



Executive Summary - Inquiry into the Performance of the Opinion Polls at the 2019 Australian Federal Election

All of the national election polls published during the 2019 election campaign purported to show that Labor had the support of the majority of Australian voters in terms of the two-party-preferred vote. The Coalition went on to win the election with 51.5% of the vote compared to Labor with 48.5%, almost the mirror opposite of what the final polls found; all missing the result in the same direction and by a similar margin. After the election, the polls attracted widespread criticism. There was also considerable hand-wringing within the polling community.

This Inquiry was established to undertake an independent, objective and non-partisan review of what, if anything, had gone wrong with the national polls and what improvements could be made. The Inquiry sought the cooperation of the four pollsters responsible for these polls: Essential Research, Ipsos, Roy Morgan Research and YouGov (responsible for both YouGov Galaxy and Newspoll). Loneragan Research was also approached to provide some insights into polling via the use of Interactive Voice Recognition (IVR) technology (i.e. robopolls) and because it went public with a claim of being involved with the suppression of a poll that was out of alignment with other polls at the time, a form of 'herding'. Informal discussions were held with some pollsters from outside this group and all pollsters and other interested parties were able to make submissions to the Inquiry via the public submissions process established by AMSRO. The governance structure for the Inquiry comprised the Inquiry Panel itself, an Advisory Board and International Advisers.

While the Inquiry Panel is grateful for the cooperation it received, the lack of access to data sets and detailed descriptions of the survey methods and statistical techniques used by the pollsters materially affected our ability to identify the specific factors that contributed to the inaccuracy of the polls. We have had to supplement the information provided by the pollsters with incomplete publicly available methodological descriptions, compare against best practice and draw inferences based on our analyses of overseas inquiries and other data. The information provided by the pollsters to this Inquiry was much less than was provided to similar inquiries conducted into the performance of recent election polls in the US and the UK. This came as somewhat of a shock to our International Advisers.

The performance of the national polls in 2019 met the independent criteria of a 'polling failure' not just a 'polling miss'. The polls: (1) significantly—statistically—erred in their estimate of the vote; (2) erred in the same direction and at a similar level; and (3) the source of error was in the polls themselves rather than a result of a last-minute shift among voters.

We rule out as contributing factors to the poor performance of the polls not only a late swing after the final polls were conducted (except possibly to a very minor extent); but also the impact of 'shy conservatives', measurement error arising from the voting intentions questions, respondents deliberately misleading pollsters, early voting, and ballot order effects. The allocation of preferences led to a slight increase in overall poll error in some estimates of the two-party-preferred vote, but was not a major contributing factor to the failure overall.

The Inquiry Panel could not rule out the possibility that the uncommon convergence of the polls in 2019 was due to herding. This could not be ruled out largely because, despite our requests, the pollsters provided no raw data to enable us to attempt to replicate their results.

Our conclusion is that the most likely reason why the polls underestimated the first preference vote for the LNP and overestimated it for Labor was because the samples were **unrepresentative and inadequately adjusted**.

- The polls were likely to have been skewed towards the more politically engaged and better educated voters with this bias not corrected.
- As a result, the polls over-represented Labor voters.

Such a skew has been evident in recent election cycles, with 17 of the 25 final poll results since 2010 (68%) overestimating 2PP support for Labor.

This finding stands independent of methodology because even though the methods used by the pollsters differ they share a common difficulty in struggling to establish contact with and gain the cooperation of a representative sample of voters. This conclusion is broadly similar to that reached by the reviews into the performance of the 2015 UK polls and the 2016 US polls.

The Inquiry Panel also found some evidence that the reporting of the polls failed to consistently meet the basic disclosure guidelines for editors and journalists set out by the Australian Press Council. The view of the Inquiry Panel is that the various reporting and disclosure standards as they apply to the publicly released election polls in Australia are in need of consolidation and clarification. This would best be achieved by putting in place a new code and new governance structure. We concur with the conclusion reached by Mansillo and Jackman (2020, p. 145) in their review of the 2019 polls, that ‘the quality of political discussion, the salience and content of the nation’s policy agenda—indeed, the health of Australian democracy—would gain from a commitment to ... transparency around the polling of Australian public opinion.’

In relation to industry governance, the conduct of polling, and standards of disclosure, the Inquiry Panel makes a number of recommendations:



Governance

Recommendation 1 – Establish a Code of Conduct for Election Polling: AMSRO, as the initiators of this Inquiry, help facilitate the establishment of a Code of Conduct for Election Polling in order to provide an oversight, regulatory and disclosure regime for election polling in Australia. This could be achieved by working in tandem with the recently announced Australian Polling Council (YouGov, 2019). This Code should be in place before the next federal election polling cycle.

Recommendation 2 – Consult the experts: The development of this Code could be led by pollsters but should be informed by the views of experts from AMSRO, the Statistical Society of Australia, The Research Society, political scientists and the Australian Press Council and/or interested media outlets.

Recommendation 3 – Ensure compliance: Fundamental to the integrity and reputation of any such Code are the disclosure requirements it establishes, how these are monitored, and how compliance is ensured. We recommend a similar approach to that of the British Polling Council (BPC) in ensuring that a broad constituency sign up to the Code and that an appropriate arbitration and sanctions process is in place. BPC membership comprises almost every market research organisation in the UK that publishes political polls. Its management committee and officers are drawn from the member organisations, but its Sub-Committee on Disclosure (which provides the technical advice) comprises representatives from research organisations, academia and the media as well as member organisations. The rules of the BPC include a complaints-handling mechanism and enable sanctions to be determined including a period of probation, suspension or expulsion from the BPC.



Methodology

Recommendation 4 – Develop more effective sample balancing and/or weighting strategies: Pollsters to identify and better understand the biases in their samples and to develop more effective sample balancing and/or weighting mitigation strategies to improve representativeness. Weighting or balancing by education seems promising and this report suggests several other variables that may warrant further consideration.

Recommendation 5 – Trial new calculation method for the two-party-preferred vote: Pollsters should not rely solely on the preference flow from the previous election to arrive at a two-party-preferred estimate, not least because some parties may be new, and for very small parties and independents preference flows from the previous election may be difficult to trace. Models that involve stated preferences with imputation of missing data or the use of stated preferences in combination with preferences from previous election could be experimentally trialled by pollsters.

Recommendation 6 – Clarify measures of uncertainty: Pollsters could use more robust methods of estimating the variability associated with their results beyond the currently inadequately calculated and inadequately reported 'Margin of Error' heuristic. In addition, pollsters should routinely report the proportion of respondents who are 'undecided' about their vote choice and identify those who are only 'leaning' towards a particular party.



Disclosure

Recommendation 7 – Establish disclosure standards: The 24 disclosure standards set out by the Inquiry Panel act as a starting point for the development of a coordinated set of publicly available disclosure standards for election polls in Australia.

Recommendation 8 – Extend beyond election polling: AMSRO and The Research Society endorse the disclosure standards so that they apply to all Members and all publicly released research, not just election polling.

Recommendation 9 – Get the media outlets onside: The support of major news outlets and others who commission or publish polls should be sought to help ensure compliance with any new disclosure standards. Australian media organisations should play an active role in supporting these standards.



Resources

Recommendation 10 – Provide educational resources: Educational resources about polling methods and standards should be made available to journalists and other interested parties. This could be along similar lines to election polling resources provided by AAPOR in the US, and by the British Polling Council in Britain. The Research Society, in its submission to this Inquiry, stated that it was willing to make such resources available. We recommend that AMSRO work with The Research Society and the Australian Press Council to make educational resources and training available.