States expected to carry the referenda, Morgan did not.

The Morgan poll has come out on the right side at most referenda since 1944 but they did not do so on the Communist Party referendum of 1951 or on the Prices referendum of 1973. There were post-mortems after each. After the 1951 referendum had been lost the Morgan poll analysed their final figures, weighted and unweighted, in terms of a number of variables: quality, experience and sex of interviewer and sex of interviewee. The weighting seems to have been by the known distribution of past vote with a correction for the oversampling of past Labor voters. "Strangely enough" the analysis concluded, "the best result (weighted) was obtained by new interviewers, and the worst result by good, experienced interviewers"; and again, "Unexpectedly, unweighted answers of men interviewed by women gave the closest result. Weighting improved the answers recorded by male interviewers only very slightly". These results were distributed to the executives of subscribing newspapers.<sup>20</sup> What their impact was on the polling organisation itself is difficult to say. The consequence of the failure to predict the outcome of the Prices referendum in 1973 were, as we have noted earlier, much clearer. The "lesson" was subsequently promoted and applied in forecasting the 1974 outcome.

Though successful predictions are not necessarily more accurate than unsuccessful predictions the 8 (out of 18) occasions on which the Morgan figures were out by no more than three percentage points have all been occasions when the poll has predicted the right outcome. Statistically an "error" of 3 percentage points is unexceptionable. On six occasions Morgan's "error" has been 6 to 11 percentage points, but only once did this involve a failure to pick the winner.

Were it not for changes of opinion in the last week of campaigning it is probable that the records of the polls would be better than they are. At least this is true where pollsters' estimates for Yes have declined on successive surveys but still finished in excess of the Yes vote actually cast. Too high an estimate of Yes, in the wake of an overall decline, seems to have dogged Morgan—though the lack of data on

women for 1946 makes an absolute judgement impossible. But corroborative evidence is available for 1973 when the poll that least exaggerated the Yes vote (Morgan) was also the last poll to be taken. The obverse, however, will not explain the overestimate of No, notable in 1977.

As we earlier indicated, State forecasting has been much spottier. ASRB and McNair have given State-by-State forecasts as a matter of course; Morgan's have not. Morgan's record is one of predicting and not predicting in almost equal parts. On the predictions themselves,

ASRB has the worst record, being out on each occasion in 1973 by an average of three States. McNair has been right on three occasions and wrong on three with an average error of two States. Morgan Gallup have been right on three occasions but wrong on four, with an average error of between one and two. Clearly the State-by-State forecasts of the Morgan Gallup poll have been a less reliable guide to the State outcome than their predictions of the outcome overall. Given the size of their State samples and the political differences among the States this is hardly surprising.

1. A history of the three organisations is sketched in Terence W. Beed "Opinion Polling and the Elections", in H. R. Penniman (ed.), *Australia at the Polls: The national elections of 1975*, Canberra, ANU Press, 1977, 211-218.

2. L. C. Webb, *Communism and Democracy in Australia: A Survey of the 1951 Referendum*, Melbourne, Cheshire, 1954, Ch. 10.

3. But for a discussion of the polls at the 1973 referendum, see J. Rydon, "Prices and Incomes Referendum 1973: The pattern of failure", *Politics*, 9 (1) May, 1974, 22-30.

4. This excludes the 1977 poll on the national song. A similar analysis of referenda prior to 1944 would exclude the Military Service polls of 1916 and 1917.

5. R. Morgan, *Memo to Chief Executive and Editors of Gallup Subscribers*, mimeo. 24 May, 1967.

6. The other explanation was suggested by the Morgan Poll. *Morgan Gallup Poll accurate*, n.d. (c. May, 1974).

7. Net change was calculated thus:  $\Sigma$  losses —  $\Sigma$  gains

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8. G. Gallup, *Report of the 1948 Election and Announcement of Change in Reporting Election Surveys*, American Institute of Public Opinion, Princeton, 1948, 9.

9. *Australian Public Opinion Polls (APOP)*, No. 216-231, Aug.-Sept., 1944.

10. *APOP*, No. 375-381, Sept.-Oct., 1946; R. Morgan, "Last Minute Changes on Referendums", *Herald*, Mel-

bourne, 24 October, 1946; "Last Minute Changes in Voting Intentions", *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 12 (3), Fall, 1948, 470-480.

11. G. Gallup, *op. cit.*, p. 3; R. Morgan, *Report on American Experiences Sept.-Nov., 1948*, (1948), mimeo, 10.

12. *Eg. APOP* No. 56-65, July-Aug., 1942; 75-81, Sept.-Oct., 1942.

13. *Sun-News Pictorial*, Melbourne, 22-24, Sept., 1951.

14. *Herald*, Melbourne, 23 Aug., 1944; *APOP* No. 232-240, Nov., 1944.

15. The 1946 pre-referendum survey excluded voters who had not yet decided on their election vote. R. Morgan, *op. cit.*, 1948, 473.

16. Correspondence from Roy Morgan to Gary Morgan, 2 June, 1977.

17. Correspondence from Gary Morgan to Roy Morgan, 23 May, 1977.

18. Correspondence from Gary Morgan to Roy Morgan, 7 June, 1977.

19. The same logic applies to general elections (124 contests). Nationally based election campaigns, uniform swings and a discernible ratio of votes to seats have made it easier to predict the national outcome from a national survey than would otherwise have been the case.

20. *Australian Public Opinion Polls, Predictions of 1951 Federal Referendum* (1951), mimeo, Tables 11 and 12. This analysis is not mentioned in Webb, *op. cit.*