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Wentworth by-election means ‘death’ of cheap robo-polling & ‘leaked’ private party polls!

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Roy Morgan CEO Michele Levine two days before the Wentworth by-election on Sky News’ new political show ‘Conroy & Kroger’ when asked why she was so critical of cheap polls said: ‘They may be cheaper, but I can’t really see any point in doing a poll that is going to get the wrong answer’.

Conducting a worthwhile poll is not as simple as interviewing 500, or a 1,000, people in a given area, and filling up gender and age quotas to match the area’s basic demographic population profile and assuming you have an accurate poll.

The recent Wentworth by-election provided a stunning example of how simply filling up quotas in this way can produce a prediction that is so far removed from reality to be useless.

The ‘wrong’ **Greenpeace** commissioned **ReachTel** robo-poll results were reported by [Carly Earl for the Guardian](#) last week prior to the Wentworth by-election (the actual results are in brackets for comparison):

“The Liberal party is in serious danger of losing the seat of Wentworth this weekend according to a new ReachTel poll that shows Liberal candidate Dave Sharma’s primary vote has slumped to 32.7% (actual vote 43.2%). The vote of high profile independent and local GP Kerryn Phelps has surged to 25.8% (actual vote 29.1%). Labor’s Tim Murray has increased his share of the primary vote to 21.6% (actual vote 11.5%), compared with 19.5% in a ReachTel poll two weeks ago. The Greens’ Dominic Wy Kanak has 9.1% (actual vote 8.6%) while independent Licia Heath has 5.6% (actual vote 2.3%)”.

The Greenpeace ReachTel robo-poll primary vote predictions were significantly in error for several of the leading candidates. Out by more than 10% for both Liberal Dave Sharma and ALP candidate Tim Murray and out by more than 3% for the two Independent candidates Kerryn Phelps and Licia Heath.

The ReachTel robo-poll’s prediction for the critical two-candidate preferred result was even further out. Not only did the two-candidate preferred result compound the error made by being over 10% out on the primary vote for Liberal candidate Dave Sharma and ALP candidate Tim Murray but the preference flows were a further source of error and meant the poll was completely wrong when predicting the two-candidate preferred result.

The ReachTel robo-poll had a ‘ridiculous’ preference flow of 90% to Kerryn Phelps compared to 10% for Liberal Dave Sharma which led to a two-candidate preferred prediction of Phelps (62.4%) cf. Sharma (37.6%). This predicted two-candidate preferred figure was well over 10% off the correct result and will be even more incorrect as postal votes continue to favour the Liberal candidate to produce a close final two-candidate preferred result – likely to be close to 51% Phelps cf. 49% Sharma.

On Thursday October 18, 2018 – two days before the Wentworth by-election, Roy Morgan CEO Michele Levine was interviewed on SkyNews new political show ‘Conroy & Kroger’ and warned about relying on cheap polls (including robo-polls such as the Greenpeace commissioned ReachTel poll) that rely on a cheap methodology rather than striving for any degree of accuracy.

The following exchange between host Stephen Conroy and Roy Morgan CEO Michele Levine addresses the issues with relying on ‘cheaper polls’:

Stephen Conroy, Host of Conroy & Kroger: *“Alright, look that’s fair enough, I mean, the parties now are faced with this dilemma, But the cheaper polls are done in a way that doesn’t always give you a really solid result. What is behind that? Why are you so critical of those polls?”*

Michele Levine, CEO Roy Morgan: *“I’m critical of them, they may be cheaper, but I can’t really see any point in doing a poll that is going to get the wrong answer.”*

“So for instance, Newspoll is now owned by YouGov and YouGov got Brexit wrong. Now if there was ever anything that really mattered, if it was really important to get the truth, then I think Brexit would have been it.

“And this is not, as somebody was saying earlier, about people not wanting to tell the truth or in fact lying when they get polled, it’s not that at all, it’s just that these modern new silly ways of polling which are either robo-polls or telephone polls which only get a small proportion of the population or online polls with commercial panels of people who volunteer to be part of it, they only get a really small piece of the population.

“They never get, as in the case of Brexit or in the case of Trump being elected in America, they never get the disenfranchised people. They just miss them completely and when they come out and vote they’re surprised. **So why people choose cheap polls, I don’t know.**”

As well as the **Greenpeace** commissioned ReachTel robo-poll there was also a ‘leaked’ internal **Liberal** poll ([reported in the Australian](#)) released in the days before the Wentworth by-election which had Sharma’s vote “in the mid-30s” and Phelps “well into the 20s”. Of course no details of the poll’s sample, methodology or questioning were made available.

The internal **Liberal** poll showed Independent Kerryn Phelps on 55% of the two-candidate preferred vote well ahead of Liberal Dave Sharma on 45% and prompted Prime Minister Scott Morrison to announce that the Liberals were going to lose the Wentworth by-election. The ‘leaking’ of the results of this poll by the Liberal Party to The Australian is suspect as it significantly over-estimated the support for Phelps while downplaying support for Liberal candidate Dave Sharma. It is well known the Liberal Party’s preferred position prior to an election is ‘behind’ – the thinking is that it will galvanise their supporters and discourage a ‘protest vote’.

These erroneous predictions are very much like the predictions from UK pre-Brexit pollsters such as YouGov (who in Australia conduct Newspoll) and most pre-Trump Presidential election polls!

Results of 2018 Wentworth by-election and pre-election polls

	AEC Official Results Wentworth*	Greenpeace ReachTEL Poll	Error	Liberal ‘Internal Poll’ Internal Poll**	Error	2016 Federal Election Wentworth	Change since 2016 Federal Election
Sample Method	October 20, 2018 79,760	October 15, 2018 661 Robo Poll		October 14-15, 2018 n/a n/a		July 2, 2016 88,641	
Primary Vote	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Dave Sharma (LIB)	43.2	32.7	+10.5	34-36**	+6-9	62.3	-19.1
Kerryn Phelps (IND)	29.1	25.8	+3.3	25-27**	+2-4	n/a	+29.1
Tim Murray (ALP)	11.5	21.6	-10.1	n/a		17.7	-6.2
Dominic Kanak (GRN)	8.6	9.1	-0.5	n/a		14.9	-6.3
Licia Heath (IND)	2.3	5.6	-3.3	n/a		n/a	+2.3
Others	5.3	5.2	+0.1	n/a		5.1	+0.2
TOTAL	100	100					
Two-Party Preferred	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Dave Sharma (LIB)	48.9	37.6	+11.3	45	+3.9	67.7	-18.8
Kerryn Phelps (IND)	51.1	62.4	-11.3	55	-3.9	32.3 (ALP)	+18.8
TOTAL	100	100		100		100	

*Official Results at 5pm Wednesday October 24, 2018. **The Liberal internal polling showed Sharma’s vote in the ‘mid 30s’ and Phelps ‘well into the 20s’ Source – The Australian (October 16, 2018: <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/kerryn-phelps-to-trounce-liberals-in-wentworth-party-polling-shows/news-story/04a7ff7057c9172fd99d055294a37696>).

The final Wentworth by-election result is not yet known because an unknown number of postal votes are yet to be returned to the Australian Electoral Commission. The AEC issued 12,788 postal vote envelopes for Wentworth. By Wednesday October 24, the AEC had processed 7,623. To be included in the final result postal votes must be received by Friday November 2, within two weeks from the date of the election and be post-marked as mailed by the date of the by-election.

Analysing the postal votes shows the Liberals gaining about 61.7% of the postal votes already counted on a two-party basis. If another 4,000 postal votes are returned by next Friday November 2 and the same preference flows apply, with 61.7% going to Mr Sharma on a two-party basis, the result will be close although Phelps will still win with just under 51% of the two-candidate preferred vote.

Surely this must mean the ‘death’ of cheap robo-polling & private party polls!

**Roy Morgan SMS Polling was extremely accurate at both the last two Federal Elections:
[See Accuracy Results here.](#)**

**Results analysed by Roy Morgan Helix Personas are available on a subscription basis.
www.HelixPersonas.com.au.**

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Morgan Poll Accuracy — Recent Elections State & Federal (2006 – 2013)

The Morgan Poll has proven to be consistently the most accurate regular poll in recent Australian Elections — including the 2013 Federal Election, 2010 Federal Election, 2007 Federal Election, 2010 Victorian State Election & 2012 Queensland State Election.

The Morgan Poll was the most accurate of all polling companies at [the 2013 Federal Election](#) for the two-party preferred vote (L-NP: 53.5% cf. ALP 46.5%) (sample 4,937 electors).

The Morgan Poll was the most accurate of all polling companies at [the 2007 Federal Election](#) for both primary vote and two-party preferred predictions (sample 2,115 electors).

The Morgan Poll accurately predicted [that the ALP would win the 2006 Queensland Election with a reduced majority](#) (sample 604 electors).

The Morgan Poll accurately predicted [that the ALP would win the 2006 Victorian Election with a reduced majority](#) (sample 956 electors). The Morgan Poll was also the most accurate on the primary vote of the major parties for the Victorian election.

Note: The [discussion on Possum Pollytics](#) regarding Morgan and Newspoll is well worth reading.

The following included comment says it all: “I find it interesting that for the only poll in the last five years for which there is any ‘real’ figure with which to compare, i.e. the polls immediately before the 2004 election, Morgan (45.5%) was closer to the actual Coalition Primary (46.7%) than Newspoll (45%) or Nielsen (49%), and Morgan (38.5%) was also closer to the ALP actual primary (37.6%) than Newspoll (39%), and only marginally further away than Nielsen (37%). Since we have no idea of how far away the ongoing polls are from ‘reality’ (whatever that means), surely we should just go with what we know, that in the most recent testable case, Morgan was better at forecasting the actual primary vote than Newspoll. On what possible basis should we decide that the Newspoll or Nielsen primary vote estimate is ‘better’ than Morgan’s.”

[View Federal Voting Intention Trend](#)

Margin of Error

The margin of error to be allowed for in any estimate depends mainly on the number of interviews on which it is based. The following table gives indications of the likely range within which estimates would be 95% likely to fall, expressed as the number of percentage points above or below the actual estimate. The figures are approximate and for general guidance only, and assume a simple random sample. Allowance for design effects (such as stratification and weighting) should be made as appropriate.

Sample Size	Percentage Estimate			
	40%-60%	25% or 75%	10% or 90%	5% or 95%
1,000	±3.2	±2.7	±1.9	±1.4