



Polls and elections: a primer for the perplexed

by Rodney Tiffen

In the lead up to this election, the always intense interest in the polls is, if anything, more acute because two major factors are in collision. On the one hand there is the electoral “man of steel” John Howard, who has rewritten Australian election records – only the second man to win four successive elections, the first since Menzies to increase his government’s share of the vote at two successive elections, since 2005 heading the first government to win control of the Senate since the 1977 election and now sitting on a buffer of sixteen seats. In the 2004 election, according to Sol Lebovic, the former head of Newspoll, Howard achieved the biggest increase during a campaign that any government has managed in Newspoll’s twenty years of polling, increasing its primary vote by 5.7 percentage points.

On the other hand the polls this year have shown a Labor lead of a strength and consistency that has probably never been seen before. Almost every poll has shown

Above: Opposition Leader Kevin Rudd speaks to the media in Brisbane on the day the 2007 election was called. AAP Image/Jack Tran

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Labor ahead at least 55–45 on a two-party preferred basis.

One thing is certain: every poll between now and the election will be greeted with breathless proclamations of its importance. This article seeks to give some perspective by outlining the results from Australian federal elections since the second world war and examining some key characteristics of the polls.

Since the war, there have been 24 elections for the House of Representatives. As Table 1 shows, of those elections the Coalition has won seventeen and Labor seven. This discrepancy largely reflects the Liberals’ string of nine successive victories from 1949, giving them 23 years continuously in office. Both sides have won seven of the fourteen elections since 1972. Table 1 also shows that the dominant pattern in Australian elections is for incumbents to be re-elected. On only five of 24 occasions has an election produced a change of government.

The two-sided nature of Australian politics is appar-

Table 1. Outcomes of Australian House of Representatives elections 1946–2004

Year	Winning party	Incumbent result	Winning leader	Losing leader	LNP primary vote %	ALP primary vote %
1946	ALP	GOVT	Chifley	Menzies	43.7	49.7
1949	LNP	OPPN	Menzies	Chifley	50.3	46.0
1951	LNP	GOVT	Menzies	Chifley	50.3	47.7
1954	LNP	GOVT	Menzies	Evatt	47.1	50.0
1955	LNP	GOVT	Menzies	Evatt	47.6	44.6
1958	LNP	GOVT	Menzies	Evatt	46.5	42.8
1961	LNP	GOVT	Menzies	Calwell	42.1	47.9
1963	LNP	GOVT	Menzies	Calwell	46.0	45.5
1966	LNP	GOVT	Holt	Calwell	50.0	40.0
1969	LNP	GOVT	Gorton	Whitlam	43.4	47.0
1972	ALP	OPPN	Whitlam	McMahon	41.5	49.8
1974	ALP	GOVT	Whitlam	Snedden	45.7	49.3
1975	LNP	OPPN	Fraser	Whitlam	53.1	42.8
1977	LNP	GOVT	Fraser	Whitlam	48.1	39.6
1980	LNP	GOVT	Fraser	Hayden	46.3	45.1
1983	ALP	OPPN	Hawke	Fraser	43.6	49.5
1984	ALP	GOVT	Hawke	Peacock	45.0	47.5
1987	ALP	GOVT	Hawke	Howard	46.1	45.8
1990	ALP	GOVT	Hawke	Peacock	43.4	39.4
1993	ALP	GOVT	Keating	Hewson	44.3	44.9
1996	LNP	OPPN	Howard	Keating	46.9	38.8
1998	LNP	GOVT	Howard	Beazley	39.2	40.1
2001	LNP	GOVT	Howard	Beazley	42.7	37.8
2004	LNP	GOVT	Howard	Latham	46.7	37.6

ALP = Australian Labor Party; LNP = Liberal and National Parties

ent with all governments being formed by the two major parties, and their combined vote on all but one occasion being more than 80 per cent of the total. But, as Table 2 shows, the number of people voting for minor parties and independents has been increasing. Six of the seven occasions on which the combined vote of the two major parties has been lowest have occurred at the last six elections. Although there were earlier occasions when “Others” have attracted a substantial vote (notably in the 1958 and 1977 elections after the formation of, respectively, the Democratic Labor Party and Australian Democrats as nationally organized parties), it now looks to have become a continuing feature of the Australian landscape. When the DLP was the largest minor party its preferences went overwhelmingly to the Coalition; preferences from the Democrats and especially the Greens have tended to go mainly to Labor.

Minor parties and independents are treated more

Table 2. Percentage of votes for minor parties and independents at House of Representatives elections 1946–2004

Year	Total other %	Year	Total other %
1998	20.7	1980	8.6
2001	19.5	1963	8.5
1990	17.2	1987	8.1
2004	15.7	1955	7.8
1996	14.3	1984	7.4
1977	12.3	1983	6.9
1993	10.9	1946	6.6
1958	10.6	1974	5.0
1969	10.6	1975	4.1
1961	10.0	1949	3.7
1966	10.0	1954	2.9
1972	8.9	1951	2.0

Table 3. Winner's two-party preferred share of vote at House of Representatives elections 1946–2004

Year	Winning leader	Winner's two-party preferred %
1966	Holt	56.9
1975	Fraser	55.7
1977	Fraser	54.6
1955	Menzies	54.2
1958	Menzies	54.1
1946	Chifley	53.7
1996	Howard	53.6
1983	Hawke	53.2
1972	Whitlam	52.7
2004	Howard	52.7
1963	Menzies	52.6
1984	Hawke	51.8
1974	Whitlam	51.7
1993	Keating	51.4
1949	Menzies	51.0
2001	Howard	51.0
1987	Hawke	50.8
1951	Menzies	50.7
1980	Fraser	50.4
1990	Hawke	49.9
1969	Gorton	49.8
1961	Menzies	49.5
1954	Menzies	49.3
1998	Howard	48.9

Table 4. Two-Party preferred swing at House of Representatives elections 1946–2004

Year	Swing in relation to government	Swing % (two-party preferred)
1975	Against	7.4
1969	Against	7.1
1946	Against	5.4
1996	Against	5.0
1955	To	4.9
1949	Against	4.7
1998	Against	4.7
1961	Against	4.6
1966	To	4.3
1980	Against	4.2
1983	Against	3.6
1963	To	3.1
1972	Against	2.5
2001	To	2.1
2004	To	1.7
1993	To	1.5
1954	Against	1.4
1984	Against	1.4
1977	Against	1.1
1974	Against	1.0
1987	Against	1.0
1990	Against	0.9
1951	Against	0.3
1958	Against	0.1

kindly by Australia's system of preferential voting than by the first-past-the-post systems in Britain and the United States. Voters can express both a preference for a minority party with their first vote and also a second preference that allows them to affect the result if their preferred candidate has no hope. Table 3 orders the election results according to the winning margin in terms of the two-party preferred vote. This is a measure, originally devised by Malcolm Mackerras, to take account of the two primary facts about Australian elections: that (a) it is a preferential voting system in which the distribution of second preference votes for minor parties may be crucial; and (b) that the basic question in deciding who forms government is which side – Labor or the Liberal–National Party Coalition – has the majority.

Table 3 reveals that although changes of government are infrequent, Australian elections tend to be close, and

that a relatively small swing in the vote could change the outcome. In thirteen of the 24 elections, the two-party preferred vote was 52:48 or closer, and in seven of the ten elections since 1980 it has been this close. The largest winning margin was Harold Holt's victory over Arthur Calwell in the 1966 "Vietnam" election, and the second biggest was Malcolm Fraser's victory following the dismissal of the Whitlam government in 1975.

On five occasions, the winning side actually received just under 50 per cent of the two-party preferred vote, and if the distribution of votes between seats had been different they could easily have lost. Each of these elections (1954, 1961, 1969, 1990, and 1998) was a case of an incumbent government being less preferred than its opponent but managing to win because it retained its most vulnerable seats. Interestingly, the government with the smallest ever winning share of the two-party pre-

Table 5. Votes and seats in House of Representatives Elections 1946–2004

Year	Winning leader	Winning party	Winner's two-party preferred %	Winner's % seats	Difference
1975	Fraser	Lib	55.7	71.7	16.0
1977	Fraser	Lib	54.6	69.4	14.8
1958	Menzies	Lib	54.1	65.8	11.7
1949	Menzies	Lib	51.0	61.2	10.2
1966	Holt	Lib	56.9	66.1	9.5
1996	Howard	Lib	53.6	62.8	9.2
1980	Fraser	Lib	50.4	59.2	8.8
1955	Menzies	Lib	54.2	61.5	7.3
1987	Hawke	ALP	50.8	58.1	7.3
1983	Hawke	ALP	53.2	60.0	6.8
1951	Menzies	Lib	50.7	57.0	6.7
1963	Menzies	Lib	52.6	59.0	6.4
2004	Howard	Lib	52.7	58.0	5.3
1998	Howard	Lib	48.9	54.1	5.2
1946	Chifley	ALP	53.7	58.1	4.4
1954	Menzies	Lib	49.3	52.9	3.6
1984	Hawke	ALP	51.8	55.4	3.6
1969	Gorton	Lib	49.8	52.8	3.0
1993	Keating	Lib	51.4	54.4	3.0
2001	Howard	Lib	51.0	54.0	3.0
1990	Hawke	ALP	49.9	52.7	2.8
1961	Menzies	Lib	49.5	50.8	1.3
1972	Whitlam	ALP	52.7	53.6	1.1
1974	Whitlam	ALP	51.7	52.0	0.3

ferred vote was John Howard's in 1998.

Table 4 orders these elections in terms of the net swing measured in two-party preferred terms. Two general tendencies stand out. One is that in three-quarters of the elections, or eighteen of 24, the swing was against the incumbent. On only seven occasions did the government improve its position in an election – the Menzies government in 1955 and 1958 following the Labor split (in 1958 its share of the vote fell very slightly, but it gained seats); in 1963 and 1966, as Labor under Arthur Calwell fell further behind after almost winning the 1961 “credit squeeze” election; Paul Keating's 1993 *Fightback!* election; and the 2001 and 2004 elections under John Howard.

The other aspect of the table is that there is normally quite a moderate net swing in Australian elections, with fourteen of the 24 producing swings of more than 2 per cent but only ten produced a swing of more than 4 per cent and only four a swing of more than 5 per cent.

Of the changes in government, two came from a very pronounced swing, when Labor lost in 1975 and 1996, but the other three came from a two-election sequence, with the biggest swing occurring in the election before office was won. After the conservative collapse during the second world war, Menzies scored a huge swing in 1946 before winning in 1949. Under conditions of great prosperity Whitlam achieved the second largest swing in the whole period, in 1969, before winning in 1972. Another Labor leader, Bill Hayden, achieved a bigger swing in 1980 than Bob Hawke did in 1983 when he defeated the Fraser government. It is perhaps this two-step pattern that made Howard think that after his 2004 triumph he would be safe for one more election.

Table 5 highlights another feature of Australia's single member electoral system for the House of Representatives: the number of seats won is not necessarily proportional to the total vote obtained. In fact, the system tends to inflate the winning margin of the victor.

In all 24 elections the winning side won a greater proportion of seats than of votes, the disproportionality sometimes being quite marked. Two patterns are apparent. One is that overall the system has been kinder to the Coalition than to Labor. Only on two of the twelve occasions when the difference in seats won compared to votes won was more than six per cent was Labor the beneficiary. The conventional explanations for this is that there used to be a weighting towards more conservative rural electorates, and that too much of Labor's vote was locked up in the working class electorates it tended to win by large margins. Both these explanations have become weaker with time.

The other pattern apparent is that the greater the winning margin, the more marked becomes the disproportion. As the winning margin in votes increases, the margin in seats increases even more markedly. Our electoral system tends to magnify landslides.

So the bottom line for this election, according to Antony Green's ABC election website, is that Labor must achieve a uniform swing of 4.3 per cent and win 51.5 per cent of the two-party preferred vote to form government. (Swings are never uniform, but there is a broad assumption that the variations will broadly cancel out in the number of seats won.)

But if the current poll figures translate into the election vote, Labor would not only win, but achieve the biggest swing since the second world war, and by far its most successful electoral result ever. If it achieved the 56 per cent of the two-party preferred vote that the Newspoll reported on October 15 gives it, it would transform its current deficit of 32 seats into a majority of 42.

So all the polls between now and election day will be closely scrutinised. Expect most of them to highlight the theme the government is closing the gap, even if the margin would still give Labor a decisive victory. This is partly because the media have an interest in building the sense of an exciting contest, partly because the current polls are so deviant from recent patterns that many believe they must narrow –perhaps partly reflecting wishful thinking by some in the media.

A frame of the government becoming more competitive also fits the narrative that Prime Minister Howard established last time, dramatically raising the government's vote as the campaign progressed. It also fits a more general narrative stemming from a conventional wisdom in Australian politics that between elections voters express their discontent with the government, but as the election looms, and the choice becomes more explicit, they focus on the weaknesses of the opposition

and drift back to the government. But as Sol Lebovic and Murray Goot have pointed out, only in two of the last seven elections has there been a substantial movement back to the government during the campaign, in 1993 and 2004.

It is hard to get a proper perspective on the credibility of the polls. Some people have a sullen suspicion of them, although the theories of sampling on which they are based are sound. More commonly, though, they are reported with a misleading certainty about what they portend. Essentially, there are seven reasons not to simply extrapolate from a recent poll finding to an election outcome.

1. Sampling error. If a poll sample is random (that is, every member of the relevant population has an equal chance of being selected), then the results for a sample of 1000 people can be extrapolated to the population with a 95 per cent confidence level to plus or minus three percentage points. In other words, nineteen times out of twenty, if such a survey showed a result of 50 per cent the true figure would lie between 47 and 53 per cent. If the random sample was 2000 people then with the same confidence level it is accurate to plus or minus two percent. If the sample was 10,000, it is accurate to plus or minus one per cent.

Note that it is the size of the sample that matters, not the size of the population. As long as the sample is random, then a sample of 2000 can be extrapolated to the Australian population, the American population, or an individual electorate with the same confidence level of plus or minus two per cent. (On his blog, www.mumble.com, Peter Brent rightly took News Limited's Glenn Milne to account recently for the common journalistic error of saying that 300 was a good sample size for estimating the vote in an individual electorate.) Be especially suspicious of polls that don't report their sample size, such as that of four marginal Queensland electorates reported by the *Courier-Mail* on 15 October.

2. Sampling distortions. In practice few surveys achieve pure randomness. Reasons of availability and access and expense produce distortions. In the old days, when most surveys were done face to face, it used to be joked that owners of German shepherd dogs were under-represented. Certainly remote rural dwellers and non-English speakers were under-represented. Telephone polls often tend to miss younger people who are

less often at home, and while the great bulk of the public own telephones (especially if mobiles are included) the sampling frame of telephone ownership does not exactly match that of the electorate.

Apart from the short cuts that cost-conscious marketing organisations may take in obtaining their sample, the other major distortion is that pollsters cannot compel people to respond, and the pattern of refusals – seemingly becoming more common as the years pass – introduces another element of non-randomness. So when Newspoll says in the small print of their table that their ‘maximum margin of sampling error is plus or minus three percentage points’, they are correct – nineteen times out of twenty – according to probability theory, but are expressing an unrealistic confidence in their capacity to obtain a purely random sample. And the majority of Australian elections have margins less than this.

On the other hand, there are reasons to be more confident in the accuracy of the polls than this. The pollsters not only have a strong interest in being accurate but have accumulated great experience, and know how well their sample demographics conform to other parameters of the Australian electorate, such as age, sex and location, and this helps give them a sense of their accuracy and sometimes leads to weighting procedures.

In surveys on issues, there are two very important sources of inaccuracy that are less important in election surveys:

3. Misleading answers. While respondents cannot be compelled to answer, neither is it guaranteed they will say what they really think. Accurate polling is impossible in a country where the respondents think they could be reported to the authorities if they gave the wrong answer for example. In a democracy the more likely distortion comes from the wish to give socially desirable or acceptable answers, which is sometimes a factor in questions about race. In election surveys it is not normally a factor, but can occasionally become so. It was thought that some One Nation supporters were reluctant to publicly state their preference, for example.

4. Misleading questions. On policy issues, the distribution of opinion can be greatly affected by how the question is framed, what words are used, what options are offered. On contentious issues, where many in the public have ambivalent attitudes, or on issues about which they do not have strongly formed attitudes, this

can greatly skew the meaning of the poll results, but in election surveys it is rarely an important factor.

Assuming that factors three and four don’t apply, and that there is a competent pollster drawing on a large sample (at least 1000+ and preferably towards 2000), we can be confident in the broad accuracy of the polls. The remaining three factors are the most important in being wary about the interpretation of the polls:

5. Distribution of “don’t knows” and minor party supporters. News organisations are interested in a simple, dramatic poll headline. They are interested in opinion rather than lack of opinion. But along with those who refused to participate, the don’t knows typically form a sizable proportion. Pollsters try to minimise this by asking which way they are leaning, but for many purposes ascertaining the lack of opinion formation or the softness of opinion may be as important as the headline result.

Similarly the distribution of preferences is usually crucial in the battle to form government in Australia, and especially so now that minor parties and independents may attract the support of up to one fifth of the electorate. Pollsters vary in their approach to the issue of how to distribute preferences, which they do not always ask respondents directly to give. The allocation of these voters, together with the don’t knows and refusers, constitute a considerable area of doubt in interpreting the polls.

6. Conversion of votes into seats. As noted, the election result is determined by the number of *seats* a party wins, not the total votes it acquires. No single-member system can be guaranteed to give proportional outcomes. This last factor probably tends to somewhat favour the government, as members in marginal electorates can use the advantages of incumbency, such as visibility and government largesse, to defy the swing elsewhere to at least some extent. So if the polls are running close to 50–50, it is probably safer to back the government.

7. Change of opinion between the poll date and election day. The capacity of people to change their mind or to decide very close to election day is the basis of the explanation pollsters usually use when their results do not match the election results. There does seem to be an increase in the number of softly committed voters who are prone to late decisions, and this does make the election campaign of increasing importance. The retro-

spective Australian Election Surveys, taken after each election since 1987, find very sizable proportions of people saying they decided how to vote during the campaign itself, and quite a few in the final days – enough, by far, to deliver a landslide to one party or the other if all decided in the same election. But these surveys almost certainly exaggerate the actual degree of indecision, and the polls published contemporaneously have never found the size of movement that the AES surveys suggest is possible. Nevertheless in many campaigns there is enough movement of opinion to change the outcome.

So, putting the fate of the nation to one side, this election is a psephologist's dream. To win John Howard must achieve the biggest swing back in polling history. If he repeated his 2004 swing in the polls it would make it very close but possibly still not quite enough. If the polls stay as they are, Kevin Rudd will achieve the biggest swing to Labor in postwar Australian history. If there are changes midway between these two, there would still probably be just the sixth change of government since the second world war. •

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The data for the tables in this paper is drawn principally from Peter Brent's electoral website, <http://www.mumble.com.au>; Antony Green's ABC Election website, <http://www.abc.net.au/elections/federal/2007>; the database on Australian politics maintained by Campbell Sharman and the University of Western Australia, <http://elections.uwa.edu.au>; and the Australian Electoral Commission, <http://www.aec.gov.au>.