Chapter 12

Hunting the Swinging Voter

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This chapter addresses Liberal and Labor Party efforts to understand swinging voters and how both parties use polling and focus groups to aid campaigning, particularly in marginal electorates. Internal party documents and accounts of interviews with party 'campaign professionals' have been used to illustrate the evolution of sophisticated polling methods. My argument questions the obsessive use of polls and the implications for party organisation of the carefully stage-managed nature of modern election campaigns. Arguably the work of campaign professionals tends to foster such a high degree of cynicism among voters that more votes are probably lost than are won by their efforts. The assumptions made by campaign professionals about voters may, however, lack firm foundation. This chapter questions the emphasis that campaign professionals have placed on the swinging voter and further considers how the stress on opinion polls has affected the internal dynamics of modern parties, especially in relation to leadership.

Opinion Polls – the Modern Electoral Curse?

Opinion polls, both those publically available and those closely guarded by the parties, are an all-pervasive part of contemporary national politics. At the time of writing, the role of opinion polls in shaping the course of national politics has never been more profound. The return of Kevin Rudd to the prime ministership was largely a consequence of syndicated polls such as Newspoll, Nielsen and Galaxy, and the online poll, Essential Vision, reinforcing Labor's internal polling, which pointed to looming electoral catastrophe. In the post-Rudd resurrection it was reported that the Liberal Party was engaging in 'intensive focus group' research to help it shape an early pre-election advertising response (Coorey 2013). When party leaders face months of adverse polls they are especially vulnerable, given the frequency of polling and the concomitant obsessive reporting and commentary. It becomes progressively more difficult to convey any message on policy when speculation over the incumbent's tenure is 'the news'. Politicians are readily unnerved by the polls, and those within the party who are privy to party

polling could, upon what seems to the voting public to be little more than a whim, seek to undermine a leader. In this context it was not surprising that Rudd sought to disallow his parliamentary colleagues' capacity to remove the parliamentary leader. Why the major parties lack confidence today is open to conjecture, but it is clear that the speculation over party leaders' tenure is ever present and reaches fever pitch whenever polls turn sour for even a mere few months. The advice given by campaign professionals compels leaders to accept a crude caricature of the sort of voter they must woo during the campaign, and this undermines a leader's capacity to appear genuine, honest and worthy of governing.

The Campaign Professionals' Rise and the 'Catch-all' Party

Over the past 30 years a class of campaign professionals has come to dominate the management of election campaigns and the shaping of the party leader's media image between elections. Armed with quantitative surveys and focus group 'intelligence', campaign professionals increasingly seek to fashion their party's propaganda without any connection or reference to party backbenchers and members. They work assiduously to advise leaders and marginal seat candidates on the key messages that emerge from their research and, in conjunction with advertising agencies, how best to formulate messages (Mills 2013: 97–8). Their rise derives from the putative increasing 'electoral volatility' and representations of swinging voters as apathetic and selfish citizens. With the advent of the information technology revolution they have become extremely influential as the custodians of computer databases dedicated to individual voter concerns (Mills 1986: 200; Peisley and Ward 2001: 555; Inman 2012). Employing an array of methods, they gather and process information to inform the leader's campaign and media image, along with a much more specifically crafted and targeted propaganda message for the local marginal seat campaign. Mills (2013: 110) observes that the aim is to reveal 'groups and individuals within those electorates who might be susceptible to party communications'. This is the essence of the local campaign and it has grown exponentially over the last decade, with ever-more party resources and funds devoted to wooing swinging voters.

The rise of campaign professionals is understood at a theoretical level by observing that Liberal and Labor evolved, over the past 40 or so years, from essentially being 'mass parties' into 'catch-all' parties. While theorising over models, or 'ideal types', in relation to political parties is contentious and gives rise to considerable debate (Marsh 2006b), it is nevertheless defensible

to conclude, following Gunther and Diamond (2003: 185), that Liberal and Labor are, on balance, catch-all party variants of what they term the 'electoralist party' model. As Wolinetz (2002: 159–60) explains, this type of party demonstrates an orientation towards 'opinion electorates' rather than electorates of 'belonging' and places 'emphasis on issues or personalities rather than ideology'. One of the obvious consequences of the eclipse of the mass party was the rise of the 'campaign professional' (Farrell and Webb 2000) and, concomitantly, the dark arts of political spin. In this political milieu, party membership has declined, with parties no longer relying exclusively on members for policy ideas, assistance with campaigning and pre-selection of candidates (see 'Parties and Campaigning' and 'The Virtual Party on the Ground' in this volume). This is a somewhat superficial summary of the current state of play in the major political parties. But what appears to be increasingly true is that both Labor and Liberal have progressively lost their 'expressive functions', as the campaign professionals – with their commitment to hunting down the swinging voters and stage-managing the party leader under the watchful eye of image and advertising advisers – have assumed a dominant role.

The reality of catch-all party politics under the sway of the professionals with their tailored advice is undisputed. Arguably, the Liberals had become a catch-all party by the mid-1960s, with Labor reaching this point by the 1990s, as its labourist mass party foundation succumbed to the pressures of a declining blue-collar working class (Jaensch 1989b; Manning 2000). But the process has been uneven with Labor introducing electoral professional practices prior to the Liberal Party in 1972. The shift to catch-all party politics introduces into modern campaign practices the centrality of the pithy message on a specific policy matter, which may activate a swinging voter's support. To this end, various types of internal party polling inform multiple aspects of the party's election-related activities: policy decisions; the honed messages leaders deliver to the mass media; the slogans and phrases to repeat perpetually; and the shape of the particularly negative advertising aimed at the opponents. These are the forces within parties that shape the modern party leader as, in effect, actors negotiating the political stage.

Outside this realm are the polling companies. Syndicated with major newspapers, they feed what is now an 'opinion industry', generating as it does endless commentary and speculation on the state of electoral play, which as some scholars observe is analogous to a 'horse race' (Holtz-Bacha 2012: 276; Young 2004: 231). This 'preoccupation with who is winning the electoral

contest rather than with the substance of policy', argue Mills and Tiffen (2012: 165), prompts 'an increasing focus on individual leaders measuring their "popularity" or "approval" of their performance'.

Campaign professionals use a combination of quantitative and qualitative survey methodologies and marry that to the 'art' of the political advertiser. The purpose here is not so much to explain how the spin doctors – a much misused term (Andrews 2006: 33) – craft their message but rather how they build the data required for message-making and the assumptions they make about swinging voters. Parties construct databases and conduct focus groups with the aim of better understanding voters, in particular swinging voters resident in marginal electorates. Before moving to consider how the parties go about his task, it is worthwhile to consider how a 'swinging voter' might be defined, whether or not their numbers are expanding with each election, and, indeed, whether the claim that the electorate is more 'volatile' today is justified.

Measuring Swinging Voters

Election campaigns are, in effect, pitched at those voters who have not made up their minds, the so-called 'swinging voters', who are viewed, for the most part, as apathetic and not particularly rational voters (Jaensch 1995: 136). The campaign professional shares this assessment that this category of voters are 'selfish', 'greedy', 'self-interested', 'ignorant' and 'apathetic' (Young 2004: 45–6). This represents the 'consensus view' among pollsters and is highlighted by Mills (1986: 22) in his discussion of Labor's pollster Rod Cameron's assessment of the swinging voter. Mills notes that Cameron presents a 'damning portrait' of swingers as invariably 'apathetic, even anti-political … [and] were it not for Australia's system of compulsory voting probably would not cast a vote at all'. Alongside such characterisations of the typical swinging voter is speculation that their number has grown steadily since the 1960s (van Onselen and Errington (2004: 362). Young (2004: 46–6) refers to Labor Party documents from the mid-1980s speculating that swinging voters numbered 15 per cent, while recently *Newspoll* founder Sol Lebovic argued that, as the divide between the political left and right blurs, the number of swinging voters grows. Surveying the large shifts in the voting intentions of *Newspoll* respondents during 2007, he concluded that more 'voters are swaying in the breeze; there appears to be a bigger pool of swinging voters' (Lebovic 2007). According to former South Australian Premier Mike Rann, Labor's pollsters believe that both major parties could only claim about 30 per cent of their support as 'rusted-on'.

It is difficult to critique the professional 'insider' perspective, but it is important to test these views against the publicly available survey data. Goot (2002) used wide-ranging survey data in his critique of the view that voters are apathetic and uninterested in party politics and election campaigns. For my analysis, I updated Goot's data and focused more specifically on swinging voters. The evidence from this analysis suggests that the efficacy of the party professionals' use of polling and focus groups is questionable. Simply put, the evidence seems to point to a great deal of time and money being wasted. At the same time, swinging voters are arguably not as apathetic or ignorant as is assumed, and the numbers of potential swinging voters is not as large as generally assumed to be the case.

Before we look more closely at defining, and tracking, the swinging voter, it is important to dispel one myth with considerable currency, namely, the purported disenchantment that voters feel towards party politics. If this is as grave as suggested, then a significant decline might be expected in the proportion of voters prepared to indicate identification with a political party when surveyed. According to McAllister (2011: 37–8), 'most voters will use their party loyalty as a short-cut in order to guide their choice on polling day', and as a consequence party identification is the 'most powerful explanation of voting behaviour'. Expressing identification does not necessarily mean that a voter intends to vote for that party; this aspect will be considered shortly. Figure 12.1 indicates that when asked the question, 'Generally speaking do you usually think of yourself as Liberal, Labor, National or what', consistently over 80 per cent of voters indicate 'identification' with a particular party. In a situation of a crisis of voter confidence, evidence of declining identification is likely; however, this is clearly not the case in Australia. Over an extended period we observe only a small decrease in the proportion of voters identifying with the major parties and a small increase in those identifying with the 'other' parties. Voters are also asked to indicate how strongly they identify, and here we find 'very strong' identification has declined from about one-third to one-fifth since 1979, while those with 'fairly strong' identification have remained consistent at around half. This suggests that voter volatility is not quite as high as is often assumed (Manning 2014: 235).

Devising a definition of 'swinging voters' that is consistent and testable over an extended period of time is required if the party professionals and pollsters' accounts are to be assessed. I use Jaensch's (1995: 135) definition of a swinging voter in the absence of a 'perfect' test. Jaensch defines swinging voters as: 1) voters who state a party identification but who choose to vote for another party; and 2) those he terms 'floating voters'; namely, survey
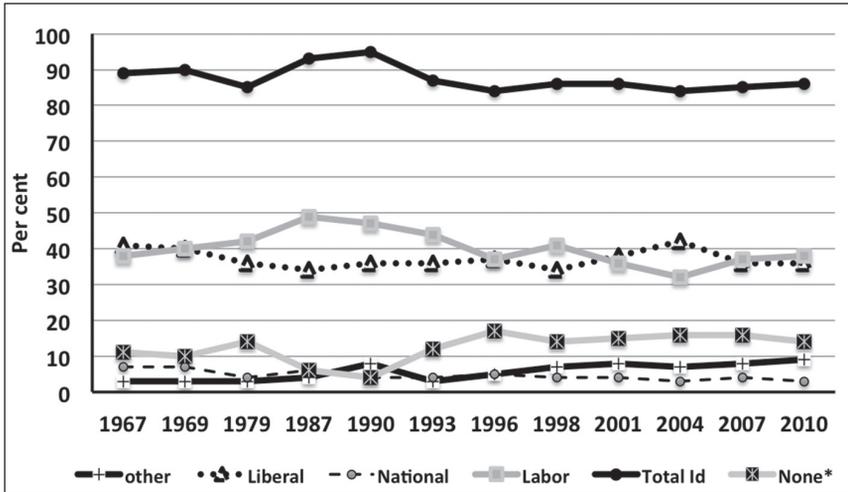
Figure 12.1: Party Identification, 1967–2010

Sources: ANPA1967, ANPA 1969, APAS 1979 and AES, 1987–2010.

respondents who say they have no party identification. Table 12.1 indicates that swinging voters in 2010 constitute about 25 per cent of the electorate, which has been the case since 1990; between 1967 and 1987 the election surveys show a lower range, with about one-fifth of the electorate as swingers. Floating voters, arguably the most obvious category of swinging voter, show little change in proportion over the four decades, with the notable exception being the 1987 and 1990 elections. The claim that swinging voters have increased significantly over the years finds only modest support.

On the question of swinging voters' putative apathy: the extent to which swinging voters are markedly different in their attitudes towards politics and elections when compared with voters who habitually vote for the same party is questionable. For example, the Australian Election Study, conducted shortly after the 2010 election, indicates that 60 per cent of floating voters claim that they have a great deal of interest in politics, compared with the 83 per cent of voters who claim to identify with a particular party. With regard to 'interest in the election campaign', a similar result is found, and on the question of actually casting a vote if it were not compulsory, 60 per cent of floating votes say they would, compared with 87 per cent of those with party identification. Floating voters, when compared with those expressing party identification, are less interested, but the degree to which this is so is not as great as one might expect should we accept the caricature painted by the campaign professionals.

	1967	1969	1979	1987	1990	1993	1996	1998	2001	2004	2007	2010	av
Voters with party identification (% of respondents)	88.8	90	85.9	93.9	95.8	88.4	83.5	86.2	85	83.8	84.5	86.3	87.7
The 'swingers': Voters with party identification but vote for another party (% of respondents)	7.4	13.5	8.2	14.4	16.4	8.8	11.3	14.5	12.1	12.2	10.9	12.4	11.8
No. respondents who swing	131	234	144	249	312	252	187	254	217	196	192	238	
'Floating voters': Voters with no party identification (% of respondents)	11.2	10	14.1	6.1	4.2	11.6	16.5	13.8	15	16.2	15.5	13.7	12.3
No. floating voters	224	186	281	109	83	345	287	257	294	278	284	283	
Total –swinging plus floating voter (% of respondents)	18.6	23.5	22.3	20.5	20.6	20.4	27.8	28.3	27.1	28.8	26.4	26.1	24.1

Table 12.1: Tracking Swinging Voters, House of Representative Elections, 1987–2010

Sources: ANPA1967, ANPA 1969, APAS 1979 and AES, 1987–2010

Turning to the question of the purported increasing electoral volatility, it again becomes apparent that the pollsters and campaign professionals may be prone to exaggeration. One way of investigating the issue is to calculate from election results the 'churn' of votes across consecutive elections, namely, to examine the net volatility. Following Goot, I measure 'movements from one party to another, during inter-election periods or from one election to the next' (1994: 176). Net volatility is calculated by determining the shifts in support (positive and negative) experienced by each party (including minor parties and independents) in consecutive elections, adding each result and dividing the result by two. Figure 12.2 points to trendless fluctuation over the period. When the results are disaggregated to the average net volatility for each of the past five decades, the average volatility for each of these periods is calculated to be 5.2, 7.2, 4.5, 7.1 and 7.4 respectively. The last 20 years of elections certainly point to a higher average volatility, but the 1970s confounds any sense of a steady rise in volatility and, as Goot (1994) shows, electoral volatility was much greater in the 1930s than in any of the contemporary periods.
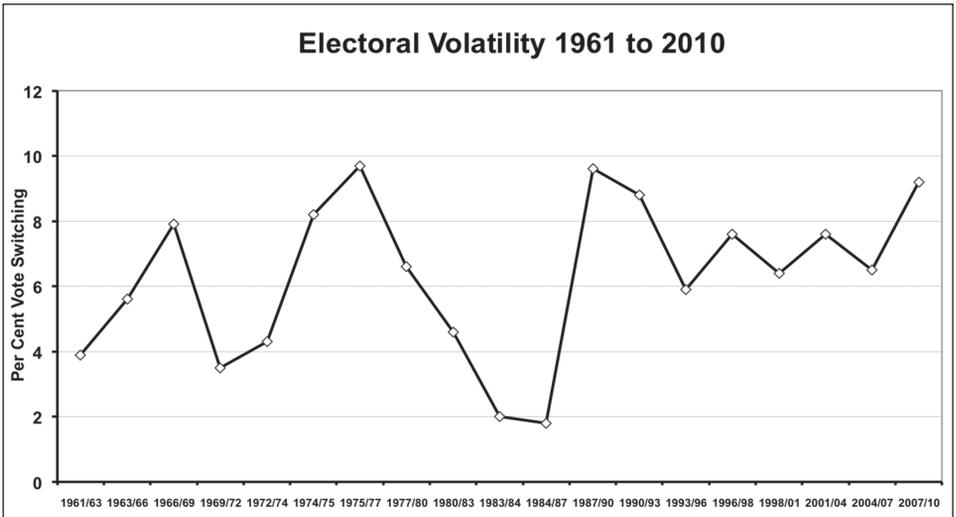

Figure 12.2: Electoral Volatility, 1961–2010
Source: Barber (2011)

Targeting Swinging Voters – What Happens Inside the Party

Although the earliest use of party polling dates to the 1950s when Roy Morgan gave polling results to the Liberal Party, it was Labor's use of quantitative polling in the late 1960s that gave the party an early advantage (Mills 2013: 97). South Australian Labor Premier Don Dunstan and ALP Federal Secretary Mick Young contracted *Australian National Opinion Polls* to conduct door-knock surveys with samples of approximately 1000 voters (Rann 2013; Mills 2013: 84). As the first national campaign director of any major party, Mick Young plotted Labor's 1972 campaign and, with Dunstan, pioneered the use of quantitative polling. During the campaign, surveys were used 'extensively' and were, according to Young, 'an integral part of all our decision-making' (Young, cited in Mills 2012: 194). Polling very effectively 'identified weaknesses in the image of party leader Gough Whitlam' and was used 'to pre-test the advertising slogan which carried Labor's message of change: "It's Time"' (Mills 2012: 194). During the 1980s the South Australian Labor state and later federal MP, Peter Duncan, commenced work on the first collation of data on individual voters for use in his electorate campaign. This represented the first step towards MPs becoming actively involved in the collection of data on voter demographics and their known policy interests. By the late 1980s Labor's national office had begun the task of coordinating data collection for all branches, and both parties began to conduct random sample surveys more frequently, while exploring how they might complement quantitative data research. In 1991 the Liberal Party appointed Mark Textor as its pollster, with his work subsequently playing a key role in the successful 1996 campaign that ended Labor's long period in office (Peisley and Ward 2001: 559). In her account of the campaign, Pamela Williams (1997: 100) noted how Textor's polling allowed the Liberal Party campaign to hone its message to swinging voters, something the Liberals had failed to achieve at previous national elections.

During the past 20 years both Liberal and Labor have developed sophisticated databases of voter interests. Labor's database *Electrac* and the Liberals' *Feedback* hold information on tens of thousands of voters, particularly those living in marginal electorates. The data range from particular issues and policy interests that have been 'tagged', to assessment of individual voters' previously expressed concerns. This enables an efficient system of message delivery, which may include any number of techniques – direct mail, email, door-knock visits and phone calls, including so-called 'robocalls' (Peisley and Ward 2001: 554; Young 2004: 64; van Onselen and Errington 2004: 359–61). The database is built on a combination of

commercially available information, raw demographic data supplied by the Australian Electoral Commission, and telephone directories. But more important for individualised targeting is the information that parties glean while door-knocking voters and perusing the lists of voters who sign petitions and/or write to their local MPs or to the newspaper editors. In recent times, identifying those who contribute to internet blogging and accessing community group membership lists are essential tactics and keep the professionals and their staff occupied (van Onselen and Errington 2004: 353–4; Young 2004: 64). Information placed in these databases and issues considered of interest to voters are tagged against particular individuals, with further specific tags indicating their assumed strength of party identification. The Liberal Party's *Feedback* database involved voters being 'tagged' against over 300 issues considered potential triggers that may prompt contact by the local candidate or a personally addressed letter from the party leader. The database had some 150 'generic forms of tags' and 'was easily viewed by office staff as icons as soon as they open the constituent's file on the database, and thus provide an instant picture of the person with whom they are dealing' (van Onselen and Errington 2004: 354).

Former South Australian Premier Mike Rann has worked on Labor's campaigns in all states and nationally since the late 1970s. Rann (2013) makes the point that the databases simply allow 'the local MP to know the concerns of individual electors' and notes that the new data-collection methods were forced by changes to privacy law in South Australia during the mid-1980s, which made it no longer possible to obtain data from the Electoral Commission on a voter's occupation or age. Given the absence of easily obtained demographic data, candidates began to collect their own data and this motivated the development of 'specifically targeted direct mail from candidates with information gained locally'. The new data-gathering techniques were learned/acquired during Rann's study tours in the United States. Voter tracking techniques were refined further by John Utting from UMR Research. Rann outlines how Utting conducted research for party secretariats:

> Rather than door-to-door interviews, which were massively expensive, Utting did phone polling. Some months before an election he would poll a series of marginal seats where the real election battles would be won or lost. So these seats would be re-polled as the campaign came closer and when it was underway. This was supplemented by a nightly tracking poll – a small sample (say 100–200) per night spread across

marginal seats. Every day the party secretary, leader and campaign team would be briefed on 'how the day went' the day before. This tended to be indicative although, after four days it meant that each day we had a sizeable sample to look at trends. In other words, every day I would have before me what the results were from the night before (how I'd done on the evening news) plus a four-day rolling average.

On the question of tracking voters during a campaign, information is held tightly by the campaign directors, the party leader and selected MPs. Graham Jaeschke (2013), who worked on a number of national Liberal campaigns during the 1990s before becoming Queensland and later New South Wales State Director, explains that 'the word tracking really describes what the effectiveness of polling is about. You are tracking movement, looking for where you are dropping off, or improving, in some respects the actual result on any given day is not as important as the movement'. This is crucial when determining where to allocate resources. Rann (2013) shares this view:

> I generally found polling to be extraordinarily accurate. But it depends on how you use it. Many politicians, including some at the most senior level, are obsessed with the horse race figures – who is ahead or behind at a particular time. I have always been much more interested in what the polling tells me about trends and messages – that is, not only how to catch a wave but to create a wave. Momentum is critically important to a campaign.

Rann notes that outside the period of an election campaign, very little, if any, polling is undertaken. In both parties, however, pre-campaign polling is used to forge a baseline for the ongoing tracking of opinion during the campaign. In Rann's experience, a major phone poll with a large sample is conducted in key marginal seats a few months before the commencement of campaigning and this informs further polling of marginal seats throughout the campaign. Once the campaign begins, this baseline poll sits alongside 'a rolling tracking poll with a very small sample, involving telephone polling of recipients every night in our cluster of marginal seats'. Information is released carefully to candidates because, 'Often they are obsessed with wanting to know the 'horse race' figures, which either depresses them or panics them, or makes them too cocky and complacent'.

Focus groups, which have long played a key role in assisting parties to identify the reactions of swinging voters, are defined as 'group discussions exploring a specific set of issues' and are often prompted by the showing

of video, promotional messages and advertisements (Kitzinger and Barbour 1999: 4). President Clinton observed 'there is no one more powerful than a member of a focus group' (Berke 1999), a view underscored in the political satire of television comedies such as the ABC's *The Hollowmen*. Opinion-polling scholar Justin Lewis warns that a skilled facilitator can easily manipulate a focus group to 'amplify certain opinions within that focus group to push it in a certain direction' (cited in Quince 2013). A facilitator seeks to foster an easy interchange of ideas among participants and, as Johnson observes, the outcome should see 'a human dimension that cannot be matched by traditional survey methods' because 'participants are free to express themselves, to complain, and to vent their anger' (cited in Lees-Marshment 2009: 85). Reflecting on his experience, Graham Jaeschke (2013) outlines the logistics around the use of focus groups:

> In a nutshell, a polling company is commissioned to hold focus groups – they may hold two – one late afternoon and one early evening. Instructions are given, where you want participants recruited from, what age group and what voting preference. Usually a mix of soft voters but this may change, for example, if doing a preference strategy you might recruit Green/Independent voters. But if we are heading for a win, you may just target soft Labor voters – this is really at the discretion of the Campaign Director/Pollster. The contracted company recruits 10 people and they are paid for attending and usually given a bite to eat and drink. The facilitator conducts the conversation and usually it is filmed with some campaign operatives sitting in the other room watching reactions. It is usually a fluid format, with the facilitator presenting campaign ads or if you want to know what is happening in a particular electorate you may have a particular issue you want to thrash out.

Focus groups allow parties to test voter reaction to, as Rann (2013) puts it, 'storyboards' – 'If particular policy ideas tested well, we would give them a much higher emphasis in the campaign, in speeches, policy announcements and advertising'.

Leader debates are now an established feature of any campaign. Rann explains how, prior to the actual televised debate, he used an actor to play his Liberal opponent and had the mock debate video-taped for use with focus groups. This process, he claimed, helped him to 'understand which issues to emphasise during the campaign'. The 'worm' used to track audience reactions to televised debates was used to assess focus group responses, in particular

'which issues, policies and images to push in advertisements, leaflets and direct mail'.

The party leadership closely guards polling information. Rann (2013) suggests that during a campaign where the prospect of defeat is high, negative information from focus groups 'could be dangerous in the hands of the disloyal, in your own team, let alone the media or your opponents'. In relation to opinion polls, Jaeschke (2013) notes that one problem with the results from polling is 'everyone wants to big-note themselves that they know the latest polling as though it is a bit of a status symbol'.

The quantitative polling is used to survey clusters of marginal seats and assists with decisions relating to the allocation of funds for direct targeting. Focus groups on the other hand assist with sharpening the 'storyboards' and informing political advertising agencies about how to script the main advertising messages. To illustrate the impact of targeting on the election result, van Onselen and Errington (2004: 360) quote a 1998 Liberal Party training manual. The report indicates how effective a targeted campaign has the potential to be: 'At the 1998 Federal election, MPs with less than 3,000 swinging voters identified in their electorate suffered a 5 per cent swing against them, where MPs with over 3,000 swinging voters tagged only incurred a 1.9 per cent swing against them'. Rann estimates that 15 per cent of the entire campaign budget is devoted to polling.

Conclusion

The main parties' obsession with opinion polls is not unique to the Australian context (Brent 2007; Mills & Tiffen 2012; Holtz-Bacha 2012). However, the Australian preoccupation with these polls is probably unsurpassed in comparable democracies, given its recent impact on the tenure of prime ministers and opposition leaders. In a 2010 speech, Labor Senator John Faulkner noted that, 'Polling is not and can never be a substitute for leadership. Polling is not and can never be a substitute for policy', and was critical of the ways polls may be used to create dissension within a party (Faulkner 2010). In the light of the influence that campaign professionals have over party leaders and ministers and the abiding negative assessment of the motivations of swinging voters, we can conclude that the democratic interface between parties and the electorate has become superficial. The use of *Australian Election Study* surveys to question assumptions about swinging voters is not an infallible measure. Notwithstanding this caveat, sufficient evidence has been presented to cast doubt on the campaign professionals' assumptions about the nature of swinging voters. That campaigns are

planned in minute detail on the basis of these assumptions tends to foster the absence of authenticity voters detect in the party leaders. During the second week of campaigning in 2010, Prime Minister Julia Gillard promised voters that she would, from that point on, strive to be the 'real Julia' by ignoring much of the advice of the campaign professionals. This statement offered voters a rare insight into the frustrations felt by a political leader. The irony is that, while voters are more educated and society in so many ways is more sophisticated and information-rich than 50 years ago, the spontaneity of election campaigning, by any measure, is severely diminished, largely due to the contemporary practices of 'stage-managing' leaders and reducing policy announcements to cleverly crafted sound bites. Ultimately, the hunt for the marginal seat swinging voter, based on all the 'science' of polling techniques and advice of the political advertising agency, may well render a reality where it is increasingly difficult for major party political leaders to lead with conviction and purpose.