



**Inside Story** | [inside.org.au](http://inside.org.au) | August 2010

# Polls, elections and Australian political history

Rodney Tiffen looks at the pitfalls of poll-watching and the lessons of postwar history

**T**here have been so many records set recently in Australian politics that the politicians should be tested for steroids. We began the current electoral cycle with the personal defeat of a prime minister for only the second time in 110 years, with John Howard following the 1929 precedent of Stanley Bruce and being swept from parliament. Then, for the first time, the Liberals staged two leadership coups within three years. Finally – and again for the first time ever – a successful leadership coup was launched against a first-term prime minister, the leader who had achieved the equal-third-biggest winning swing since the second world war.

This raises an obvious question. Will this month's election follow the precedent of the 1931 election, with Julia Gillard joining James Scullin as leader of one of

only two federal governments defeated after only one term? Or else, will she follow Paul Keating as the only leader at either state or federal level – at least in the last half century – to win an election after deposing their predecessor?

For Julia Gillard defeat will mean an even more odious entry into the record books. She is already Australia's first female prime minister, our first Welsh-born prime minister, and the first PM to take office with a de facto partner. But if the current polls are an accurate indicator she is at grave risk of becoming Australia's second-shortest-ever reigning prime minister.

Australia has had three “caretaker” prime ministers – deputies who took over when the incumbent died in office but were always known to be temporary. The three are Earle Page (1939, for twenty days after the death of Joe Lyons); Franke Forde (1945, for eight days after the death of John Curtin); John McEwen (1967–68, for twenty-three days after the death of Harold Holt).

**Above: Julia Gillard and treasurer Wayne Swan board the media bus in Sydney on 3 August, heading for a day of campaigning on the central coast.**

AAP Image/Alan Porritt

Of the twenty-four real prime ministers, the shortest-serving was Arthur Fadden, who took over as head of government after the collapse of the Menzies coalition government in 1941. His stormy rule lasted for “forty days and forty nights,” in the words of one writer, before two independents in the House voted him out of office. John Curtin’s Labor government took over and prosecuted the war effort much more effectively.

If Julia Gillard loses the election (and resigns the next day) she will have been prime minister for fifty-nine days. She would displace the current second-place holder, John Christian Watson, who was prime minister for a total of 112 days in 1904 (and was Australia’s only Chilean-born Australian prime minister). Despite the brevity of his tenure, Watson’s leadership had several achievements. In particular, his was the first Labor government anywhere in the world. It was always a minority government, and Watson governed during a period when three parties of broadly equal strength vied for office and short terms in government were the norm. Between 1901 and 1910, Australia experienced seven prime ministerships. Much longer periods of incumbency are now the norm, making a Gillard Labor loss even more extraordinary.

Given these dramatic developments and possibilities, it is little wonder that the media have been speculating so breathlessly about the election outcome. Each poll between now and the election will be greeted with exaggerated claims for its importance. To put this all in perspective, it’s useful to look back at the results from Australian federal elections since the second world war and examine the key issues in public opinion polling and predicting elections.

Since the war, there have been twenty-five elections for the House of Representatives. As Table 1 shows, of those elections, the Coalition has won sixteen and Labor nine – the discrepancy largely reflecting the Liberals’ nine successive victories from 1949, giving them twenty-three years continuously in office. Since 1972, Labor has won eight elections and the Coalition seven. Table 1 also shows that the dominant pattern in Australian elections is for incumbents to be re-elected. On only six of twenty-five occasions has an election produced a change of government.

All governments have been formed by one of the two major parties, and their combined vote on all but one occasion has been more than 80 per cent of the total. But, as Table 2 shows, the number of people voting for minor parties and independents has been increasing. Seven of the eight occasions when the combined vote of

the two major parties has been lowest have occurred at the most recent elections. Although there were earlier occasions when “Others” have attracted a substantial vote (notably in the 1958 and 1977 elections after the formation of, respectively, the Democratic Labor Party and the Australian Democrats as nationally organised parties), it now looks to have become a continuing feature of the Australian landscape. When the DLP was the largest minor party its preferences went overwhelmingly to the Coalition; preferences from the Democrats and especially the Greens have tended to go mainly to Labor.

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

Table 3 reveals that although changes of government are infrequent, Australian elections tend to be close, and that a relatively small swing in the vote can change the outcome. In thirteen of the twenty-five elections, the two-party-preferred vote was 52:48 or closer, and in seven of the eleven elections since 1980 it has been this close. The largest winning margin was Harold Holt’s victory over Arthur Calwell in the 1966 “Vietnam” election, and the second-biggest was Malcolm Fraser’s victory following the dismissal of the Whitlam government in 1975.

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

**Table 1. Outcomes of Australian House of Representatives elections 1946–2007**

Year	Winning party	Incumbent result	Winning leader	Losing leader	Coalition primary vote %	Labor vote %
1946	Labor	GOVT	Chifley	Menzies	43.7	49.7
1949	Coalition	OPPN	Menzies	Chifley	50.3	46.0
1951	Coalition	GOVT	Menzies	Chifley	50.3	47.7
1954	Coalition	GOVT	Menzies	Evatt	47.1	50.0
1955	Coalition	GOVT	Menzies	Evatt	47.6	44.6
1958	Coalition	GOVT	Menzies	Evatt	46.5	42.8
1961	Coalition	GOVT	Menzies	Calwell	42.1	47.9
1963	Coalition	GOVT	Menzies	Calwell	46.0	45.5
1966	Coalition	GOVT	Holt	Calwell	50.0	40.0
1969	Coalition	GOVT	Gorton	Whitlam	43.4	47.0
1972	Labor	OPPN	Whitlam	McMahon	41.5	49.8
1974	Labor	GOVT	Whitlam	Snedden	45.7	49.3
1975	Coalition	OPPN	Fraser	Whitlam	53.1	42.8
1977	Coalition	GOVT	Fraser	Whitlam	48.1	39.6
1980	Coalition	GOVT	Fraser	Hayden	46.3	45.1
1983	Labor	OPPN	Hawke	Fraser	43.6	49.5
1984	Labor	GOVT	Hawke	Peacock	45.0	47.5
1987	Labor	GOVT	Hawke	Howard	46.1	45.8
1990	Labor	GOVT	Hawke	Peacock	43.4	39.4
1993	Labor	GOVT	Keating	Hewson	44.3	44.9
1996	Coalition	OPPN	Howard	Keating	46.9	38.8
1998	Coalition	GOVT	Howard	Beazley	39.2	40.1
2001	Coalition	GOVT	Howard	Beazley	42.7	37.8
2004	Coalition	GOVT	Howard	Latham	46.7	37.6
2007	Labor	OPPN	Rudd	Howard	42.1	43.3

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

The other aspect of the table is that there is normally quite a moderate net swing in Australian elections, with fourteen of the twenty-five producing swings of more than 2 per cent but only ten produced a swing of more

**Table 2. Percentage of votes for minor parties and independents at House of Representatives elections 1946–2007**

Year	Total other %	Year	Total other %
1998	20.7	1980	8.6
2001	19.5	1963	8.5
1990	17.2	1987	8.1
2004	15.7	1955	7.8
2007	14.6	1984	7.4
1996	14.3	1983	6.9
1977	12.3	1946	6.6
1993	10.9	1974	5.0
1958	10.6	1975	4.1
1969	10.6	1949	3.7
1961	10.0	1954	2.9
1966	10.0	1951	2.0
1972	8.9		

**Table 3. Winner's two-party preferred share of vote at House of Representatives elections 1946–2007**

Year	Winning leader	Winner's two-party preferred %
1966	Holt	56.9
1975	Fraser	55.7
1977	Fraser	54.6
1955	Menzies	54.2
1958	Menzies	54.1
1946	Chifley	53.7
1996	Howard	53.6
1983	Hawke	53.2
1972	Whitlam	52.7
2004	Howard	52.7
2007	Rudd	52.7
1963	Menzies	52.6
1984	Hawke	51.8
1974	Whitlam	51.7
1993	Keating	51.4
1949	Menzies	51.0
2001	Howard	51.0
1987	Hawke	50.8
1951	Menzies	50.7
1980	Fraser	50.4
1990	Hawke	49.9
1969	Gorton	49.8
1961	Menzies	49.5
1954	Menzies	49.3
1998	Howard	48.9

**Table 4. Two-Party preferred swing at House of Representatives elections 1946–2007**

Year	Swing in relation to government	Swing % (two-party preferred)
1975	Against	7.4
1969	Against	7.1
1946	Against	5.4
2007	Against	5.4
1996	Against	5.0
1955	To	4.9
1949	Against	4.7
1998	Against	4.7
1961	Against	4.6
1966	To	4.3
1980	Against	4.2
1983	Against	3.6
1963	To	3.1
1972	Against	2.5
2001	To	2.1
2004	To	1.7
1993	To	1.5
1954	Against	1.4
1984	Against	1.4
1977	Against	1.1
1974	Against	1.0
1987	Against	1.0
1990	Against	0.9
1951	Against	0.3
1958	Against	0.1

than 4 per cent and only five a swing of more than 5 per cent.

Of the changes in government before 2007, two came from a very pronounced swing, when Labor lost in 1975 and 1996, but the other three came from a two-election sequence, with the biggest swing occurring in the election before office was won. After the conservative collapse during the second world war, Menzies scored a huge swing in 1946 before winning in 1949. Under conditions of great prosperity Whitlam achieved the second largest swing in the whole period, in 1969, before winning in 1972. Another Labor leader, Bill Hayden, achieved a bigger swing in 1980 than Bob Hawke did in 1983 when he defeated the Fraser government. It was perhaps this two-step pattern that made Howard think that after his 2004 triumph he

would be safe for one more election. But Rudd scored the equal third highest swing to defeat him.

Table 5 highlights another feature of Australia's single member electoral system for the House of Representatives: the number of seats won is not necessarily proportional to the total vote obtained. In fact, the system tends to inflate the winning margin of the victor. In all twenty-five elections the winning side won a greater proportion of seats than of votes, the disproportionality sometimes being quite marked. Two patterns are apparent. The first is that the greater the winning margin, the more marked becomes the disproportion. As the winning margin in votes increases, the margin in seats increases even more markedly. Our electoral system tends to magnify landslides.

**Table 5. Votes and seats in House of Representatives Elections 1946–2007**

Year	Winning leader	Winning party	Winner's two-party preferred %	Winner's % seats	Difference
1975	Fraser	Lib	55.7	71.7	16.0
1977	Fraser	Lib	54.6	69.4	14.8
1958	Menzies	Lib	54.1	65.8	11.7
1949	Menzies	Lib	51.0	61.2	10.2
1966	Holt	Lib	56.9	66.1	9.5
1996	Howard	Lib	53.6	62.8	9.2
1980	Fraser	Lib	50.4	59.2	8.8
1955	Menzies	Lib	54.2	61.5	7.3
1987	Hawke	ALP	50.8	58.1	7.3
1983	Hawke	ALP	53.2	60.0	6.8
1951	Menzies	Lib	50.7	57.0	6.7
1963	Menzies	Lib	52.6	59.0	6.4
2007	Rudd	ALP	52.7	58.7	6.0
2004	Howard	Lib	52.7	58.0	5.3
1998	Howard	Lib	48.9	54.1	5.2
1946	Chifley	ALP	53.7	58.1	4.4
1954	Menzies	Lib	49.3	52.9	3.6
1984	Hawke	ALP	51.8	55.4	3.6
1969	Gorton	Lib	49.8	52.8	3.0
1993	Keating	Lib	51.4	54.4	3.0
2001	Howard	Lib	51.0	54.0	3.0
1990	Hawke	ALP	49.9	52.7	2.8
1961	Menzies	Lib	49.5	50.8	1.3
1972	Whitlam	ALP	52.7	53.6	1.1
1974	Whitlam	ALP	51.7	52.0	0.3

The second is that overall the system has been kinder to the Coalition than to Labor. Only on two of the twelve occasions when the difference in seats won compared to votes won was more than 6 per cent was Labor the beneficiary. The conventional explanations for this are that for many years the distribution of seats was weighted towards more conservative rural electorates, and that too much of Labor's vote was locked up in the working-class electorates it tended to win by large margins. Both these explanations have become weaker with time.

The distribution of votes into seats is one of many reasons why the pre-election enthusiasm for predicting the outcome based on polls is hazardous. It is hard to get a proper perspective on the credibility of the polls. Some people have a sullen suspicion of them, although the theories of sampling on which they are based are sound. More commonly, though, they are reported with

a misleading certainty about what they portend. It is also important to remember the potential impact of the media's own vested interests when they interpret the poll results. Because they have an interest in maximising the news value of these products they have paid for, they tend to highlight change and novelty.

They also have an interest in increasing the newsworthiness of the election, and so they exaggerate the drama of the contest. These interests were evident in the reporting of the 2007 polls by News Limited. That election was unusual in the very steadiness of the polls. As Newspoll founder Sol Lebovic observed, "in the past twenty years no party has maintained such a large and consistent lead going into an election." The *Sydney Morning Herald's* Peter Hartcher put it more graphically — the Howard government faced "opinion polls of chilling steadiness and deadly intent." And Kevin Rudd went on to win government, with a very

large swing and a winning margin in the vote exactly as large as Howard's in 2004.

Nevertheless the News Limited papers manufactured an election-eve flurry. The *Daily Telegraph* was particularly gung ho. On the Friday before the election, half of its front page had a picture of Howard with the caption, "Battered and bruised but our final poll shows Half-Term Howard is... [and then the largest headline] Half a Chance." This story – best read with the music from *Rocky* playing loudly in the background – said that their Galaxy Poll showed a late swing back, and had the government "within striking distance." Its inside report was headlined "Too close to call: parties pull level" (in fact there was a four point gap), and Malcolm Farr and Simon Benson imagined how "a determined John Howard has wrenched back a swag of supporters from Labor and is poised to confound election forecasts and retain government." On election day, Farr's final comment was that Howard "is well positioned to retain government."

So the reporting of the polls is not always carried out as professionally as the pollsters' data gathering. Essentially, there are seven reasons not to simply extrapolate from a recent poll finding to an election outcome.

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

Note that it is the size of the sample that matters, not the size of the population. As long as the sample is random, then a sample of 2000 can be extrapolated to the Australian population, the American population, or an individual electorate with the same confidence level of plus or minus two per cent. (Mumble's Peter Brent rightly took News Limited's Glenn Milne to account in 2007 for the common journalistic error of saying that 300 was a good sample size for estimating the vote in an individual electorate.) Although the pollsters sometimes combine several recent polls to explore regional variations, if they give state figures based only on one

poll, their subsamples for predicting each state have a much larger sampling error than the survey as a whole. Be especially suspicious of polls that don't report their sample size, which sometimes occurs when newspapers do quickie surveys of marginal electorates.

Of course polls based on self selection – on readers recording their views on a website for example – have zero scientific validity. This is always true, but it is particularly so during an election campaign when supporters of one party may mobilise to try to shape perceptions. A recent nonsensical exercise was undertaken by the News Limited tabloids, which reported on 4 August the results of what 15,500 of their readers thought of the leaders. A whopping 79 per cent thought Tony Abbott deserved to become prime minister, and a fraction less thought he was better qualified. A majority agreed that Julia Gillard was sneaky and scheming. What is most amazing about these results is that supposedly credible news outlets thought they were worth reporting.

**Sampling distortions.** In practice few surveys achieve pure randomness. Reasons of availability, access and expense produce distortions. In the old days, when most surveys were done face to face, it used to be joked that owners of German shepherd dogs were underrepresented. Certainly remote rural dwellers and non-English speakers are undoubtedly underrepresented. Telephone polls often tend to miss younger people who are less often at home, and while the great bulk of the public own telephones (especially if mobiles are included) the sampling frame of telephone ownership does not exactly match that of the electorate.

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

On the other hand, there are reasons to be more confident in the accuracy of the polls than this. The

pollsters not only have a strong interest in being accurate but have accumulated great experience. They know how well their sample demographics conform to other parameters of the Australian electorate, such as age, sex and location, and this helps give them a sense of their accuracy and sometimes leads to weighting procedures.

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

**Misleading answers.** While respondents cannot be compelled to answer, neither is it guaranteed they will say what they really think. Accurate polling is impossible in a country where the respondents think they could be reported to the authorities if they gave the wrong answer, for example. In a democracy the more likely distortion comes from the wish to give socially desirable or acceptable answers, which is sometimes a factor in questions about race. In election surveys it is not normally a factor, but can occasionally become so. It was thought that in the late 1990s some Pauline Hanson One Nation supporters were reluctant to publicly state their preference, for example.

**Misleading questions.** On policy issues, the distribution of opinion can be greatly affected by how the question is framed, what words are used, what options are offered. On contentious issues, about which many people have ambivalent attitudes, or on issues about which they do not have strongly formed attitudes, this can greatly skew the meaning of the poll results, but in election surveys it is rarely an important factor.

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

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

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

**Conversion of votes into seats.** As noted, the election result is determined by the number of seats a party wins, not the total votes it acquires. No single-member system can be guaranteed to give proportional outcomes. This last factor probably tends to somewhat favour the government, as members in marginal electorates can use the advantages of incumbency, such as visibility and government largesse, to defy the swing elsewhere to at least some extent. So if the polls are running close to 50–50, it is normally safer to back the government. Nevertheless, although the recent redistribution may have helped it slightly, it seems that on the current boundaries Labor will need close to 51 per cent of the two-party-preferred vote to retain government.

**Change of opinion between the survey date and election day.** The potential for people to change their mind or to make their final decision very close to the election is the basis of the explanation pollsters usually use when their results do not match the election results. There does seem to be an increase in the number of softly committed voters who are prone to late decisions, and this does make the election campaign of increasing importance. The Australian Election Surveys, taken after each election since 1987, find very sizable proportions of people saying they decided how to vote during the campaign itself, and quite a few in the final days – enough, by far, to deliver a landslide to one party or the other if all decided in the same direction. But these surveys almost certainly exaggerate the actual degree of indecision. The polls published contemporaneously have never found the size of movement that the AES surveys suggest is possible.

But it is timely to recall that Tony Abbott's polls after two weeks of the five week campaign are very similar to Mark Latham's in 2010. This fits a conventional wisdom in Australian politics that although voters express their discontent with the government between elections, but

as the election looms, and the choice becomes more explicit, they focus on the weaknesses of the opposition and drift back to the government. But, as Sol Lebovic and Murray Goot have pointed out, only in two of the last seven elections – 1993 and 2004 – has there been a substantial movement back to the government during the campaign. Lebovic said that in 2004 Howard achieved the biggest increase during a campaign that any government had managed in Newspoll's twenty years of polling, increasing its primary vote by 5.7 percentage points.

By changing prime ministers so late this time around, Labor has sacrificed some of the advantages that normally flow to incumbents. Nevertheless there are sufficient indications that people are still undecided that the polls so far published cannot be used to predict the result with any certainty.

**W**hat does all this tell us about what will happen on 21 August? When I was studying first year philosophy, I used to be annoyed when my Oxford-trained lecturers used the statement “all swans are white” when they were attempting to convey the concept of an empirical regularity based on induction rather than causal logic. As 98 per cent of the swans that I and most of the rest of the class had ever seen were black, this always struck me as a dumb example.

My long forgotten irritation was re-aroused by the publication in 2007 of an influential book by Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan*. For Taleb a Black Swan

Event is an unforeseen and improbable event, which has a high impact on all subsequent developments. He lists the first world war, the development of the personal computer, the rise of the internet and the September 11 attacks as cases of Black Swan Events.

Taleb's book is a fruitful exploration of the failure to acknowledge uncertainty and the inevitability of the limits of information, and an argument that we need systems that are better able to respond to the Black Swan Events that will inevitably come in the future. For Australian observers, wanting to stretch the metaphor, a slightly different interpretation suggests itself, namely that black swans are a manifestation of a theoretical universe that was too narrow – that their concept of swans was inadequate.

This thought and Taleb's arguments about financial crises are a useful reminder that the past is never a perfect guide to the future. In both economics and politics we are dealing with complex and, even more importantly, open systems. Present-day actors orient their future actions to take account of what they have learned from the past.

In reviewing patterns of Australian electoral behaviour we can see tendencies and patterns, but usually these amount to much less than a binding causal logic. In reviewing polling, by nature we are dealing with probabilities and juggling uncertainties, and caution is called for. Not that any of this is to suggest that the election of Tony Abbott as prime minister would constitute a Black Swan Event. •

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