8

Opinion Polls and the Media in Australia

Stephen Mills and Rodney Tiffen

Since 1943, every Australian election has been preceded by published opinion polls. Since 1972, every election has been preceded by at least three companies regularly conducting opinion polls for competing media groups. As early as the 1977 election, Goot and Beed (1979, p. 141) observed that 'during an election, to talk about politics is to talk about the polls', while in 2010, Young (2010, p. 186) found that in 2007, 44 per cent of election-related front page newspaper articles and 35 per cent of TV news stories contained some reference to opinion polls, a dramatic increase on the previous two elections. The prominent psephologist Peter Brent opined that 'there must be some countries more obsessed with political opinion polls than Australia, although they're yet to be found' (2007, p. 131).

Consistent with Australia's minimally regulated campaign environment (Plasser & Plasser 2002, p. 151), opinion polling has come to play this central role in an almost entirely unregulated environment and for largely commercial purposes. Pollsters may survey public opinion and conduct market research for any purpose, employ whatever survey method they choose, and operate at any time including during election campaigns, on behalf of clients in business, government and the media. Indeed, while television advertisements are banned from broadcast in the final days of a campaign (Young 2004), polls may be conducted, and published, up to, and on, Election Day (Orr 2010, pp. 176–178).

While many bemoan what they see as the influence of the polls, and there are frequent controversies about results and reporting, there has been no serious or influential proposal for any official regulation of their political role. Survey data collection is subject to a government-approved privacy code administered by the market research industry body, which also administers voluntary self-enforced guidelines

C. Holtz-Bacha et al. (eds.), *Opinion Polls and the Media*

on professional behavior (Association of Market and Social Research Organisations 2003, 2010); market researchers are permitted to call numbers on the Do Not Call register (Australian Communications and Media Authority 2010). An attempt by some pollsters to form an association to regulate election polling, similar to the British one, came to nothing because a principal company, Morgan Gallup, refused to participate (Goot 1988, p. 144).

The clients of these research firms are under no obligation to publish any survey results; equally, newspapers and magazines that commission and report on survey findings are subject only to voluntary guidelines issued by their self-regulatory industry body, the Australian Press Council. These guidelines recommend that poll reports include background information including 'a bedrock of who conducted the poll among whom'; they also warn against surveys that lack proper sampling, such as phone-in or Internet polls. But the Council states it is 'firmly against' any limits on the reporting of political opinion polls (Australian Press Council 2001). Adherence to the guidelines is low (Goot 2002), and even lower among 'secondary' reports summarizing the most newsworthy aspects of some other group's poll results (Mills 1999, p. 215).

The chapter proceeds by outlining the challenges to pollsters and reporters posed by the unique nature of the Australian electoral system. It then charts the growth of the media-polling relationship in Australia and traces the shifting alliances between media and polling companies. The following two sections examine the changing methods of gathering data, and the changing repertoire of survey questions. The final section examines the contemporary role of polling and the reporting of polls by reference to the politically tumultuous events of the year 2010.

The Australian electoral system and polling

'Australia has been one of the most innovative liberal democracies in the design of its electoral institutions' (McAllister 2009, p. 160). Its distinctive electoral system has both advantages and disadvantages for pollsters.

Government is determined by which party has the majority of the 150 seats in the House of Representatives, a chamber elected through single-member constituencies. Like other single-member electoral systems coming from the Anglo-American tradition, the battle to form government in Australia is essentially a two-sided contest. Since 1910, every government has been formed either by Labor or by the biggest

non-Labor parties. The Labor Party, despite undergoing three major and electorally disastrous splits (in 1917, 1931 and 1955) has been a constant. But the non-Labor side has changed its identity on four occasions. Since 1944, the major party on the conservative side of Australian politics has been the Liberal Party, formed by its first leader Robert Menzies, who went on to become Australia's most successful prime minister, winning seven successive elections from 1949 to 1963, before retiring in early 1966. For all that period the Liberals were in government with the Country Party, now renamed the National Party. Although formally a coalition, the cooperation and unity between them goes far beyond a coalition between two independent parties; Sartori (1976, p. 166) famously called it a coalescence rather than a coalition. Sometimes they directly compete with each other in rural electorates, but normally a sitting member from one party is not opposed by a candidate from the other. Most importantly, voters know that the parties will govern together, so the non-Labor side is often referred to as the Coalition.

However, unlike the other Anglo-American democracies, Australia has a system of preferential voting, sometimes called the alternative vote (Hughes 2007 p. 176; Reynolds and Reilly 1997). Australian voters can express a preference for a minority party with their first vote and a second preference that may, if their preferred candidate is eliminated, influence which of the major parties wins the seat. This renders the House a more representative expression of public sentiment than would be the case under a first-past-the-post system. It also treats minor parties and independent candidates more kindly. In the 26 federal elections since the Second World War, the combined vote for Labor and the Liberal-National Parties has on all but one occasion been more than 80 per cent of the total. But the number of people voting for minor parties and independents has been increasing (Tiffen 2010). Since 1990, this has always been more than 10 per cent, and in several elections close to 20 per cent. Although there were earlier occasions when 'Others' have attracted a substantial vote, this now looks to have become a continuing feature of the Australian landscape. Between 1955 and 1972, the most important preference flow was from the Democratic Labor Party to the Coalition; now it is from the Greens to Labor.

These features create a significant headache for Australian pollsters and journalists, who have to estimate not only the primary vote each party will receive but also the pattern of support for the major parties after the distribution of preferences from minor parties and independents. The electoral scholar Malcolm Mackerras (1972) devised

the concept of the 'two-party preferred' vote, which clarifies this problem by expressing the aggregate vote-split for the two major parties after the distribution of preferences. All published polls (but only since 1993, Goot 2010b, p. 71) are reported in terms of both primary vote and two-party preferred vote. The Mackerras pendulum, which ranks all electorates in a U-shape according to the two-party preferred swing necessary for the seat to change hands, has also become part of the iconography of Australian elections (Mackerras 2010). It is most useful when the basic contest is between Labor and the Coalition, less so when an electorate might be won by an Independent or a third party such as the Greens.

Like other single-member electoral systems, there is of course no guarantee that the distribution of support measured by a national survey sample will translate into parliamentary seats. Indeed in five elections, the winner actually polled less than 50 per cent of the two-party preferred vote – the lowest winning percentage was John Howard's 48.9 per cent in 1998. So to predict the winning party, pollsters need not only gauge public voting sentiments, but also which side will win the marginal seats. Further, Australian elections are perilously close. Of the 26 elections since the Second World War, in 14 the winner's share of the two-party preferred vote has been 52 per cent or less. In other words, many elections are decided on a margin less than the sampling error from a sample of 1000 respondents.

One advantage that Australian pollsters have over those in most other democracies is that registration and voting are compulsory. There is a fine if a registered voter fails to attend for the vote. The Australian electoral authorities make it easy for a voter to cast an absentee or postal ballot, or to vote in advance of Election Day if they wish. Turnout is therefore often around 95 per cent (Hill 2007 p. 126). Australian pollsters do not therefore have the problem of estimating who in their samples is likely to vote, and whether differential turnout may affect predictions.

But more than in other democracies they have a problem with informal voting. In the Australian House of Representatives, a valid vote requires numbering a vote for all candidates, and sometimes – especially when different rules apply at state level – there is accidental informal voting. However, there is also some deliberate informal voting, with ballots either left blank or spoiled in some way. In 2010, both non-attendance and informal voting spiked compared with the 2007 election. Informal voting jumped from 3.95 per cent to 5.61 per cent of the vote overall (Irvine 2010). The number not voting rose from

5.2 per cent to 6.8 per cent, so that 'more voters refused to vote than at any election since 1925, the first election at which voting was made compulsory' (Colebatch 2010). If the figures for absenteeism and informal voting are combined with the 1.4 million eligible adults who were not properly registered, then a dramatic figure of 3.2 million eligible voters – or around one-fifth of the electorate – did not cast a valid vote in 2010 (Costar & Browne 2010). This is large enough to complicate the pollsters' performance, especially when there is a possibility – and this must remain a matter of speculation – that in 2010 it told more against Labor than the Coalition.

Australian governments are made and unmade in the House of Representatives, but Australia is also a strongly bicameral system (Lijphart 1984; Tiffen & Gittins 2009, pp. 30–1). This means firstly that the composition of its two houses is incongruent, in that they are elected by different formulas and on somewhat different timetables, but that its powers are symmetrical, in that all legislation must pass both houses. The Australian Senate has multi-member constituencies, a method of proportional representation called Hare-Clark, which allows voters to choose between candidates for one party and to express preferences across parties. The pollsters pay far less attention to the Senate, and their capacity to predict the outcome is more limited.

Finally – another blessing for the polling industry – Australia has frequent elections. The maximum interval between federal elections is three years. In addition to federal elections, there are elections in the six states and two territories (plus of course local government elections, although these seldom involve any polling), so that there are typically at least a couple of elections each year somewhere in the country.

Organizational history

Public opinion polling in Australia began as a press initiative. In 1940, the head of the *Herald and Weekly Times*, Sir Keith Murdoch, father of contemporary international media mogul Rupert, arranged for one of his employees, Roy Morgan, an accountant and finance journalist by background, to go to the United States to gain experience by working with George Gallup (Goot forthcoming; Mills 1999). The first Gallup Poll, published in the *Herald* on 4 October 1941, found that 59 per cent of respondents favored equal pay for women (Mills 1999, p. 204).

This was the beginning of a remarkable association, one that monopolized national public opinion polling for more than 30 years, producing news stories on more than 3000 poll questions (Mills 1999,

p. 205). The relationship was so close that Morgan had his office in the *Herald* building.

When Murdoch died in 1952, a company valedictory hailed him as the first man to accept the value of opinion polls (Goot 2010a, p. 280). More accurately, he was the only one who had the financial capability to make it happen. Through a series of strategic acquisitions, Murdoch had built the *Herald and Weekly Times* into the first press empire in Australia. Thus he was able – through ownership and/or commercial arrangements – to publish the Morgan Gallup poll in every state (Beed 1977, p. 212; Goot 2010a, p. 274). As in other democracies, there was considerable idealism and optimism about the new venture. 'This will do a lot of good,' wrote Murdoch in 1939, when approving the approach to Gallup. The poll's newsletters carried such bold inscriptions as 'Australia Speaks' and 'What Australia Thinks' (Mills 1999, p. 206).

The astounding longevity and strength of the *Herald and Weekly Times*-Morgan Gallup monopoly was only broken in 1971. This was a period of ferment both in Australian politics, with a resurgent Labor Party led by Gough Whitlam within striking distance of its first Federal victory in a generation, and in Australian journalism. The latter was fed by many factors including generational change in the parliamentary press gallery (Lloyd 1988); new journalistic ventures in the Australian Broadcasting Commission, especially in the growth of current affairs programming to supplement news coverage (Inglis 1983) and how Rupert Murdoch's founding of the first national newspaper *The Australian* in 1964 (Cryle 2008) had helped stimulate a renewal in quality newspapers more generally (Hills 2010).

As a result, three separate companies' polls were commissioned by and reported in three different newspaper groups in the lead-up to the 1972 election (Beed 1977). Since 1972, media reporting of polls has remained competitive and dynamic, with at least three pollsters commissioned by media outlets to gauge opinion before every federal election. It has also become more unstable and complex with corporate changes in the media – most spectacularly Murdoch's takeover of the *Herald and Weekly Times* in 1987 (Tiffen 1994) – and also changing ownership and strategic permutations in the market research industry leading to several shifting alliances between pollsters and newspapers.

The most important move was the founding of Newspoll in 1985, half owned by News Limited, and managed by pollster Sol Lebovic until his retirement in 2007. The poll is now published principally in *The Australian*, although other Murdoch papers often carry a truncated

report, and it is the most frequently conducted and most widely published poll in Australia. It began as a monthly poll, and became fortnightly in 1992 (Megalogenis 2010). No other newspaper has an equity investment in a polling organization, instead commissioning polls from commercial market research companies. The broadsheet newspapers in the Fairfax organization, the *Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald*, have commissioned and published polls since the 1970s including, continuously since the mid-1990s, from the Neilsen Company. Newspoll, the Neilsen poll, and Galaxy polls published in the Murdoch metropolitan tabloids constitute the three most important media polls in 2010.

A peculiarity of Australian media and polling is that it has been overwhelmingly a press affair. With the exception of a fondness for 'phone-in' polls, commercial broadcasters as well as the publicly-owned ABC have generally been content to report poll results indirectly rather than commission their own. Television has generally not been prepared to invest the necessary resources, in contrast to the USA, for example. Indeed in recent decades, polling has been primarily conducted by the relatively low-circulation broadsheets, so that one could posit that those media organizations with the largest audiences – especially commercial television – invest least in the polls (and often do the worst in reporting them).

Reporting of polls is enriched in two other principal ways. First, Australian political parties, like their counterparts elsewhere, have discovered the value of doing their own polling. By the 1980s, each party had a relationship with a pollster (Mills 1986). Interestingly, the two major parties' long periods of electoral success – the Hawke-Keating Labor government of 1983–1996 and the Howard Coalition Government of 1996–2007 – each coincided with a stable and close association with a pollster skilled in both survey and qualitative (focus group) work – Rod Cameron of ANOP and Mark Textor of Crosby Textor respectively. Excerpts from the parties' internal polling often find their way into the media, but are reported in a much more fragmentary way and much less regularly than the published polls. Typically the reports give what the parties see as the 'bottom line' of their research, but little of the supporting evidence. The reader must take their conclusions on trust, and much of the time so, presumably, must the journalist. Such trust is not always justified. Brian Dale, former press secretary to New South Wales Labor Premier, Neville Wran, confessed: 'In presenting ALP polls conducted by ANOP I always added a point or so to Wran and deducted it from (the Liberals') Willis' (Dale 1985, p. 102).

Second, the Internet has provided a significant new medium for publication and analysis of political poll results. There was already a trend in the mainstream press to do 'polls of polls'. But this reached a new peak with the rise of the blogosphere. Australia now has several psephological bloggers who bring a new level of penetration to the analysis of the polls. Internet websites such as Possum Comitatus's (the pseudonym of Scott Steel) www.pollytics.com and Peter Brent's www.mumble.com aggregate data across different published polls while contrasting and exploring their differences. This is also done by experts, for example Andrew Catsaras' influential newsletters and William Bowe's *Pollbludger* (http://blogs.crikey.com.au/pollbludger/) site. The ABC's election analyst, Antony Green, as well as becoming a fixture of every election night's television, maintains a widely cited website on all matters electoral (http://blogs.abc.net.au/antonygreen). In sum, the activities of the pollsters are more extensive than in the past, but just as importantly they are much more intensively scrutinized and analyzed.

Developing techniques

For the first decades of polling by the Morgan Gallup Poll, its contract specified that it would conduct six surveys a year, each on 11 subjects for a total of 66 separate releases each year (Goot forthcoming). Some early reports were published a month after the data had been gathered. The polls were almost never published on the front page. Only rarely were there any follow-up comments by politicians or anyone else (Goot 2010a, p. 290). The polling was all done face-to-face. This necessitated the need for a large field staff able to cover the whole country. Terry Beed, one of the founders of ANOP, described the expense and logistical difficulties of a new company organizing its field staff in the 1970s (1977).

Given its unregulated and commercially oriented nature, the growth and development of Australian public opinion polling has always been shaped by considerations of cost. Newspaper proprietors look for maximum news impact at lowest cost, and pollsters have needed to balance sample size with reliability. Face-to-face polling was always expensive and slow. Thus, once sufficient households had telephones, most market researchers leapt at this cheaper alternative means of gathering data. Yet Morgan Gallup insisted on continuing with face-to-face interviews via its field staff – and still persists with that data-gathering method today, although no longer relying solely upon it. Its principal Gary Morgan asserted that telephone polls were less accurate because respondents are

more likely to nominate who they think will win rather than the party they intend to vote for (Goot 2002), but the evidence, including from his own polls, is against him (Goot 2009, pp. 124–128, 131).

Telephone polling, however, has been widely adopted – notwithstanding the sampling problems arising from, for example, younger people tending to be at home less often, or only owning mobile phones that cannot be easily included in a fixed line sample. In recent times, perhaps because of growing public irritation at the intrusions of telemarketing, there has apparently been a greater refusal rate. In practice, pollsters have an increasingly sophisticated knowledge of population parameters, and can apply this to weight their samples. Most of the time, this probably increases the accuracy of polls, but such weighting rests on the problematic assumption that the characteristics of the respondents missed are the same as the characteristics of the respondents included.

Polling by the Australian media has almost exclusively involved quantitative survey research. A rare exception was the News Ltd/Sky News collaboration in which US pollster Frank Luntz conducted two focus groups of voters in the lead-up to the 2007 elections; the sessions were broadcast on Sky and reported in *The Australian* under the banner of 'The Voters' Verdict' (Megalogenis 2007).

Three other data-gathering techniques have risen to prominence in recent years. From 2007, a public affairs consultancy Essential Media Communications (www.essential.media.com.au) has conducted a weekly survey of issues including voting intentions, drawn from an online panel and published in Australia's most successful online news service *Crikey!* This innovation is possible because an increasing proportion of households have the Internet, but the biases in inclusion are still systematic. In particular, old people and poor people, those on the wrong side of the digital divide, are excluded.

Televised debates between the two major party leaders – a feature of every Australian election campaign since 1984 (except 1987) – have also provided pollsters with new opportunities to experiment. It has been commercial broadcasting that has made the most significant contribution, through the so-called 'worm'. First deployed by Channel Nine in the 1993 debate between Keating and Hewson and progressively refined over the years, the 'worm' is generated by a small live audience, recruited by a market research company, using individual electronic devices to register their responses to the debate, on a positive-negative scale, in real time. The responses are aggregated and represented as a moving graph or 'worm' which is broadcast along with the debate itself. The technique has proven controversial but remains popular, and innovations

continue. For the 2010 debate between Gillard and Abbott, the first involving a female and male candidate, audience responses were separately tracked by gender (Sawer 2010); there was also competition between Channel Nine's 'worm' and Channel Seven's 'polliegraph', the latter conducted by Roy Morgan Research Centre (Idato 2010).

In the last week of the 2010 campaign the *Sydney Morning Herald* published what it referred to as 'the most comprehensive public opinion poll ever undertaken in Australian politics' – a survey of 28,000 voters living in 54 marginal seats as well as a sample of safe seats (Brent 2010; Coorey 2010). The survey was an innovative application of automatic telephone messaging – 'robocalling' – which had been used as a campaign tool by political parties in 2004 and 2007 to disseminate their messages. In 2010, an independent research firm, JWS Research, pioneered the application of 'robopolling'. The technique lowers the cost of interviewing as respondents are speaking to an automated call centre, allowing pollsters to generate very large samples and potentially reduce the sampling error. The large JWS sample, however, was spread thin, with just 400 respondents per electorate, and this resulted in numerous incorrect predictions regarding which seats would change hands.

A developing repertoire of questions

Perhaps ironically, in the early days the Morgan Poll was centered less around parties, and certainly much less around political personalities, whereas the weight of contemporary polling is much more centered on the 'horse race'. Around nine out of ten questions Morgan asked were to do with issues. Today, the most common questions are about voting intentions, leaders and alternative leaders, and these probably constitute a majority of the questions asked and reported in the mainstream media. Moreover, when issues are canvassed, quite a high proportion do not probe respondents' perceptions or substantive attitudes, but simply which party they think would handle the issue better, typically followed by speculation on the electoral implications of this.

Morgan Gallup's questions ranged 'from the parochial to the international, from the social and humanitarian to the economic and political, from the wearing of lipstick to the dropping of atomic bombs' (Goot & Ilbery 1969, p. i). Morgan boasted that, through his partnership with the Herald group, his survey questions had 'the most newsy slant in the world' (Mills 1999, p. 206). In all this, he shared the plebiscitary idealism of George Gallup, viewing polling as a highly desirable new form of collective expression, as well as a valuable tool for democratic leaders.

While voting intentions were a staple of the polls from the beginning (Beed et al. 1978), polling about leaders was more erratic. Indeed, Morgan expressed the view that questions about the performance of political leaders was disrespectful, and only started to ask these regularly in 1968 (Goot forthcoming). Over his 23 years as prime minister, Menzies was the subject of only three approval polls, while Harold Holt, prime minister for almost two years in 1966–1967, was not the subject of any (Mills 1999 p. 209). But in 1972, Whitlam and McMahon were each the subject of 20 approval polls. Another significant step was Newspoll's introducing a regular question about the 'preferred prime minister'. In Goot's judgment, this well publicized question has helped Newspoll become the most important poll published by the Australian press in the last 25 years (2010, p. 288).

The polls' increasing focus on individual political leaders, measuring their 'popularity' or 'approval' of their performance either singly or in comparison, has been a significant contributing factor to the media's increased personalization of political reporting. Intensive polling on leadership, fuelled by news interest, fed directly into the political contest. In the late 1970s, Bob Hawke's ambitions to transfer from leading the trade union movement into parliament, and thence to leadership of the Labor Party, presented a new theme for pollsters and reporters: leader comparisons not cross-party but intra-party, comparing perceptions of an incumbent office holder such as Opposition Leader Bill Hayden with potential alternatives (if not actual challengers) such as Hawke. Such polls, especially internal party polling, became an important weapon in Hawke's campaign to destabilize Hayden's leadership and ultimately replace him in the lead-up to the 1983 Federal election (Summers 1983, pp. 29–32). This canvassing of alternative leaders has become a regular feature of Australian polling and politics; Opposition leaders appeared particularly vulnerable. Howard's first tenure as coalition Opposition leader was weakened immeasurably by a front cover of the *Bulletin* magazine in December 1988 in which he was hailed as 'Mr 18%', in reference to a new Morgan poll. Paul Kelly described opinion polls as 'handy weapons for destabilization' (Kelly 1992, p. 231).

2010: The interaction of polls and politics

The last few years have been a spectacular ride in Australian electoral politics, and in particular 2010 brought unprecedented developments. First, an elected prime minister was deposed by his own party in his first term of office. Second, for the first time since the depths of the

depression in 1931, a government failed to win a majority at its first attempt at re-election. Third, for the first time since 1940, a general election produced a hung parliament with independents and minor parties holding the balance of power, leading, fourth, to the most prolonged period after an election before a new government was formed. The polls – and the reporting of them – were intricately involved in all these dramatic developments; indeed it would be impossible to explain the sequence of events without reference to opinion polling and its effect on political leaders, journalists and voters.

For its first two years after being elected in late 2007, Labor was comfortably ahead on all published two-party preferred measures; Kevin Rudd himself was reported by Newspoll, in May 2008, as 'preferred prime minister' by 72–9 over Opposition Leader Brendan Nelson. Nelson was soon replaced by Malcolm Turnbull, but at the end of 2008 the same poll showed Rudd outscored him 66–19. In a mid-October 2009 Newspoll, the two-party preferred vote hit 59–41 with the Coalition divided over its response to the proposed Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS), and Rudd still outscored Turnbull as preferred prime minister by 65–19. Such highly unusual figures would translate into an electoral wipeout for the Coalition – neatly summarized by the headline writer in *The Australian* as: 'Rudd's future assured by Coalition in chaos' (Kelly 2010). Yet the next Newspoll, at the end of October, showed a sharp and significant deterioration in Labor's position, as its lead in the two-party preferred vote fell back to 52–48, beginning a Labor slide that was never reversed. In June 2010, Rudd was ousted as prime minister by his deputy, Julia Gillard. It is possible to explain this unprecedented outcome by pointing to a sequence of government policy failures and a steady improvement in the Opposition's performance (Stuart 2010). Most significantly, the replacement of Turnbull by Tony Abbott in December 2009 reunited the Opposition around an aggressively attacking leader who immediately stymied the government's ETS legislation. But the publication of opinion polls added a crucial element, feeding the process in at least three ways.

First, opinion polls influenced the style and substance of media reporting. Polling is often said to foster 'horse race' journalism – a media preoccupation with who is winning the electoral contest rather than with the substance of policy. The truth is that polling provides several different 'form guides' for that 'horse race', and this allows journalists to choose from a diverse stream of narratives. In 2010 the major pollsters were polling on national primary voting intention, national two-party preferred vote, satisfaction ratings for prime minister and

Opposition leader, and a preferred prime minister comparison. Many of these questions were also polled within marginal electorates. Newspoll also conducted an occasional series on 'personality traits' of the prime minister and Opposition leader. This diversity should fuel a more sophisticated analysis by the media, though in the circumstances of mid-2010 nuance was replaced by a growing assault on the prime minister himself – whose slide in personal approval rating far exceeded Labor's slide in the two-party preferred vote. As the slide continued, Newspoll's fortnightly publication schedule fostered a sense of anticipation for 'Newspoll Tuesday', creating a timeframe for news reporting that was independent of the political and policy agenda and that seemingly vindicated an increasingly critical media stance towards the government and prime minister.

Second, Rudd's and Labor's deteriorating standing in opinion polls seemingly influenced the government's policy decisions as they attempted to reverse the slide, creating a negative response loop. Of all the issues, the most important was climate change. The parliamentary impasse over the ETS, along with the failure of the Copenhagen climate talks to deliver tangible progress – talks at which Rudd had tried to take a leading role – left the government without an apparent plan to address what he had earlier described as the greatest moral challenge of the age. When Rudd announced that the government would not proceed with the ETS legislation and would defer any action until 2013, the backdown fuelled public dissatisfaction and drove the polls down further. Rudd's net satisfaction rating (measuring those 'satisfied' with his performance, minus those 'dissatisfied') had been at a commanding 43 (67 minus 24) in late September 2009, but was down to 18 (52–34) at the start of 2010, and seven (48–41) in March. But in the wake of his ETS decision, Newspoll recorded a catastrophic decline. Rudd's net satisfaction rating dropped into negative territory for the first time, to –11 (39–50), while Labor's two-party preferred vote immediately fell from a winning 54–46 to a probably losing 49–51. As *The Australian* reported on its front page on 4 May, Rudd's rating had fallen 'the most in the shortest time in the 20-year history of Newspoll' (Shanahan 2010).

Third, opinion polls became the driver for the Labor Party's unprecedented decision to move against Rudd. By early June, Rudd's satisfaction rating reached –19 (36–55), and though Labor led the Coalition on a national two-party preferred vote 52–48, reports from marginal seats were worse. On 21 June Rudd was removed overnight as prime minister by Gillard in a party room movement so overwhelming that no vote was deemed necessary. The party turned to her because many of

them – informed by the polls – believed that not to do so was to risk defeat in the approaching elections. *The Sunday Telegraph* reported that 'secret ALP polling in four western Sydney seats last week convinced Labor Party officials that Kevin Rudd had to go'. The paper reported that having been 'shown' the research, the MP for one of the seats 'was so concerned that he openly confronted Mr Rudd at last Tuesday's caucus meeting' (Silmalis 2010). Thus this private research has been used both to influence political decision making and to justify it after the event via leaks to the media.

Gillard explained her challenge by saying the Labor Government was a good government that had 'lost its way', and set about addressing three key policy issues – all of which had featured prominently in published polls. These efforts took place against a backdrop of continuing media attention on the polls: did Gillard give Labor a 'bounce' in the polls? Did she receive a 'honeymoon'? And did she benefit from a gender gap? Gillard called an early election for 21 August. The 2010 election was the occasion of particularly intense attention to polls – accentuating the long-term emphasis on covering the campaign as a contest (Tiffen 1989, pp. 130–1), with the dominance of horse race, sports and military metaphors framing much news coverage (Young 2010, pp. 181–2). In 2010, this was partly driven by the finely balanced state of opinion. Two-party preferred voting intentions showed parties consistently at or around the 50–50 mark. Primary voting intentions further revealed Labor's weakness and the corresponding strength of the Green vote, presenting dissatisfied Labor supporters with a credible form of protest while also highlighting the importance of the Green preference flows to determining the election outcome. The campaign was widely derided as devoid of substance or passion – a phenomenon which was itself attributed by the media to the parties' 'focus-group driven' political strategies, and in this context the published polls provided journalists with genuine news value. The main polls all performed well in their final calls: all predicted a very close outcome, although most over-estimated, but within acceptable sampling error margins, Labor's lead.

In the unprecedented post-election period – 17 days passed from Election Day until the decision of the last two Independents to support Labor in a minority government – public opinion polls continued to have prominence. Indeed, given the apparent failure of the electoral system to provide an immediate winner, some seized on the polls to play a role by providing a default evidentiary basis for determining the winner; in a hung parliament, the polls provided a potential tool to break

the deadlock. For example, as the three rural independents pondered whether to support a minority Labor or minority Coalition government, Newspoll surveyed their electorates to establish what their own voters wanted them to do; *The Australian* editorialized that its poll showed the independents needed to support a minority Coalition government (*The Australian* 2010), although the crucial two opted to support Labor.

At the end of such an eventful and often problematic year, the accuracy of the polls received further vindication, when the Victorian Labor government of John Brumby was defeated. Nearly all the pundits expected Labor to be re-elected, but the late polls indicated otherwise. Betting on elections is legal in Australia, and indeed one of the staples of reporting in recent election campaigns has been the state of the betting market. Wolfers and Leigh once argued that 'the press may have better served its readers by reporting betting odds than by conducting polls' (2002, p. 223). However in Victoria, even on Election Eve, Labor was 'a barely backable favourite' and the coalition was at long odds (Bowe 2010). The polls predicted the result better than the punters.

Conclusion

Public polling in Australia is still dominated by the long-lived commercial and editorial relationship between newspapers and opinion polls. The early suspicions of polling by the left wing (Goot 2010, pp. 283–4), and accusations about the integrity of the data by politicians, such as Whitlam in 1975 (Beed 1977, p. 226; Mills 1999, p. 210) and even most recently when in 2010 Tony Abbott declared the 'worm' never favored coalition leaders in TV debates, have all proved groundless. The very public nature of the product provides incentives towards accuracy. As one of the pioneers of the industry, Ian McNair once commented: 'If we were wrong most of the time (in election polls), then sampling surveys of all kinds would be in disrepute' (Mills 1999, p. 213).

Only once did the pollsters wrongly predict an election outcome. That was in 1980. At that time the last published polls had been taken some time before Election Day, and there was almost certainly a strong swing back towards the Fraser Liberal government (Goot 1984), partly fuelled by a massive advertising campaign the government mounted when it was alerted to its position in the polls (Butler 1983; Tiffen 1989). Since then, pollsters (and party officials) have been very vigilant for late swings. The other election in which there was a dramatic swing back resulting in a government winning after being behind at the start of

the campaign was in 1993. This time the polls captured the movement and pointed to a cliff-hanger. However, election outcomes, even election results, are a very limited means of holding pollsters' accuracy to account.

The longevity of the poll-media relationship suggests that both sides perceive benefits from its continuation. On the one hand, newspaper proprietors and editors are attracted to survey research because it generates news stories that are compelling, relevant and exclusive: it helps drive newspaper sales. On the other hand, polling organizations enjoy the publicity derived from their press work to market their services to commercial clients. Both sides derive a critical source of influence over policy and political matters. Sharing a vested interest in presenting their polls as significant new revelations, then, both pollsters and journalists sometimes turn a blind eye to small samples in marginal seats, report as substantial poll movements that are not statistically significant, emphasize small changes within larger stability, and maintain news interest by presenting political contests as dramatically and unpredictably close. This is compounded by another principal incentive: wanting to avoid being caught in a visible and memorable mistake. So even when their figures are fairly clear-cut, the reports are often full of caveats. This was particularly the case with the News Limited papers on the eve of the 2007 election. They all emphasized how Howard was making a comeback, and could even be on the verge of an unexpected victory (Goot 2009; Tiffen 2008). When the result was a clear victory for Rudd, their Monday morning reports stressed the inevitability of what had occurred, and the pollsters congratulated themselves.

The wish to stress the newsworthiness of their poll results was neatly captured by one former reporter from *The Australian*, who described the commercial pressures arising from Newspoll ownership as 'heavy but subtle' (Milne 2010):

> You were aware that the poll was expensive. Therefore you had better make good use of it . . . there was therefore an unspoken demand to dramatize the numbers within reason. You were aware that as the national flagship paper of the country, Newspoll was inextricably bound up with the prestige branding of The *Australian*. To make Newspoll count was to make the *Australian* count. That was an added pressure to maximize the impact of the poll.

In 2007, *The Australian*'s interpretation of its Newspoll became an object of controversy. The Howard government for the whole year before the

election was facing what journalist Peter Hartcher described as 'polls of chilling steadiness and deadly intent' (2007), but among the multiple narratives to which any series of polling questions might lend themselves, many critics felt that the paper always sought the one most favorable to the government. Its reporting became an object of ridicule in the blogosphere (Young 2010 p. 211). In July *The Australian* (2007) editorialized against these 'sheltered academics and failed journalists who would not get a job on a real newspaper'. It concluded with an epistemological gem: 'we understand Newspoll because we own it'.

It should be stressed that it is not only newspapers, but also politicians who are prone to exaggerating the significance of the most recent polls. What Mills (1999, p. 204) called 'the three-sided relationship . . . between the pollster, the journalist and the politician' is often central to how political events unfold, as was evident above in the key events of 2010. Hartcher, analyzing the fall of John Howard, commented on the direct personal impact of the polls:

> Politicians, despite all their protestations to the contrary, live and die by the polls. Most receive them with the gravity of a judicial ruling. Especially in the run-up to an election, Howard's moods from day to day depended on the opinion polls. . . . (After poor polls) he frequently vented his frustrations on senior staff, yelling and shouting. . . . The polls ruled Howard's emotions.
>
> (2009, p. 7)

In 2010, more pollsters are reported in more media outlets, and their findings are scrutinized more intensely, than ever before in Australian history. The landscape is dynamic and competitive. For the main, the pollsters' sampling and question methodology is sophisticated and robust, and their track record over a long period has been good. There is a group of journalists who have developed considerable expertise in reporting polls, and equally importantly, on the edges of the mainstream media and outside, there is another group of experts who monitor developments closely, and whose writings feed into media discussions of the polls. Many of the dilemmas arising from the polling-media relationship are variants of the central dilemmas of democracy: the tendency of politicians to be more influenced by majority opinion than the merits of a policy; of reports of poll results to add fuel to media and political bandwagons, despite increasing evidence that voters themselves, simultaneously source and recipient, are becoming perhaps more confused, skeptical and alienated. It is wrong to hold the media

reporting of polls responsible for political superficiality and conformism, but neither are they a cure for it.

Acknowledgment

This chapter has been improved by a characteristically searching critique from Professor Murray Goot.

References

Association of Market and Social Research Organisations (2003) *Market and Social Research Privacy Code*, http://www.amsro.com.au/AMSRO_wp_amsro236/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/AMSRO-Code_final_ofpc_30-June-07.pdf

Association of Market and Social Research Associations (2010) *Code of Professional Behaviour*, http://www.mrsa.com.au/files/Code_of_Professional_Behaviour.pdf

Australian Communications and Media Authority (2010) *Frequently asked Questions about the Do Not Call Register*, https://www.donotcall.gov.au/consumerfaq.cfm#exemptions.

Australian Press Council (2001) General Press release no 246, (iv) July 2001, http://www.presscouncil.org.au/pcsite/activities/guides/gpr246_4.html.

Australian, *The* (editorial) (2007, July 12) 'History a Better Guide than Bias'.

Australian, *The* (editorial) (2010, August 28) 'Time to Climb Off the Fence', p. 15.

Beed, T. W. (1977) 'Opinion Polling and the Elections', in H. Penniman (ed.), *Australia at the Polls: The National Elections of 1975* (Washington DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research).

Beed, T. W., M. Goot, S. Hodgson and P. Ridley (1978) *Australian Opinion Polls 1941–1977* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger).

Bowe, W. (2010, November 26) 'Pollbludger: Galaxy Poll Encourages Coalition, Bookies Say Otherwise', *Crikey*.

Brent, P. (2007) 'Poll Position: Making Sense of Opinion Polls', in C. Kerr (ed.) *The Crikey Guide to the 2007 Election* (Ringwood: Penguin).

Brent, P. (2010, August 19) 'Eyebrows Raised by March of the Robopoll', *The Australian Mumble Blog*.

Butler, D. (1983) 'Introduction', in H. R. Penniman (ed.), *Australia at the Polls: The National Elections of 1980 and 1983* (Sydney: George Allen & Unwin for the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research).

Colebatch, T. (2010, September 21) 'The Great Turnoff', *The Age*.

Coorey, P. (2010, August 18) 'Poll has Abbott Reeling', *Sydney Morning Herald*.

Costar, B. and P. Browne (2010, September 24) 'Missing Votes: The 2010 Tally', *Inside Story*, http://inside.org.au/missing-votes-the-2010-tally/

Cryle, D. (2008) *Murdoch's Flagship. Twenty-Five Years of the Australian Newspaper* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press).

Dale, B. (1985) *Ascent to Power: Wran and the Media* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin).

Goot, M. (1984) 'The Media and the Campaign', in H. R. Penniman (ed.) *Australia at the Polls: The National Elections of 1980 and 1983* (Sydney: George Allen & Unwin for the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research).

Goot, M. (1988) 'Trust the Polls', in I. McAllister and J. Warhurst (eds), *Australia Votes: The 1987 Australian Federal Election* (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire).
Goot, M. (2002) 'Reporting the Polls', in S. Tanner (ed.), *Journalism: Investigation and Research* (Sydney: Pearson).
Goot, M. (2009) 'Getting it Wrong while Getting it Right: The Polls, the Press and the 2007 Australian Election', *Australian Cultural History*, 27(2), 115–33.
Goot, M. (2010a) ' "A Worse Importation than Chewing Gum": American Influences on the Australian Press and their Limits – The Australian Gallup Poll, 1941–1973', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 30, 269–302.
Goot, M. (2010b) 'Underdogs, Bandwagons or Incumbency? Party Support at the Beginning and End of Australian Election Campaigns, 1983–2007', *Australian Cultural History*, 28(1), 69–80.
Goot, M. (forthcoming) 'Morgan, Roy Edward', in M. Nolan (ed.), *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (Vol. 18; Carlton: Melbourne University Press).
Goot, M. and T. W. Beed (1979) 'The Polls, the Public and the Re-election of the Fraser Government', in H. R. Penniman (ed.), *The Australian National Elections of 1977* (Washington, DC and Canberra: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research and the Australian National University Press).
Goot, M. and J. Ilbery (1969) *Australian Public Opinion Polls* (Occasional Monograph, Department of Government and Public Administration, no. 2, University of Sydney).
Hartcher, P. (2007, November 16) 'Howard's Instinct Let him Down', *Sydney Morning Herald*.
Hartcher, P. (2009) *To the Bitter End: The Dramatic Story Behind the Fall of John Howard and the Rise of Kevin Rudd* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin).
Hill, L. (2007) 'Compulsory Voting', in B. Galligan and W. Roberts (eds), *The Oxford Companion to Australian Politics* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press).
Hills, B. (2010) *Breaking News: The Golden Age of Graham Perkin* (Melbourne: Scribe).
Hughes, C. A. (2007) 'Electoral Systems', in B. Galligan and W. Roberts (eds), *The Oxford Companion to Australian Politics* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press).
Idato, M. (2010, July 26) 'Polliegraph Squashes Worm', *Sydney Morning Herald*.
Inglis, K. S. (1983) *This is the ABC: The Australian Broadcasting Commission 1932–1983* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press).
Irvine, J. (2010, September 1) 'Informal Vote Makes Mockery of Democracy', *Sydney Morning Herald*.
Kelly, P. (1992) *The End of Certainty* (St Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin).
Kelly, P. (2010, October 7) 'Rudd's Future Assured by Coalition in Chaos', *Australian*.
Lijphart, A. (1984) *Democracies: Patterns of Majoritarian and Consensus Government in Twenty-One Countries* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press).
Lloyd, C. J. (1988) *Parliament and the Press: The Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery 1901–1988* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press).
Mackerras, M. (1972) *Australian General Elections* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson).
Mackerras, M. (2010, February 5) 'The Mackerras Pendulum', *The Australian*.
McAllister, I. (2009) 'Elections and Electoral Behaviour', in R. A. W. Rhodes (ed.), *The Australian Study of Politics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan).
Megalogenis, G. (2007, August 31) 'Swinging Voters Prefer to Hear Rudd Over Howard', *The Australian*, p. 7.

Megalogenis, G. (2010) 'Trivial Pursuit: Leadership and the End of the Reform Era', *Quarterly Essay*, 40, Black Inc.
Mills, S. (1986) *The New Machine Men: Polls and Persuasion in Australian Politics* (Ringwood: Penguin).
Mills, S. (1999) 'Polling, Politics and the Press 1941–1996', in A. Curthoys and J. Schultz (eds), *Journalism: Print, Politics and Popular Culture* (St Lucia, QLD: University of Queensland Press).
Milne, G. (2010, November) 'Death by Newspoll', *IPA Review*, 62(4).
Orr, G. (2010) *The Law of Politics: Elections, Parties and Money in Australia* (Annandale, NSW: The Federation Press).
Plasser, F. with G. Plasser (2002) *Global Political Campaigning, a Worldwide Analysis of Campaign Professionals and their Practices* (Westport, CT: Praeger).
Reynolds, A. and B. Reilly (1997) *The International IDEA Handbook of Electoral Design* (Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance).
Sartori, G. (1976) *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
Sawer, M. (2010, October) 'Managing Gender: The 2010 Federal Election', *Australian Review of Public Affairs*, available at http://www.australianreview.net/digest/2010/10/sawer.html.
Shanahan, D. (2010, May 4) 'Record Drop in Satisfaction after ETS Backflip as Coalition Moves Ahead', *The Australian*.
Silmalis, L. (2010, June 27) 'Why Kev had to Go', *The Sunday Telegraph.*
Stuart, N. (2010) *Rudd's Way. November 2007–June 2010* (Melbourne: Scribe).
Summers, A. (1983) *Gamble for Power: How Bob Hawke beat Malcolm Fraser. The 1983 Federal Election* (Melbourne: Thomas Nelson).
Tiffen, R. (1989) *News and Power* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin).
Tiffen, R. (1994) 'Media Policy', in J. Brett, J. Gillespie and M. Goot (eds), *Developments in Australian Politics* (Melbourne: Palgrave Macmillan).
Tiffen, R. (2008) 'Campaign Tactics, Media Bias and the Politics of Explanations: Accounting for the Coalition's Loss in 2007', *Communication, Politics and Culture*, 41(2), 8–29.
Tiffen, R. (2010, August 6) 'Polls, Elections and Australian Political History: A Primer', *Inside Story*, http://inside.org.au/polls-elections-and-australian-political-history-a-primer/
Tiffen, R. and R. Gittins (2009) *How Australia Compares*, 2nd edn (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press).
Wolfers, J. and A. Leigh (2002) 'Three Tools for Forecasting Federal Elections: Lessons from 2001', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 37, 223–40.
Young, S. A. (2004) *The Persuaders; Inside the Hidden Machine of Political Advertising* (Melbourne: Pluto Press).
Young, S. A. (2010) *How Australia Decides: Election Reporting and the Media* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press).