6. To the Second Decimal Point: How the polls vied to predict the national vote, monitor the marginals and second-guess the Senate

Murray Goot

From a poll-watcher's perspective, three things made the 2010 election distinctive. One was the unprecedented number of pollsters and the competition among them for media space. For the first time, seven companies were involved nationally—five from the outset of the campaign, one towards the end and one after respondents' had cast their votes—with others involved in particular States or in private polling for the parties. Polling was conducted both nationally and in marginal seats. Almost all the polling was focused on the election for the House of Representatives; only one set of results pretended to offer any sort of guide to the Senate. And no fewer than four companies conducted exit polls or day-of-the-election surveys.

A second feature was the record number of polls in the public domain not paid for by the press. Three polling organisations did have contractual relations with the press: Newspoll with *The Australian*, Galaxy with News Limited's metropolitan dailies and Nielsen with *The Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*. But Galaxy also polled for Channel Nine, and three firms produced 'exit' polls or election-day polls for television: Galaxy for Channel Nine, Auspoll for *Sky News* and Morgan for Channel Seven. And of the seven companies that conducted national polls during the campaign, three paid for the fieldwork themselves: Morgan, which posted the results on its web site and sent them to about 10 000 email addresses, gave some of its findings first to Channel Seven; Essential Research, whose results were distributed to some 400 email addresses and posted on the *Crikey* web site; and JWS, whose findings were taken up and published by the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

The third difference was the unprecedented range of data-gathering techniques these firms deployed. Morgan used face-to-face interviewing, a tradition that dates from 1941 when it ran the Australian Gallup Poll; but it also used phone polling and text messaging—an Australian first—for its exit poll. Galaxy used the phone, but switched to face-to-face interviews for its exit poll—a mode also used by Auspoll for its exit poll. Newspoll used phone interviewing. Essential Research ran its polling online. And JWS had respondents enter their voting

intentions into a computer via their telephone keypads. The proliferation of polls was driven by new, cheaper technologies—the Internet and automated telephone polling lowering the barrier to entry.

This chapter outlines what the pollsters said about their own accuracy—an important part of their post-election marketing—before looking at the ways in which a more dispassionate observer might assess their performance. It traces the ways in which the polls tracked the parties' fortunes. It examines the uneven performance of the polls in the marginal seats—seats where, as the contest tightened, the pollsters put in a lot of effort. And it looks at their poor performance in relation to the Senate—an arena into which only one of the polls ventured.

Which of the polls performed best? That depends on the criteria against which their performance is measured; in any event, the differences were not statistically significant. Where the polls ran into most trouble was in marginal seats where they used small samples. Are the polls getting worse at measuring party support? Notwithstanding the decline of landlines and response rates, they are not. Are the polls getting better? Again, the answer is no. Indeed, anyone guessing that the two-party preferred vote at every election since 1993 would be evenly split would have as good a record for accuracy as any of the three polling organisations that have provided estimates at each of the elections since that date.

Bragging Rights

The day after the election a number of the pollsters released their own assessments of their performance and that of their competitors, though the parties' vote share was still unclear. The Morgan poll—keen to calibrate the errors of its rivals to two decimal places—was first in, though not necessarily best dressed. 'As of now', declared Gary Morgan on the day of the election—when the vote count had Labor on 38.5 per cent (it would finish with 38 per cent), the Coalition on 43.5 per cent (43.6 per cent), the Greens at 11.4 per cent (11.8 per cent) and Others at 6.6 per cent (6.6 per cent)—'the 7 NEWS Morgan Poll is easily the most accurate of the 4 major polls'. Morgan's 'Two Party preferred had an average error of only 0.3 per cent', meaning 0.3 percentage points; its 'Primary vote average error' (based on its estimate of votes for Labor, the Coalition, the Greens and Others) 'was only 0.5 per cent—probably our most accurate forecast', though whether it was the 'most accurate' ever or simply the 'most accurate' of the four 'final' polls he had conducted for the 2010 election was unclear. In addition,

Morgan had ‘correctly predicted a Green controlled Senate’, had predicted that ‘the Greens would win their first House of Representatives seat’ and had been ‘the first to predict a hung parliament’ (Morgan et al. 2010).

The poll on which Morgan based its claim to having produced ‘easily the most accurate’ poll was a strange hybrid—a mixture of initial interviews and selected ‘follow-ups’. Morgan made no attempt to contact all the respondents; it simply assumed that the only respondents who might have changed their mind were the ‘undecided’ and those intending to vote Greens. While the original Morgan poll had the same two-party preferred count (51:49) as the adjusted poll, the average difference between the first-preference votes (Coalition, Labor, Greens, Other) and the election result was greater in the original poll (1 percentage point) than in the adjusted version (0.5 percentage points).

Another poll that might have formed the basis of its post-election comparison but did not was its day-of-the-election phone poll for Channel Seven. Described as an ‘exit poll’—in fact, it was based on nationwide interviews on election day with respondents who had voted and those who had yet to vote—it reported a Labor two-party preferred vote of 51.5 per cent and a first-preference distribution of Liberal-Nationals 41.5 per cent, ALP 38.5 per cent, Greens 13 per cent and 7 per cent Other (Morgan 2010a). Less accurate than Morgan’s pre-election poll in terms of the two-party preferred, it was no less accurate in terms of first preferences.

There was a third poll to which Morgan might have referred as well. Also described as an ‘exit poll’—this time more accurately—it involved asking 2000 voters drawn from the Roy Morgan Elector Panel to text their vote to Morgan once they had voted. Since ‘the original panel’—recruited over a number of years from Morgan’s face-to-face surveys—was ‘controlled’ and ‘their previous voting intention and their vote at the last election’ in 2007 were ‘known’, it was ‘possible to project from the sms [sic] “exit” poll’, Morgan argued, ‘to an Australia-wide vote’. While the response rate in this survey was high (1580 members of the panel responded), the last results, posted at 6.16 pm Eastern Standard Time, appear to have been entered into the system at 4 pm—two hours before polling booths in most of the country closed (Morgan 2010b). This means results from Western Australia—two hours behind the rest of the country—were under-represented.

Not to be outdone, Essential Research on the Monday after the election issued an ‘election poll wrap’ of its own, inscribed with the headline: ‘Essential wins bragging rights.’ In estimating the two-party preferred vote, it argued, ‘[a]ll pollsters performed well’ because ‘all were within 0.3% to 1.3% of the current result’, which it reported as 50.7:49.3. ‘The Essential Report and Morgan Research were closest with 51/49. Newspoll’s 50.2/49.8 was next closest with Nielsen and

Galaxy 1.3% off at 52/48.' 'However,' it continued, 'a better way to compare the polls' was 'to look at their first preferences for the major parties'—by which it meant the Greens not just the Coalition and Labor—because the two-party preferred count was 'based on an assumed distribution of preferences' (not true of Morgan, Nielsen, Essential, Auspoll or JWS), 'not on the actual measurement of voting intentions'.

On this measure, 'all the polls'—it listed Newspoll, Nielsen, Galaxy, Morgan and Essential but not JWS—'were within the margin of error'. But 'Essential Research was clearly the closest', the 'average difference' between its estimates of the parties' performance and their support at the election 'being just 0.5%'; the equivalent score for Morgan (on the basis of its last complete poll not its subsequent adjustment) was 1.2 percentage points, for Nielsen 1.4, for Newspoll 1.7 and for Galaxy 1.9 percentage points. The Greens' support, it concluded, had been 'over-estimated' in 'most polls' (all polls, except the Essential, 'over-estimated' Greens' support), while support for Labor in Newspoll had been 'underestimated' (Essential 2010b).

Equally quick off the mark were the papers that had commissioned Newspoll and Nielsen. A headline inside Monday's *Australian* declared: 'Newspoll forecast right on the money again.' According to the report, 'Newspoll yet again' had 'taken out top polling honours'. With the official count showing Labor ahead 50.67 per cent to the Coalition's 49.33 per cent, Newspoll's 50.2:49.8 'came closest to precisely mirroring the outcome of the vote'. Nielsen and Galaxy—the 'other two major polls'—had 'overstated Labor's support'. (This was true, but they had overstated Labor's support by a smaller margin than Newspoll had overstated the Coalition's support.) 'Minor polls'—as the report called the Morgan and Essential polls, presumably on the grounds that they lacked media sponsors—had come 'closer than Nielsen and Galaxy to forecasting the outcome': the 'final Morgan telephone poll of the campaign' (its election-day phone poll), with a 51.5:48.5 split, and 'Essential Research's web-based poll', with a 51:49 split. As for '[t]he much ballyhooed "Robo-poll" automated telephone poll', produced by JWS and published by the rival Fairfax press, it 'also overstated Labor's two-party preferred vote' (Kerr 2010).

'It always seems risky to go with a number that's very different from other pollsters', Newspoll's chief executive officer, Martin O'Shannessy, was quoted as saying, 'but we have a very strict policy of always reporting the poll exactly and not adjusting it and that's why we reported this, not rounded in any way'. In fact, its 'very strict policy' of reporting the two-party preferred count to the first decimal point was relatively new; Newspoll had first adopted it in March 2009 on the eve of the Queensland election. This was the first national election at which Newspoll had reported its results to less than half a percentage point (Goot 2010, 78–80). O'Shannessy said nothing about how well Newspoll had

done in predicting the first-preference vote for the various parties—again, as in Queensland and subsequently South Australia, reported to the first decimal point.

On the performance of the Galaxy poll—a poll with a very good record—not one of the News Limited dailies was prepared to comment. While the report in *The Australian* seemed happy enough to dismiss it—Newspoll and Galaxy were keen rivals—none of the other newspapers was prepared to defend it. Galaxy, however, was not to be counted out. On its web site, it insisted that its polling, which had shown Labor's two-party preferred vote at 50–52 per cent from the time Gillard became Prime Minister through to the election, was '[a] remarkable feat of consistency' (though what this proves is unclear); that it had predicted 'the closeness of the election' (though not the closeness that Newspoll had predicted); and that its 'Superpoll' in the last week of the campaign (discussed below) had 'provided the best guide to the swings in each of the states of all the published polls' (Galaxy 2010).

Writing on the Monday after the election in *The Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*—papers that had commissioned Nielsen, and, in the case of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, also published JWS—Mark Davis, the National Editor for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, awarded the palm not to Newspoll or Galaxy, not to the polls *The Age* or *Sydney Morning Herald* had published, but to Morgan's phone poll and the poll published by Essential; both had estimated Labor's two-party preferred vote at 51 per cent, which made them 'out by just 0.3 percentage points' but 'spot on if the election result is rounded to the nearest percentage point like most of the published poll predictions'. In contrast, Newspoll was out by 0.5 or by 0.7 percentage points if its estimates were rounded. JWS Research 'notched up an unrounded error [of] 0.9 percentage points'. Entering the contest, Nielsen's John Stirton noted that if it was a battle to the first decimal point, Nielsen's (unpublished) unrounded figure for Labor—51.8 per cent—'gave Nielsen a 1.1 per cent (unrounded) error', assuming Labor's two-party preferred vote remained at 50.7. Nonetheless, Davis stressed, the predictions made by all the polls were 'well inside their statistical margin of error'.

Each of these assessments—from *The Australian*, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*—was confined to the way the polls had measured up to the two-party preferred vote. This was also true of *The Canberra Times* (2010), the only other daily to comment on the performance of the polls. Not until 1993 had all the polls published a two-party preferred figure (Goot 2009, 126). Now the two-party preferred score seemed to be the only measure that mattered.

Mirror, Mirror on the Wall...

Once the results were finally declared, the two-party preferred figures looked slightly different. So did the first preferences. If we focus on first preferences—the way polls everywhere else in the world are judged—there is more than one measure we can apply. With a variety of measures, a poll that scores well on one measure—whether it is the two-party preferred or some other measure—will not necessarily score well on others.

Labor's final two-party preferred margin was not 50.7 per cent, as it appeared on election night, but 50.1 per cent. On this measure, Newspoll, which had Labor on 50.2 per cent, performed best; it would have taken an even greater measure of luck to have performed any better. As Table 6.1 (pre-election polls) and Table 6.2 (election-day polls) show, the Essential poll, conducted online in the last week of the campaign, the Morgan pre-election phone poll, whether in its original or its adjusted form, the Morgan day-of-the-election (SMS) poll and the Auspoll were the next best with a Labor two-party preferred count of 51 per cent. These were followed by Morgan's day-of-the-election phone poll (51.5 per cent). Tied, at the back of the field, came half-a-dozen others: Morgan's final face-to-face poll, the final Nielsen phone poll, the two JWS automated phone polls (its campaign poll and its day-of-the-election poll) and the two Galaxy phone polls (its last campaign poll and its exit poll), all of which had Labor on 52 per cent. Morgan, with four runners in the race—almost certainly a world first—had two in the third (or second-last) bunch of finishers and two in the fourth (or last).

Table 6.1 Final Pre-Election Day Polls for the House of Representatives Election, 21 August 2010

Poll	Method	Date	Days before election	Lib*/NP**	LNP	ALP	AD	Greens	FF	Ind.	Other	Excl.	Total	N	2PP [†] (ALP)
Nielsen	Phone	17–19 Aug.	2	(39/2) [#]	41.5	39	1	13	1.5	2	2	n.a.	100	(2040)	52
Morgan	Face-to-face	14–15 Aug.	6	n.a.	43	40	n.a.	13.5	1.5	n.a.	2	[7]	100	(1049)	52
Morgan	Phone [#]	18–19 Aug.	2	(39/3)	42	38	n.a.	13	n.a.	n.a.	7	[9]	100	(1872)	51
Galaxy	Phone	17–18 Aug.	3	38/3	41	38	n.a.	14	2	n.a.	5	[5]	100	(1200)	52
Newspoll [†]	Phone	17–19 Aug.	2	n.a.	43.4	36.2	n.a.	13.9	n.a.	n.a.	6.5	n.a.	100	(2507)	50.2
Essential	Online	13–19 Aug.	2	(40/3)	43	38	n.a.	12	2	n.a.	5	[5]	100	(1077)	51
JWS	Phone—auto	14–15 Aug.	6	n.a.	42.2	36.5	n.a.	14.9	n.a.	n.a.	6.4	[3]	100	(28 000)	52
Election		21 Aug.		39.6/4	43.6	38	0.2	11.8	2.3	2.5	1.6		100		50.1

Note: Poll data to nearest integer or decimal point as reported by each of the polling organisations.
n.a. not available

* Liberal Party and Liberal National Party of Queensland

** The Nationals and Country Liberal (Northern Territory)

[#] On 20 August, Morgan recontacted 187 ‘undecided’ and Greens respondents and adjusted its figures to read: LNP 42.5 per cent; ALP 39 per cent; Greens 11.5 per cent

[#] Separate figures for The Nationals not provided to the *Sydney Morning Herald* or *The Age*

[†] Based on the distribution of minor-party preferences at the 2007 election

Sources: For Nielsen, Coorey (2010, 1, 10) and Grattan (2010, 1); for the face-to-face poll, <<http://www.roymorgan.com/news/polls/2010/4566/>>; for the phone poll, <<http://www.roymorgan.com/news/polls/2010/4567/>>; for the update, <<http://www.roymorgan.com/news/polls/2010/4568/>> (viewed 21 August 2010); for Galaxy, Farr (2010, 4–5) and Shanahan (2010, 1, 6); Essential (2010a); JWS (2010); and for the election results, Australian Electoral Commission (<www.aec.gov.au>), viewed 5 October 2010.

Table 6.2 Election Day and Exit Polls, House of Representatives, 21 August 2010

Poll	Method	Lib*/NP**	LNP	ALP	AD	Greens	FF	Ind.	Other	Excl.	Total	N	2PP† (ALP)
Morgan	SMS	(39/2.5)	41.5	38.5	n.a.	12	n.a.	n.a.	7	n.a.	100	(1580)	51
Morgan	Phone	(39.5/3)	42.5	38	n.a.	13	n.a.	n.a.	7	n.a.	100	(1220)	51.5
Galaxy	Face-to-face	n.a.	44	41	n.a.	11	n.a.	n.a.	4	n.a.	100	(2959)	52#
JWS	Phone—auto	n.a.	42.5	37.2	n.a.	14.3	n.a.	n.a.	6	[2]	100	(17 851)	52
Auspoll	Face-to-face	n.a.	45	42	n.a.	9	n.a.	n.a.	4	n.a.	100	(3000)	51##
Election		39.6/4	43.6	38	0.2	11.8	2.3	2.5	1.6		100		50.1

Note: Poll data to nearest integer or decimal point as reported by each of the polling organisations.

n.a. not available

* Liberal Party and Liberal National Party of Queensland

** The Nationals and Country Liberal (Northern Territory)

† Except for Galaxy; based on preference flow at the 2007 election

Exit poll conducted at 24 booths across Australia with respondents asked to fill out a form similar to the ballot paper

Exit poll of 30 marginal seats

Sources: For the phone poll, <<http://www.roymorgan.com/news/polls/2010/4571/>> (viewed 30 September 2010); Morgan (2010b); for two-party preferred data, John Scales, 'JWS Research-Telereach election day poll results', Email to Steve Wilson [Channel Ten], 21 August 2010, 5.43 pm, Author's collection; for first preferences, John Scales, Email to Steve Wilson, 21 August 2010, 6.42 pm; for sample size and excluded (undecided/don't know), John Scales, Email to the author, 4 October 2010; for Galaxy, David Briggs, Personal communication; for Auspoll, Ross Neilson, and <<http://blogs.crikey.com.au/pollbludger/2010/08/21/morgan-sms-exit-poll-51-49-to-labor/comment-page-13/>>

Does the order of merit change if we change the measure of success from predicting the two-party preferred to one of predicting the primary or first-preference vote? In boasting of their success, both Morgan and Newspann noted, after the final results were in, that the ‘error’ of their estimates for each of the parties was 1 percentage point or less—‘well within the expected sampling error’, Newspann added, ‘of ± 2 percentage points’ (Levine et al. 2010, 16; Morgan et al. 2010 for the poll cited in Levine et al. 2010; Newspann 2010).

To compare like with like, we need to focus on those parties—Labor, the LNP (taken as a single entity), the Greens and ‘Other’ (the parties and Independents that make up the rest)—for which *all* the polls provided estimates (see Table 6.3a). On this measure, the Essential poll had an average error of just 0.3 percentage points. The next most accurate were three of the Morgan polls: the last of its pre-election phone polls (0.7), the phone poll taken on the day of the election (0.7) and the one taken on the day of the election via SMS (0.8). Less accurate were the final campaign polls conducted by Newspann (1.1) and Nielsen (1.1), the last Galaxy poll of the campaign (1.3), and the day-of-the-election poll conducted by JWS (1.3). Least accurate were the JWS poll (1.6) and Morgan’s face-to-face poll (1.9) completed six days before the election—three to four days before any of the other final pre-election polls; and two day-of-the-election polls, Galaxy (1.7) and Auspoll (1.8), conducted in less than one-quarter of the seats. (Given that Galaxy and Auspoll would have been delighted to have come up with figures that matched the national result, and in the absence of any statement about the electorates/polling booths they sampled, it seems reasonable—if less than ideal—to assess them on the same basis as their competitors.) If the polls taken early in the last week confirm one maxim—where voting intentions change, timing matters—the polls on election day confirm another: it is foolish to judge the whole electorate on the basis of sampling its (unspecified) parts.

Table 6.3a Magnitude of the Average Error in the Polls’ Estimate of the Vote Share for the ALP, LNP, Greens and Others in the Final Polls of the Campaign and in Polls on Election Day, House of Representatives, 2010 (percentage points)

	Galaxy	JWS	Morgan	Auspoll	Essential	Nielsen	Newspann
Campaign	1.3	1.6*	0.7, 1.9 [†]		0.3 [°]	1.1	1.1
Election day	1.7 ^{†#}	1.3*	0.7, 0.8 [∞]	1.8 ^{†##}			

* Automated telephone call [†] Face-to-face [#] Exit poll conducted at 24 booths across Australia ^{##} Exit poll in 30 marginal seats [°] Online [∞] SMS

Note: Telephone interviews unless otherwise indicated.

Sources: As for Tables 6.1 and 6.2.

Since some polls estimated the distribution of the vote for a larger number of parties than just those with the most substantial support (Labor, the LNP, the

Greens plus Others), we can also measure the polls' performance by adopting a horses-for-courses principle—that is, by calculating the average error for each of the parties for which the polls provided an estimate (see Table 6.3b). On this measure, the order of merit is much the same, though there is nothing to choose between the Essential poll (0.6)—now looking slightly worse—and the two Morgan day-of-the-election polls (0.5, 0.6) at the top, followed by: the Morgan (0.8) and Nielsen (0.9) phone polls conducted in the last week of the campaign; the campaign polls of Galaxy (1) and Newspoll (1.1); the JWS day-of-the-election poll (1.3); with the Morgan face-to-face poll (1.5), the JWS campaign poll (1.6) and the exit Auspoll (1.8) retaining their places at the bottom.

Table 6.3b Averages of the Differences Between the Polls' Estimates of the Parties' First-Preference Votes for Each Party Polled and the Votes actually Recorded by Each Party, in the Final Polls of the Campaign and in Polls Conducted on Election Day, House of Representatives, 2010 (percentage points)

	Galaxy	JWS	Morgan	Auspoll	Essential	Nielsen	Newspoll
Campaign	1.0 [6]	1.6 [4]*	0.8 [4], 1.5 [5] [#]		0.6 [5] ^o	0.9 [8]	1.1 [4]
Election day	1.7 [4] ^{†#}	1.3 [4]*	0.5 [5], 0.6 [5] [∞]	1.8 [4] ^{†##}			

* Automated telephone call † Face-to-face [#] Exit poll conducted at 24 booths across Australia ^{##} Exit poll in 30 marginal seats ^o Online [∞] SMS

Notes: Telephone interviews unless otherwise indicated; the number in square brackets indicates the number of parties for which each poll provided an estimate; the Nielsen poll reported the widest range of estimates—for Liberal, Liberal National, Labor, Australian Democrats, Greens, Family First, Independents, and Other; for other polls, parties not reported are added to Other and the appropriate comparison is made.

Sources: As for Tables 6.1 and 6.2.

On any of these measures—two-party preferred, the parties for which all the polls offered estimates, and the estimates for the parties offered by each poll—there is no evidence of the polls doing either significantly better or significantly worse, in strictly statistical terms, than in the past. Nonetheless, some outperformed while others under-performed their medium or long-term average. In terms of the two-party preferred figures (Table 6.4), Galaxy recorded a relatively poor result. It overestimated Labor's lead by 1.9 percentage points in both its pre-election and its day-of-the-election polls; in 2004 and 2007, it had underestimated first the Coalition's, and then Labor's, winning lead, by just 0.7 percentage points. Nielsen, with the same size error, actually did markedly better than in 2007; its 2010 figure brought it back into line with its long-term average. Morgan's phone polls were slightly more accurate than their long-term average (though the variance in Morgan's performance has been high); Morgan's face-to-face poll—out by 1.9 percentage points—also beat its long-term average, which has been poor (see also Jackman 2005). Newspoll, too, outperformed its long-term average, while Auspoll did almost as well in 2010 as it did in 2007.

Table 6.4 Differences Between the Polls' Final Estimates of Winning Party's Share of the Two-Party Preferred and the Actual Two-Party Preferred Vote, House of Representatives, 1993–2010, for Polls that Estimated the Two-Party Preferred Vote at the 2010 election (percentage points)*

Election	Nielsen	Morgan		Newspoll	Galaxy		Auspoll	Essential	JWS
2010	+1.9		+0.9 +1.4	+0.9 [∞] +1.9 [‡]	+0.1 [†]	+1.9 [†] +1.9 ^{‡6}	+0.9 ^{‡6}	+0.9 ^{‡z}	+1.9 [°] +1.9 [°]
2007	+4.3	+4.3 ^z	+0.8 [†]	+3.9 [‡]	−0.7 [†]	−0.7 [†]	+0.3		
2004	+1.3		−3.7	−4.2 [‡]	−2.7	−0.7 [†]			
2001	+1.0			−5.5 [‡]	+2.0				
1998	+1.0		+1.0	−1.0 [‡]	−2.0				
1996	−2.6		−3.6		−0.1				
1993	+1.9	−0.4 ⁶	+0.9		+1.9				
Mean	2.0		1.8	3.3 [‡]	1.4	1.1 [†]	0.6	0.9 ^z	1.9 [°]

* Based on respondents' reports of their second preferences/preference between Labor and Liberal unless otherwise stated

+ Overestimate − Underestimate † Based on distribution of minor-party preferences at preceding election

^z Online [°] Automated telephone calls ⁶ Exit polls [‡] Face-to-face [∞] SMS

Notes: Telephone interviews unless otherwise indicated; 1993 was the first election for which each poll estimated a two-party preferred count.

In terms of the first preferences that all the polls reported—for the ALP, LNP, the Greens and Others—Newspoll's performance was better than its long-term average, as were Nielsen's and Morgan's (both phone and face-to-face). Galaxy was the one poll to do noticeably worse than in 2004 or 2007 (Table 6.5a).

Table 6.5a Averages of the Differences Between the Polls' Estimates of the Parties' First-Preference Votes and the Votes Actually Recorded, House of Representatives, 1987–2010, for Firms that Conducted Polls During the 2010 Campaign (percentage points)*

Election	Parties	Nielsen [†]		Morgan		Newspoll	Galaxy		Auspoll	Essential	JWS
2010	4	1.1		0.8 0.7	1.1 [‡] 0.8 [∞]	1.1	1.7	1.3 ^{‡b}	1.8 ^{‡b}	0.3 ^z	1.6 ^o 1.3 ^o
2007	4	2.5	1.6 ^z	0.6	2.1 [‡]	1.2	0.6		2.5 ^b		
2004	6	1.7		1.0	1.8 [‡]	1.1	0.5				
2001	7	1.5			1.9 [‡]	1.3					
1998	7	1.0		1.2	1.1 [‡]	1.5					
1996	5	1.4		1.8		1.0					
1993	4	1.9	1.9 ^b	0.7		1.7					
1990	4	2.2		1.7		2.7					
1987	4	2.6		1.1		1.6					
Mean		1.8		1.1	1.6 [‡]	1.5	0.9		2.2 ^b		1.4 ^o

* Phone poll unless otherwise indicated [†]Nielsen (2007–10), ACNielsen (1998–2004), AGB McNair (1990–96), McNair Anderson (1987) ^o Automated telephone calls [‡] Face-to-face ^z Exit poll conducted at 80 booths in 40 electorates (AGB McNair); at 24 booths (Galaxy); in 30 marginal seats (Auspoll) [∞] Online [∞] SMS

Notes: The period dates from the first national election to include Newspoll; restricted to the parties whose level of support was estimated by all the polls: LNP, ALP, Greens, Other (2007, 2010); Liberal, NP, ALP, AD, Greens, and Others (2004); LNP, ALP, AD, Greens, One Nation, and Others (2001); Liberal, NP, ALP, AD, Greens, One Nation, Others (1998); LNP, ALP, AD, Greens, and Others (1996); LNP, ALP, AD, and Others (1987–93).

In terms of the first preferences reported by individual polls—and for Newspoll and Galaxy these were the same as those reported by all the polls—the story is much the same. Nielsen—with its best figures since at least 1987—and Morgan did a bit better than average. Galaxy—whose record had made it think of itself as the best poll in the country—did worse than in 2004 or 2007. Most striking, perhaps, is how similar the long-term performance of Morgan, Nielsen, Newspoll and Galaxy has been—from one end (Galaxy, with an average error of 0.9 percentage points) to the other (Nielsen on 1.5), the range is just 0.6 percentage points (Table 6.5b).

Table 6.5b Averages of the Differences Between the Polls' Estimates of the Parties' First-Preference Votes for Each Party and the Votes Actually Recorded by Each Party, House of Representatives Elections, 1987–2010, for Firms that Conducted Polls During the 2010 Campaign (percentage points)*

Election	Nielsen [†]		Morgan		Newspoll	Galaxy	Auspoll	Essential	JWS
2010	0.9 [8]		0.6 [5] 0.5 [5]	1.5 [5] [‡] 0.6 [5] [∞]	1.1 [4]	1.7 [4] 1.3 [4] ^{†b}	1.8 [4] ^{†b}	0.4 [6] ^z	1.6 [4] ^o 1.3 [4] ^o
2007	1.6 [8]	1.8 [8] ^z	0.6 [7]	1.5 [7] [‡]	1.2 [5]	0.8 [6]	2.5 [4]		
2004	1.4 [8]		1.1 [6]	2.1 [6] [‡]	0.7 [7]	0.5 [6]			
2001	1.4 [8]			2.6 [7] [‡]	1.3 [7]				
1998	1.3 [8]		1.1 [6]	1.2 [7] [‡]	1.5 [6]				
1996	1.4 [6]		1.8 [5]		1.0 [5]				
1993	1.9 [4]	2.1 [5] ^o	0.6 [5]		1.5 [5]				
1990	2.2 [4]		1.8 [5]		1.4 [5]				
1987	2.6 [4]		1.1 [4]		1.6 [4]				
Mean	1.5 [58]		1.0 [48]	1.8 [32] [‡]	1.2 [48]	0.9 [16]			1.4 [8] ^o

* Phone poll unless otherwise indicated [†] Nielsen (2007–10), ACNielsen (1998–2004), AGB McNair (1990–96), McNair Anderson (1987) ^o Automated telephone calls [‡] Face-to-face [°] Exit poll conducted at 80 booths in 40 electorates (AGB McNair); at 24 booths (Galaxy); in 30 marginal seats (Auspoll) ^z Online [∞] SMS

Notes: The period dates from the first national election to include Newspoll; the number in square brackets indicates the number of parties for which each poll provided an estimate; mean is weighted; where separate estimates are provided, Liberal and Nationals are treated as two and the combined figure for the LNP is ignored; minor parties for which no estimates are provided are treated as 'Other'.

The Marginals

Overwhelmingly, the marginal-seat polling done for the press was commissioned in the last two weeks of the campaign by News Limited: *The Weekend Australian*, through Newspoll, and the metropolitan tabloids through Galaxy. Individual papers, including News Limited's *Adelaide Advertiser*, also commissioned or conducted marginal-seat polling of their own. In addition, Galaxy ran a marginal-seat poll for Channel Nine, and marginal-seat polling was conducted independently of the press (and of the parties) by JWS, which boosted its samples in marginal seats, and by Morgan.

The Newspoll survey, with 3351 respondents (close to 200 per electorate), covered Labor's six most marginal seats in New South Wales (Macarthur, Macquarie, Robertson, Gilmore, Bennelong and Eden-Monaro), Labor's eight most marginal seats in Queensland (Herbert, Dickson, Longman, Flynn, Dawson, Forde, Brisbane and Leichhardt) and the Coalition's three most marginal seats in Victoria (McEwen, La Trobe and Dunkley). The decision to poll

in New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria was based on Newspoll's national polling, aggregated over time (two or more weeks) and disaggregated by State. Labor was travelling poorly in Queensland (46 per cent two-party preferred, across the two weeks 30 July – 8 August, down from 50.4 per cent in 2007), had slipped in New South Wales (from 53.7 per cent to 51 per cent), but was more than holding its own in Victoria (55 per cent compared with 54.3 per cent). True, Labor had also slipped in Western Australia (42 per cent compared with 46.7 per cent in 2007) and improved its standing in South Australia (56 per cent compared with 52.4 per cent) (*The Australian*, 11 August 2010; Mackerras 2009, 229–32, for 2007). But New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria accounted for three-quarters of the 150 seats in the House of Representatives: New South Wales, with 49, accounted for one-third (and Labor held 28); Queensland, with 37, accounted for about one-fifth (21 Labor); and Victoria, with 37, accounted for one-quarter (of which the Liberals held 14)—and the three States were *The Australian's* biggest markets. Within each State, Newspoll's choice of seats fitted not only within the Australian Electoral Commission's definition of 'marginal'—seats requiring a swing of up to 6 percentage points (AEC 2010; see also Mackerras 1975, 5)—it also fitted the definition of 'ultra-marginal' (requiring a swing of up to 4.9 percentage points) rather than 'marginal' (requiring a swing of between 5 and 9.9 percentage points) developed by Hughes (1977, 281).

The results—released on the weekend before the election—pointed to a swing against Labor of 1.3 percentage points in New South Wales, which was a more modest swing than the aggregate data suggested but enough to cost it four of its eight most marginal seats; they suggested a swing against Labor of 3.4 percentage points in Queensland, which again was smaller than it might have expected but enough to cost it all six of its most marginal seats; and they indicated a swing to Labor of 6.2 percentage points in Victoria, which was completely out of line with its data for Victoria as a whole and enough to cost the Liberals at least five and possibly nine of its most marginal seats (*The Weekend Australian*, 14–15 August 2010). No reference was made, however, to the differences between the State-by-State data it had published from its national polls and the data from these marginal-seat polls. Earlier, Newspoll had reported that Labor was ahead in the NSW marginal seat of Lindsay ($n = 609$), where it had a buffer of 6.4 percentage points, but behind in Dawson ($n = 601$) (*The Weekend Australian*, 7–8 August 2010).

In their last pre-election editions—published the day after the Newspoll survey appeared—News Limited's Sunday papers carried front-page reports of what Sydney's *Sunday Telegraph* called a '4000-voter superpoll', the Brisbane *Sunday Mail*, a 'super poll', and the Adelaide *Sunday Mail*, an 'exclusive super poll'. The only Sunday papers in the News group not to refer to the poll on page one were Melbourne's *Sunday Herald Sun*, published in a city where Newspoll

had said Labor would pick up seats, not lose them, and the *Sunday Territorian*, which had not mentioned the election on its front page since 18 July—the day after the election was called.

Conducted by Galaxy across four seats in each of the five mainland States, the poll was taken on 8–13 August and covered an arc on the Mackerras pendulum stretching from seats that required a swing of up to 4.5 percentage points to the Coalition to change sides, of which there were 26, to seats requiring a swing of up to 4.5 percentage points to Labor to change sides, of which there were 19 (Mackerras 2010)—all ‘ultra-marginals’. Eight of the 20 seats were held by the Coalition; 12 by Labor at least notionally. Excluded were the three Labor seats in Tasmania that required a swing of less than 4.5 percentage points as well as the seat of Denison, held by a margin of 15.4 percentage points, which Labor was to lose to an Independent, Andrew Wilkie; the margin might have made it ‘safe’ (AEC 2010; Mackerras 1975, 5) or ‘ultra-safe’ (Hughes 1977) vis-a-vis the Liberal Party but not in relation to Wilkie. Excluded, too, was the Labor seat of Solomon in the Northern Territory, which required a swing of less than 4.5 percentage points and was also lost. Again, there were roughly 200 respondents per seat.

In Queensland, Galaxy reported a swing to the Coalition of 5.4 percentage points (not 5.4 *per cent*, as most journalists and others persist in calling such swings)—a greater swing than that reported by Newspoll; this was based on three of the four most marginal Labor seats (Dawson, Dickson and Flynn but not the equally vulnerable Longman) plus one Liberal National seat (Bowman, the party’s most vulnerable seat, held by a margin of 0.1 percentage points). Galaxy also reported a swing of 2.4 percentage points to the Coalition in New South Wales. Based on four of the five most marginal Labor seats (Macarthur, Macquarie, Gilmore and Eden-Monaro but not the equally vulnerable Bennelong), this, too, was greater than that reported by Newspoll. And it found a swing of 2.1 percentage points to the Coalition in Western Australia based on Labor’s two most marginal seats (Swan and Hasluck) and the Liberal’s two most marginal (Cowan and Stirling). There was no net swing to the Coalition in the South Australia marginals—the three most marginal Liberal seats (Sturt, Boothby and Grey) and the only Labor seat (Kingston) vulnerable to a swing as high as 5 percentage points. In Victoria, there was a swing to Labor, though much smaller than that reported by Newspoll; the swing of 1.6 percentage points was based on the Coalition’s two most marginal seats (McEwen and La Trobe) and Labor’s two most marginal (Corangamite and Deakin).

Extrapolating from these results, Galaxy projected a loss in Queensland of 10 Labor seats, in New South Wales a loss of seven and in Western Australia a loss of two. In South Australia, there was likely to be no change but in Victoria the swing against the Coalition pointed to Labor picking up two. The extrapolations,

prepared by Galaxy's CEO, David Briggs, were based on the Mackerras pendulum. One had to read well into the reports carried by all but one of the Sunday papers, however, to register Briggs' note of caution: each projection 'presupposes', he noted, 'that the swings in each state will be uniform and there are good reasons for thinking that this won't be the case' (Kearney 2010a, 2010b; Kearney and Campbell 2010; Passmore 2010).

As well as projecting State-wide swings based on polling in just four seats, three of the six News Limited papers projected the distribution of first preferences nationwide: Coalition 46 per cent, ALP 37.8 per cent, Greens 10.2 per cent, Family First 2.2 per cent and Others 3.8 per cent. In addition, all six projected a national two-party preferred vote of 51.4:48.6 to the Coalition. These projections assumed a 'uniform swing' in each of the five States—an assumption that each of the papers (other than the *Sunday Tasmanian* and the *Sunday Territorian*) qualified by quoting Briggs. They also assumed an equal number of voters in each State—clearly a mistake, as a couple of bloggers were quick to point out (see Bowe 2010; Green 2010). Weighted by State, the national figure should have been reported as 51:49 in favour of Labor. Briggs' estimate of a swing to the Coalition of 1.7 percentage points—published in News Limited's Sunday papers (except the *Sunday Tasmanian*)—appears to have been calculated simply by adding all the State swings and dividing by five (Briggs cited in Passmore 2010). And while the headline inside *The Sunday Telegraph* referring to '[a] neck and neck fight to the last' might have served to keep readers in the paper's thrall, the projected net loss of 17 Labor seats would have produced a comfortable Coalition win: 78:69 plus three Independents. While nothing was said about the exclusion of Tasmania (and the two Territories), the *Sunday Tasmanian* could not resist adding 'Tas 2' to its front-page table listing 'Labor seats at risk', and reporting that '[s]enior Tasmanian officials from both parties' were 'agreed' that 'the election could now be decided in the state's two most marginal seats—Bass and Braddon'. How anyone could have reached this conclusion the paper did not stop to explain. As with the 'officials', however, its reasons for promoting the idea seem fairly plain.

While this poll represented the largest number of marginal seats in the largest number of States Galaxy polled, it was neither the first nor the last of its marginal-seat polls. With its polling showing a swing to the Coalition, especially in Queensland and New South Wales, and with Queensland and New South Wales accounting for two-thirds (18) of Labor's 27 ultra-marginals, it was on Queensland and New South Wales that Galaxy focused—both for News Limited and in its four-seat poll (Eden-Monaro, Macarthur, Bonner and Bowman) for Channel Nine (4–5 August 2010). In New South Wales, a Galaxy poll conducted for *The Daily Telegraph* at the beginning of the second-last week of the campaign (11–12 August) in four seats—two Labor marginals (Greenway and Lindsay) and

two ultra-marginals (Macquarie, Labor; and Hughes, Liberal)—found Labor trailing, 37:45 or 49:51 two-party preferred, which was a two-party preferred swing of nearly 4 percentage points against Labor. ‘On that basis’, Simon Benson (2010) wrote, ‘Labor would lose the seat of Macquarie, fail to pick up Hughes... but hang on to Lindsay and narrowly win in Greenway’. This was correct. But the temptation to push the analysis where it was never meant to go proved too great. ‘If the same swings [presumably the average swing] were repeated across other marginal seats in Sydney and the Central Coast’, he argued, ‘Labor would lose Bennelong [it did] and Robertson [it did not] and could struggle to hold on to Eden-Monaro [it did not] and Dobell [it did not]’ (Benson 2010).

In Queensland, a Galaxy poll conducted during the last week of the campaign (15–16 August) for *The Courier-Mail* in four of Labor’s ultra-marginals—Herbert, Longman, Forde and Bonner—revealed a similar swing with Labor trailing, 38:44 or 49:51 two-party preferred, which was an anti-Labor two-party preferred swing of about 3.5 percentage points. ‘If such a swing was observed on a uniform basis across marginal electorates in Queensland’, Briggs observed, ‘this would result in the government losing six seats’. Keen to generalise the poll’s findings, the paper led with a statement not about the four seats but about ‘Labor in pain in six seats’. What the headline ignored was the last paragraph in the story, which referred to a ‘separate Galaxy poll in the *Sunday Mail*’ that ‘showed a 5.4 per cent swing against the Government’ in four other Labor ultra-marginals: ‘Bowman, Dawson, Dickson and Flynn’ (Balogh 2010). On that basis, the paper might have generalised not to six seats but to as many as ten.

The JWS Research poll, with 28 000 respondents, also conducted in the final week, included a ‘boost sample’ of more than 22 000 drawn from ‘54 key marginals’, ranging from Lindsay in New South Wales, held by Labor on a margin of 6.3 percentage points, to McMillan in Victoria, held by the Liberals on a margin of 4.8 percentage points. Published as an ‘exclusive’ on the front page of the *Sydney Morning Herald* (19 August 2010), though not commissioned by it, the JWS poll was the biggest rollcall of individual marginal seats published in the course of an election by any Australian polling organisation; indeed, with its having made upwards of 250 000 calls to get a response of this size, it was the biggest polling effort undertaken by anyone in Australia in a single weekend.

It was also one of the most controversial, with the Association of Market and Social Research Organisations issuing—and then hastily withdrawing—a statement attacking its ‘standards’, the ‘low participation rate’ and the ‘vast numbers of people’ likely to end up ‘annoyed’ (see Burgess 2010). According to JWS, Labor would lose 15 seats: eight in Queensland (every seat, except Longman, on the Mackerras pendulum, from Herbert, its second most marginal, to Bonner); four in New South Wales (Macarthur, but not the equally marginal seat of Macquarie; Robertson, but not the almost equally marginal seat of

Gilmore; Bennelong and Lindsay); two in Western Australia (Hasluck and Swan); and one in Victoria (Corangamite). But JWS also had the Coalition losing seats: three in Victoria (McEwen, La Trobe and Dunkley), two in New South Wales (Cowper and Paterson) and one in South Australia (Boothby). The loss of six Coalition seats meant Labor would 'win with a four-seat majority'.

The last week also saw a marginal-seat result from Morgan for Bennelong. It suggested that Labor might hold on. A week earlier, Morgan had reported new results from three other seats it had polled before the election was called: Macquarie (NSW) and Leichhardt (Qld), both ultra-marginals, where the results pointed to big swings away from Labor in the previous six weeks; and Brand (WA), where little appeared to have changed. On the day of the election, Morgan conducted polls in the marginal seat of Lindsay (NSW) and the ultra-marginals of Leichhardt and La Trobe (Vic.).

The Canberra Times, a Fairfax daily that had no relationship with Nielsen; the *Adelaide Advertiser* and *Sunday Mail*, owned by News; and the *West Australian*, owned by neither Fairfax nor News; all either commissioned polls or conducted polls of their own. These polls focused on seats in which the papers' readers resided—marginals in particular. *The Canberra Times* commissioned Patterson Market Research, a firm it had used in the past, to conduct two polls across the border in the NSW seat of Eden-Monaro—a seat it promoted as a 'bellwether' (*The Canberra Times*, 26 July 2010 and 20 August 2010) on the grounds that since 1972 whichever party won Eden-Monaro had formed government (Richardson and Kerr 2007, 35).

The Advertiser and *Sunday Mail*, using their own staff, conducted polls in Kingston (*The Advertiser*, 23 July 2010), Boothby (*Sunday Mail*, 25 July 2010), Sturt (*The Advertiser*, 6 August 2010) and Hindmarsh (*The Advertiser*, 21 August 2010); *The Advertiser's* practice of bypassing pollsters dates to the 1970s. And the *West Australian* commissioned Patterson—a local firm it had used since the 1980s—to conduct a poll across Western Australia (*West Australian*, 7 August 2010) and in four marginals (Hasluck and Swan, Labor; Cowan and Canning, Liberal), though the paper was confused about whether these were the most marginal seats in Western Australia (they were not) and which party held them (*West Australian*, 24 July 2010 and 21 August 2010). In those seats polled more than once, Labor's lead was narrowing.

How well did the marginal-seat polls perform? Some were accurate, others remarkably inaccurate. Of the pollsters that polled in batches of more than a dozen seats, Galaxy appears to have done best. In Queensland, where it marked down 10 Labor seats as potential losses, Labor lost nine. In New South Wales, where it saw seven potential Labor losses, Labor lost four. In Western Australia, it saw two Labor seats at risk and both were lost. And in Victoria, it saw Labor

losing two seats and Labor lost them. This gave Galaxy a score of 17 out of 21; in none of its sets of four did the average error exceed 1.2 percentage points. Newspoll, in contrast, picked only 11 of the 15 marginals along the eastern seaboard that changed hands and identified another that did not—effectively, a score of 11 out of sixteen. Its biggest problem was in Queensland where it had marked as ‘in doubt’ only five of the nine Labor seats that fell. After the election, the result from its 17-seat poll did not appear on the Newspoll web site.

Morgan’s predictions for individual seats, based on its State-by-State figures (Personal communication), were out by 12 (Morgan 2010a). It had the Coalition gaining seats it did not gain (Dobell, Lindsay, Page, NSW; Brand, WA), losing seats it did not lose (Herbert, Qld; Sturt, SA), and failing to win seats it actually won (Macarthur and Gilmore, NSW; Dickson, Brisbane and Bonner, Qld; and Swan, WA). Across the three seats Morgan polled on election day (Lindsay, NSW: La Trobe, Vic.; Herbert, Qld), the average error, two-party preferred, was more than 6 percentage points; in two of the three cases (Lindsay and Herbert), Morgan called it for the party that lost. In contrast, *The Advertiser/Sunday Mail* scored four out of four (Kelton 2010) and Patterson five out of five.

Of the predictions generated by the JWS day-of-the-election automated phone poll, no less than one-third turned out to be wrong. Among the 18 marginal seats it expected Labor to hold were five it lost (Bennelong and Macquarie, NSW; Hasluck and Swan, WA; Solomon, NT); among the 15 it expected Labor to lose were four it held (Lindsay and Robertson, NSW; Moreton, Qld; Corangamite, Vic.); and among the six it expected the Coalition to lose were four it held (McEwen and La Trobe, Vic.; Boothby, SA; Stirling, WA).

The Senate

Compared with the contest for the House of Representatives, the contest for the Senate attracted little attention. If the number of pollsters lining up to measure the parties’ electoral support in the House of Representatives continues to grow, the number lining up for the Senate has fallen. In 2004—an unusual election that saw the government win a majority in the Senate—there were three polls: ACNielsen, Morgan and an ANU online poll (Goot 2005, 65–7). In 2007, there were two: Morgan and Galaxy (Goot 2009, 128–30). In 2010, however, there was just one. Even so, it was not the press that commissioned the poll; it was Morgan that chanced its arm.

Encouraged by the prospect of being the first poll to declare the Greens would hold the balance of power, Morgan went into the field early. Its series of face-to-face polls, from which it extracted its findings on the Senate, was conducted in different States at different times, with all the surveys under way before

the election was announced and completed when the election campaign still had some way to run. In New South Wales (n = 1195) and Victoria (n = 731), the polling was conducted in July; in Queensland (n = 1497), South Australia (n = 591) and Western Australia (n = 622), it was conducted in June–July; in Tasmania (n = 451), in May–July; and in the Australian Capital Territory (n = 446), in February–July (Morgan 2010c).

Headed ‘Greens set to hold Senate “Balance of Power” with 10 Senators’ and released on 10 August, Morgan’s findings put support for the Greens in New South Wales at 17 per cent (they finished with 10.7 per cent of the vote), Victoria at 14 per cent (14.6 per cent), Queensland 13 per cent (12.8 per cent), South Australia 16.5 per cent (13.3 per cent), Western Australia 18 per cent (14 per cent), Tasmania 21.5 per cent (20.3 per cent) and the Australian Capital Territory 27 per cent (22.9 per cent). On these figures, Morgan predicted, correctly, that the Greens would win one seat in each of the States; but its prediction that the Greens would win a seat in the Australian Capital Territory proved wrong. Morgan warned that to achieve the levels of support its polling reported, ‘the manning of polling places’ might be the ‘biggest hurdle for the Greens to overcome’. Whether this helps explain the difference between Morgan’s figures and the vote the Greens actually achieved is difficult to say. Certainly, Morgan overestimated the Greens’ support in New South Wales, South Australia, Western Australia and the Australian Capital Territory, but it did not do so in Victoria or Tasmania. For Morgan to be right, the Greens would have to have been better at staffing the polling places in Victoria and Tasmania than they were anywhere else.

Morgan’s overestimates for the Senate were not confined to the Greens. In New South Wales, it overestimated the Greens by 6 percentage points and Labor by 4; in Victoria, it overestimated Labor by 6; and in Western Australia it overestimated the Greens by 4 and Labor by three. The evidence that counts most strongly against Morgan’s thesis about the Greens’ ‘biggest hurdle’ is, however, its underestimate—not overestimate—of the vote for parties *other* than Labor, the Coalition or the Greens: in New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania by a massive 8 percentage points, in Queensland by 6, and in Western Australia by five. If the Greens had trouble ‘manning’ polling places, one can only imagine the height of the hurdle confronting even smaller parties.

Overall, Morgan’s figures were much less accurate in the Senate than in the House. Applying the formula used in Table 6.3a—the difference between the polled figures and the results for Labor, the Coalition, the Greens and Other, divided by four—the average error in New South Wales was 5.4 percentage points, Victoria 4.2, Queensland 3.7, Western Australia and Tasmania 3.4, the

Australian Capital Territory 3.2 and South Australia 2.6. In contrast, Morgan's average error for the House of Representatives election (Table 6.3a) was 1.9 percentage points.

It would be nice to say that things such as sample size, aggregating the data from several surveys, and the time of survey explain much of this—and perhaps they do. But two of the three largest errors, in New South Wales and Queensland, occurred in States with the biggest samples, and the four jurisdictions with the lowest errors—Western Australia, South Australia, Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory—had the smallest samples. Moreover, polling in the Australian Capital Territory started in February while in Tasmania it started in May—earlier than in any of the other jurisdictions. Clearly, there are hurdles other than these to polling in the Senate. One of them—suggested by the underestimate of the vote for 'Others'—is that respondents do not know what choices they will face on election day. More to the point, by not presenting respondents with the full panoply of parties, polling of this kind cannot enlighten them about what their choices really are.

Conclusion

Based on their national estimates for the House of Representatives, the polls did well. Few tipped a hung parliament, but none tipped a Coalition victory. All the polls overestimated Labor's lead but all were within the margin of error. There was no sign that the increasing difficulty of reaching the required number and kind of respondents affected the polls adversely. While some polls were a little better than others, it was not a case of winner takes all. The poll that came closest to estimating each side's final share of the two-party preferred vote did not come out trumps on other criteria. Nor did phone polls always beat online polls or polls conducted via text messaging. While Newspoll stood out for its estimate of the two-party preferred count, it was the online Essential poll, followed by the Morgan phone polls (before the election and on election day) and the Morgan poll via SMS, that did best in estimating the parties' shares of first preferences. Nor was a two-party preferred count calculated on the basis of the 2007 results—Newspoll, for example—necessarily less accurate than one based on asking respondents directly.

Polling in the marginals was a good deal less impressive, with a number of seats being called by Galaxy and Newspoll—and more especially by Morgan and JWS—falling for the wrong side of the ledger. This could partly reflect the fact that things can change one way in one seat and in the opposite way in another seat—phenomena that wash out in the aggregate. But it is more likely to underline the most basic truth about survey research: sampling variance is not

a function of the size of the population but a function of the size of the sample. As this election showed, yet again, conducting polls with very small samples in a number of seats and then focusing on how many interviews one has secured in the aggregate does not get around this problem; in close contests—and marginal seats fit this description almost by definition—sample sizes of 400 (JWS) let alone 200 (Galaxy and Newspoll) are too small.

With the Senate, the problem was less one of predicting the number of seats than of accurately estimating the parties' shares of the vote. While Morgan was able (almost) to predict the number of seats the Greens would win, and trumpeted that they would hold the 'balance of power' (something that was not really in doubt), it did poorly in estimating the parties' shares of the vote. Its samples were not big enough and it polled too early but it also did not fully inform respondents about which parties were running.

Measured against their final national figures, two-party preferred, for the House of Representatives, the differences among the polls are small; even the least accurate of the polls—and no fewer than six of the 12 final pre-election or day-of-the-election polls tied for this title—came within 2 percentage points of the correct result. In political terms, a difference of this magnitude can make a world of difference; but in statistical terms, it is not a matter of great consequence. To be sure, there is also the matter of bragging rights. But over the long term, differences between the polls are even smaller than the 2010 figures might suggest. Since 1993, when the pollsters began to report a two-party preferred count, the average two-party preferred error for the phone polls conducted by Newspoll has been 1.4, for Morgan 1.8 and for Nielsen 2.0 percentage points—a range across the three organisations not of 1.8 (the difference in 2010 between 1.9 for Nielsen and 0.1 for Newspoll) but of just 0.6 percentage points.

But while the average errors recorded by each of these organisations over the past seven or eight elections have been perfectly respectable, they have been far from remarkable. Writing nearly 40 years ago, David Butler suggested that if 'an enterprising rogue had set up a pseudo-poll that conducted no interviews' but simply worked on the assumption that at every election Labor and the Coalition would each get 46 per cent of the first-preference vote, they 'would not have had too bad a record'—an average error between 1958 and 1972 of 'under 2½' percentage points (Butler 1973, 114). In a similar vein, we can now say that if in 1993 an enterprising rogue had set up a pseudo-poll that conducted no interviews but simply worked on the assumption that at every election Labor would get 50 per cent of the two-party preferred vote, he or she would have an even better record—an average error of just 1.8 percentage points. As it happens, 1.8 percentage points is the median error for the three polls—Newspoll, Morgan and Nielsen—with records that stretch back to 1993. Moreover, the range of

deviations (0.2–3.6 percentage points) from a 50:50 two-party preferred result in elections held since then is not very different from the range of errors recorded by the polls (0.1–4.3 percentage points).

The point here is not to suggest that any of the pollsters are rogues; rather, as Butler put it, it is to show ‘how limited has been the possibility of error’ (Butler 1973, 114). Indeed, if one can work out which party is likely to get the majority of the two-party preferred vote—generally, not a difficult task—the possibility of error is even less. Operating in a competitive polling environment and able to take advantage of a late or last-mover advantage because one pollster can see what another has reported (Goot 2009, 128) reduces the possibility of error further. The increasing emphasis on the two-party preferred count as the measure of a poll’s success might help to explain why the number of market research firms involved in polling has increased in recent years and why the methods deployed by the industry have expanded.

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