



Political polling in the 21st century: hard science or the emperor's new clothes?

Sunday 23 June 2013

Does anyone care about policy issues anymore or has politics in the twenty first century become nothing more than a series of political polls? Increasing political polling and in particular polls about the popularity of political leaders dominate media coverage of politics. Why have polls become the main focus of the media and what impact does this have on the democratic and political process?

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Transcript

Annabelle Quince: Today on *Rear Vision*, the science and sorcery of opinion polls.



Journalist [archival]: In today's Nielsen poll in the Fairfax press, Labor's primary vote now has a 2 in front of it.

Journalist [archival]: The Newspoll in today's *Australian* gives the opposition a 16-point lead over...

Bill Shorten [archival]: There is no doubt in my mind that if the polls are correct, Tony Abbot would win in a landslide.

Journalist [archival]: Well, with federal parliament convening today for its final sitting fortnight before the election, the opinion polls are of greater interest than ever.

Annabelle Quince: Listening to the coverage of federal politics over the past few days you'd be forgiven for thinking that politicians and journalists had abandoned policy issues altogether. All we ever seem to hear, read or watch is the reporting of opinion polls. And it's not just the ABC, all media increasingly focus on opinion polls, and in particular those polls that rate the popularity of the party leaders or their challengers.

Hello, this is *Rear Vision* on RN and via podcast. I'm Annabelle Quince, and today we take a look at the world of political opinion polling.

The story of political polling begins in the land of polls, the United States of America. Amy Fried is Professor of Political Science at the University of Maine and author of *Pathways to Polling Crisis*.

Amy Fried: Well, when it comes to political polling it grows out of activities in the 1920s where there are some kinds of surveys that are being done predominantly for market research, and some of the very early pollsters come out of that background, including George Gallup but also other pollsters of the time, Mr Roper and Crossley were all involved in some kind of market research, and they start to move into doing political polls. And really the breakthrough time for them is 1936, the presidential election between Franklin Roosevelt and Landon. There had been another kind of poll that's called a straw done by the *Literary Digest* where they just ask people to send in these postcards and they contacted some people but not really randomly. And the *Literary Digest* poll had huge numbers of people responding but they ended up getting it completely wrong, while the pollsters, or as they called themselves a time, the people doing 'scientific polling', did much better.

Ken Warren: *Literary Digest* just guessed, they did what modern pollsters would consider just absurd things. They polled people during the height of the Depression, they polled people who had cars, who owned telephones and bought their magazine.

Annabelle Quince: Ken Warren is Professor of Political Science at Saint Louis University, president of the Warren Poll and author of *In Defense of Public Opinion Polling*.

Ken Warren: Well, that was kind of crazy because naturally Republicans were grossly overrepresented, that's why the feedback to the *Literary Digest* suggested that Landon was going to win. The thing about it is they interviewed thousands and thousands and thousands of people, literally tens of thousands of people, but it

doesn't matter how many people you interview, in a sense it's whether or not you interview the right people, so to speak, in polling so you get a representative sample.

And George Gallup started off by using quota or stratification sampling techniques. These techniques aren't very good either and he wasn't really close to predicting the actual percentages in 1936, but he did predict who would win, and that made him look much better than *Literary Digest*.

Annabelle Quince: So what is scientific polling? Justin Lewis is Head of the School of Journalism at Cardiff University and the author of *Constructing Public Opinion*.

Justin Lewis: Well, it's scientific in one way and not it's very scientific in another. What's scientific about it are the kind of mathematical and statistical formulae which allows us to take, say, a group of 1,000 people and say that they are likely to be representative of the population to within a few points. So most polls will say something like there is a 95% probability that this poll will be accurate to within two or three percentage points, and those are simply statistical projections that we can make based on our knowledge of statistics, of representative sampling, of what is likely probability and those kinds of things that allow us to make those quite specific projections.

So in terms of sampling I think polling is incredibly scientific. Of course what's less scientific and what's more art than science really other questions that we ask in polls and how we ask them because once you get into that, that's much more subjective, it's much more subject to interpretation. So it's very scientific in terms of the sampling methods, I'd say more art than science when it comes to the kinds of questions we ask.

So there are examples of polls where public opinion on an issue has shifted quite dramatically in the same poll because of the way a question was asked, it was asked rather differently, in a different way. We've done it ourselves in polls that we've done just to test that proposition and we found that you can actually shift public opinion quite decisively on an issue simply by asking a question in a different way. So very scientific in terms of the statistical sampling, less scientific in terms of the way you ask a question, which can never be absolutely scientific.

Murray Goot: Public opinion polls come to Australia in 1941. It's the Gallup poll, brought to Australia by Sir Keith Murdoch, Rupert's dad, and the poll would be run in Australia along the same lines as it was run in the US for a number of newspapers connected to the Herald and Weekly Times. It would be run about once every two months in those days with about a dozen questions.

Annabelle Quince: Murray Goot is Professor of Modern History, Politics and International Relations at Macquarie University.

Murray Goot: The Morgan poll was run by Roy Morgan for Sir Keith Murdoch, and it was a monopoly in Australia from 1941 to 1971. The kinds of questions they asked were—especially in the 1940s to the 1960s—very different to the kinds of questions now run in public opinion polls. The focus was very much on issues of public policy, and the underlying philosophy of the Gallup poll was that it would convey the views of the public via the poll to the politicians about various matters of public interest. There was only the occasional question about voting intention, and there was even less attention paid to support for the leaders.

Stephen Mills: The technology in those days was to doorknock. So the Morgan pollsters, using this technique which they'd basically borrowed directly from George Gallup in the States, was to fan out across the whole nation with people who were supposed to knock on every X number of doors and conduct an interview with the person who answered the door.

Annabelle Quince: Dr Stephen Mills is from the Graduate School of Government at the University of Sydney.

Stephen Mills: Australia's first public opinion poll in 1941 was on the evergreen topic of equal pay for women, it found 59% of respondents favoured equal pay for women and that was published in the *Herald* newspaper in October of 1941.

Murray Goot: The Gallup method was always face-to-face interviewing. In other words, selecting starting points across Australia and collecting ten interviews from particular starting points. The sampling, especially in the 1940s, was problematic, but it was always done face-to-face. It was only much later in the 1970s that you switched to telephone polling.

The Morgan monopoly through the Gallup poll breaks in 1971 when two polls emerge, one for the *Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*, which is the Australian Sales Research Bureau, later known as the Saulwick poll, and then there was the Australian nationwide opinion poll which was created for News Ltd and run by the *Australian*, co-owned originally by the *Australian*, just as Newpoll, its successor, is co-owned by News Ltd today and run exclusively for the *Australian*.

Stephen Mills: Public opinion polling really has got this symbiotic relationship with the media, always has, still does, probably always will be. And when we say the media, especially with newspapers, television stations, for probably commercial reasons, tend not to conduct polls, so we're talking mostly newspapers here. 1972 was the first campaign in Australia, that was the Gough Whitlam It's Time campaign, was the first one where there was more than one pollster conducting polls with voting intentions.

To everybody's surprise they came up with different results. They all tended to predict that Labor would win, but it was a bit of a shock for the supposed objectivity of public opinion polls. Morgan had used the example of the

scoreboard; if you're at a football game, the scorer keeps score, if you're in politics, the public opinion pollster keeps score. All of a sudden we had more than one scoreboard and more than one scorer, and they were coming up with a different range of results.

[Excerpt from *The Hollowmen*]

Justin Lewis: Well, focus groups are interesting. I'm a great believer in focus groups if they are used well. In the political world though I think focus groups have increasingly been used (and there's a lot of evidence now for this) as a way of manufacturing opinion in a way that suits particular political agendas. We saw that very much, and history is now showing this, with the rise of New Labour in the UK where focus groups were used by a particularly influential people within the party not as a genuine way to find out what people thought but as a way of pushing people towards a set of policy positions that the people conducting those focus groups actually wanted them to speak.

[Excerpt from *The Hollowmen*]

Stephen Mills: From the late '60s the Labor Party in South Australia under Premier Don Dunstan did begin public opinion polling of what we would call a scientific basis. Prior to that, parties had tried to do their vox pops and their man-in-the-street type of polls but it was conducted on a very unprofessional, amateur basis. Labor in South Australia did begin getting market research firms to actually conduct scientific polls on a propriety, that is a confidential basis, for the party, not for publication, and this helped inform Labor's campaigns in the state elections in South Australia. By no coincidence one of the main party officials involved in that South Australian campaign was Mick Young who went on to be the federal secretary of the Labor Party in 1972. The 1972 campaign was the first where market research was used by a political party, by the Labor Party, for strategic reasons to guide its campaign, and it did so very successfully. And so really from the early '70s, parties have been very much involved in public opinion polling.

Justin Lewis: Focus groups are very easy to manipulate. So you can present information in a certain kind of way, you can give a certain context to focus groups, you can amplify certain opinions within that focus group to push it in a certain direction, and it's very easy to do that if you're skilled at it. What focus groups should be used for is to genuinely find out what lies behind public opinion, but I think in the political world they've often not been used for that, and that's because I think in the political world focus groups are used as a way of informing a partisan strategy, and therefore what you want to do is find out how you can get people on board with that particular strategy rather than really finding out what they actually think.

Murray Goot: The focus groups also tell politicians what issues really matter, how voters frame these issues, what terms they think about when they think about these issues. Is education really about the cost of education or is it about the quality of education? Are private schools attractive because of the values that they imbue or are said to imbue or because people think they're going to get a better education there, or whatever? So you get all that way of framing an issue and at the same time and in the same way you get ways in which... a language from focus groups that enables politicians to feed back to the electorate particular ways of talking about issues which they think will help swing votes.

[Excerpt from *The Hollowmen*]

Murray Goot: The Labor side discovered or decided that 'working Australians' or 'working families' seemed to be an embracing term that lots of voters could relate to, whereas other ways of addressing these voters sort of fell on deaf ears. And so you had rhetoric about whether the budget was good for working Australians, and you can see the difference between is this budget a good budget for Australia, is it a good budget for you, is it a good budget for working families. Different kinds of language will produce different kinds of results. Politicians are onto this through their advisers, through the market research companies that work for them, and try to look for a way of expressing exactly the same thing, in this case a budget outcome, in language which resonates with the voters they want to appeal to. Often these voters are, as you say, a small but decisive part of the electorate.

Annabelle Quince: You're with *Rear Vision* on RN and via podcast. I'm Annabelle Quince and today we're tracing the science and sorcery of opinion polls.

Journalist [archival]: I think the problem for Bill Hayden is that he now lacks the credibility of a consistent line. Indeed, Bob Hawke manoeuvred Bill Hayden recently into having to do an about-face or an apparent about-face on the wages pause issue.

Journalist [archival]: But could the Labor Party change its leader now and still win the next election?

Stephen Mills: Probably the first leadership battle in Australian politics that was fought out using public opinion polling was Bob Hawke's campaign to unseat the then Labor leader Bill Hayden in the early 1980s. And as you recall, he actually succeeded in unseating Hayden just prior to the 1983 election and became prime minister in 1983.

Hayden had always struggled in the polls. Hawke, for reasons to do with his just very wide scale popularity long before he'd entered parliament, when he was still...back in the ACTU days he always polled very well then, and essentially what happened in the Hawke/Hayden leadership battle was that confidential Labor Party polling that had been conducted we presume by the Labor Party Secretariat, although that's never quite clear, those polls were selectively leaked, either directly to journalists and published, which put Hayden under pressure, or

sometimes they were shown on a selective basis to, for example, influential people in caucus, influential frontbenchers and so forth, that also had the effect of undermining the leader.

So Hawke/Hayden really set up the dynamics for the leadership battles which we saw through the 1980s in the Liberal Party, Howard/Peacock, they were often fought out through use of public opinion polls. Alexander Downer, who was briefly leader of the Liberal Party, was basically torn down because he always polled extremely badly and those Liberal Party confidential polls found their way to the media. Obviously Keating's challenge against Hawke was facilitated by Hawke's apparent decline in popularity when he was still prime minister.

Journalist [archival]: Polling finds voters feeling warmer towards Labor under new Prime Minister Julia Gillard.

Journalist [archival]: The poll also suggests if Kevin Rudd was reinstated as leader of the Labor Party, Labor's primary vote would improve and the government and the opposition would be level at 50-50, two-party preferred.

Stephen Mills: And of course through the current government, Rudd and Gillard have fought out a lot of their battle through proxy by the selective leaking and publication of Labor Party internal polling, as well as of course reinforcing the impression gained from the published media polls.

Amy Fried: There was a very interesting book some years ago by a political scientist Tom Patterson who compared the kinds of...this is more journalists' questions, the kinds of questions journalists will ask of politicians in the US versus citizens, when citizens get a chance to ask. In general the politicians are asked really much more substantive, issue-oriented questions from citizens than they are by journalists. Journalists tend to talk more about their position in terms of just the electoral horserace—how are you doing in this state, or who are you trying to appeal to—and not as many issue questions. And that to me has always suggested that citizens do want to know more about issues, and it would be useful to certainly have those kinds of questions asked of politicians and also hear about how the public thinks when it comes to various issues.

Annabelle Quince: So why do you think the media has been much more focused on the horserace as opposed to the substance of elections?

Amy Fried: I think several sorts of things, I mean, for one thing in some ways it's maybe a bit easier to write a snappy story that focuses on personalities, it's a more interesting narrative may be to create than to go into some detail about particular issue positions. I think that might be one sort of thing, and it may also be that journalists may know what someone's issue positions are, they've heard them give a lot of speeches already, and to them it's not news anymore. If news is defined as 'what is new' it's not news to them. But it may be news to some citizens who haven't been paying as close attention or tune in from time to time.

Stephen Mills: We have got this horserace mentality. We like seeing which horse is in front of the other horse, and public opinion polls help us do that. It's just so easy for newspapers to interpret politics as a horse race, and we, the media consumers, often think of politics in that way. You know, is Gillard ahead of Abbott or is Abbott ahead of Gillard? Is Gillard ahead of Rudd? We've got this habit now of thinking of politics as a personal contest rather than a contest of ideas, policies and ideologies. It's certainly wrong to blame public opinion polls for that shift alone. There are lots of reasons why contemporary society is less ideological and why political debate is less policy focused than it used to be. But public opinion polls have certainly facilitated that change. And as far as media coverage is concerned, media finds it convenient to report politics in this way. It's reasonably cheap, it's exclusive, they've got it on their own, it's their own Newspoll or *Herald* poll, and they are going to run with that. They know that this gives them enormous impact in Canberra, they know that every second Tuesday people are scurrying around the press gallery and the corridors of parliament wondering what's in the Newspoll, they're not thinking about policy questions either, they're thinking about leadership.

Journalist [archival]: In today's Nielsen poll in the Fairfax press, Labor...

Journalist [archival]: The Newspoll in today's *Australian* gives the opposition a 16-point lead...

Murray Goot: It's got to do with newspapers trying to themselves become part of the game of politics. The polls give newspapers an independent voice into politics. They also produce for their readership something which the readers think is of interest, and my guess is that what newspapers think is that increasingly this is what really interests their readership, and also what is likely to be taken up by other media, because one of the strengths of polling for a newspaper is that it is widely reported. Most stories in newspapers are not widely reported, at least they are not attributed to a newspaper or to a brand. But now we see with the polls that they are called Newspoll or they are called the Nielsen poll in Fairfax or the Fairfax poll. And one thinks of polls as increasingly commodities that circulate in this sort of way through the media.

Annabelle Quince: So are opinion polls something that benefit our political process or not?

Ken Warren: One of my books is called *In Defense of Public Opinion Polling* and I defend them very much, because what can be more democratic really than polling? Because you're asking people what they think. Do dictators carry out polls? Of course not. Dictators don't want to know what the people think, or if they do know what the people think they don't care, they're not going to act on it. But a democratic leader needs polls because a poll tells them how they're doing, what people like and what people do not like. The democratic leaders do not have to go by polls alone, that would be unprincipled because sometimes people don't know

certain things that they need to know about public policy issues to give valid responses or useful responses to pollsters.

For instance, you ask foreign policy issues where frequently the American people, I'm sure the Australian people would be the same way, are not following these foreign policy questions that well and will not give the kind of information back that democratic leaders can use. On other things, certainly the American people or the Australian people know about these issues quite a bit, and the democratic leaders would be undemocratic to ignore public opinion. So that is why there is nothing more in the democratic mainstream than public opinion polling.

Stephen Mills: Certainly back in the early days of polling there was this idealistic plebiscitary idea that polls were going to be this wonderful new tool to assist political leaders to govern us. If we could tell the politicians what we really thought, then they would listen to us and they'd put in place the appropriate responses. And George Gallup and, to a certain extent, the *Australian's* Roy Morgan, shared this sense of idealism that here was a wonderful new tool.

Now, it didn't turn out that way, clearly. There have certainly been examples of public opinion supporting social movements. I think if you look at social change, feminism, the gay movement, the fact that polls register support for social movements, the Vietnam War, certainly assisted those social changes to take place, but that was not really through influencing political decision-makers, that was by citizens really seeing in polls that other citizens were growing and growing in this view. Look at the way that the gay marriage movement recently has gathered strength as it has gathered support in the public opinion polls.

Justin Lewis: The way polls are used at the moment it's hard to argue that it really benefits democracy. The dominant use of polls these days is to measure the popularity of politicians and their parties, that's the dominant use of polls, and actually that doesn't really tell us very much. So if we see a poll that shows that, say, the Liberal Party is this number of points ahead or Julia Gillard gets this kind of rating in the polls, if we see polls like that, what does it tell us about where those people stand on issues or whether we should vote for them or not? It doesn't tell us anything at all. If we vote for a politician just because they're popular, that's a terrible reason to vote for somebody. So that kind of polling I don't think is informative at all. It tells us nothing. In fact it distracts us from the reasons why we should vote for people.

So I think polling that focuses purely on parties...I mean, it's great fun for those of us who are speculating about who's going to win and who's going to lose, for insiders it's a kind of game that we all like playing, but in terms of how much it informs us about what political leaders think and what they're going to do, I say it's a distraction. So while I think polls could bolster democracy, the way polls are currently used, with an endless focus on parties and leaders, really it's hard to argue that it tells us anything at all.

Annabelle Quince: Today's guests: Professor Justin Lewis, the author of *Constructing Public Opinion*; Professor Murray Goot from Macquarie University; Dr Stephen Mills from the University of Sydney; Professor Ken Warren, the author of *In Defense of Public Opinion Polling*; and Professor Amy Fried, the author of *Pathways to Polling Crisis*.

Thanks to Working Dog productions for the use of the material from *The Hollowmen*, which is currently being repeated on ABC1 on Wednesday nights at 10pm.

A podcast and transcript of this program is available from the *Rear Vision* web site, just search for *Rear Vision* via your favourite search engine.

Today's sound engineer is Phillip McKellar, I'm Annabelle Quince and this is *Rear Vision* on RN. Thanks for joining us.

<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/rearvision/political-opinion-polls/4748882>