

Can we believe the Opinion Polls?

Keith Rankin, 9 June 2011

New Zealanders are not getting an accurate picture of the fortunes of the respective political parties in the run-up to the 2011 general election.

There are five professional companies that do regular political polling. The four – Digipoll, Colmar Brunton, Reid Research, Roy Morgan – who have contracts with New Zealand's four principal commercial media organisations, appear to give up some useful accuracy for the sake of simplicity of presentation. All suggest to media consumers that National would command over 50 per cent of the vote if an election were held soon.

The fifth professional polling organisation is Horizon, and their results seem to be quite different. What is consistent across all five companies is that, for every 100 eligible voters polled, between 35 and 50 persons say they will vote for National. The most cited media polls allegedly exclude up to 30 per cent of responses before presenting their results (<http://www.horizonpoll.co.nz/page/133/political-po>), although Horizon's comments appear to target Digipoll specifically. (TVNZ's Colmar Brunton recent poll and TV3's Reid poll claim around 11% of respondents were undecided.) If 30 respondents do not give a preferred party, 40 out of 70 saying they will vote National computes as 57 per cent.

In excluding undecided voters, the polling companies remove the respondents whose answers are the most critical in predicting the actual election result in November. These are those who presently report as "undecided". The four polling companies that fail to report the undecided responses assume that the distribution of the undecided votes will be the same as the distribution of the already decided vote.

We know that this assumption is wrong, because in each election for many years, the support for the principal governing party has appeared to decline as the undecided voters made up their minds in favour of the smaller parties. This occurs because, while many voters do not know yet who they will vote for, they have a very good idea about who they will not vote for. Thus a typical undecided voter may be undecided between, say, Labour and Green, and will not vote National. Others, of course, will be undecided between National and Act.

The Horizon Poll is superior, I would argue, both because of the question it asks, and because of the way it presents its results. The Horizon question is: "If a New Zealand general election were held tomorrow, which party would you vote for, or which do you have a preference towards at the moment?" It presses the critical "undecided" voters more strongly to indicate a likely preference.

The May 14 Horizon poll suggested that the centre-left block of five parties (46.5%) had overtaken the centre-right block of four parties (44.9%). We should note that the Mana Party, in Parliament, can be expected to vote with Labour rather than National on matters of confidence.

Even before the Budget, one poll – arguably the most professional of all – was suggesting that the next government would be a Labour-led coalition. National support was 36.6 per cent of persons questioned, quite consistent with the results for National given by the other polling organisations.

In that Horizon poll, the significant numbers add up to 91.5 percent. The remaining 8.5 percent splits between "don't know" (4.9%), "other party" (1.9%) and "choose not to vote" (1.7%). These "don't know" voters are those who plan to vote but really have no idea about who to vote for. It is a consistently lower figure than the unpublished "don't know" responses of the other organisations' polls.

The most recent Horizon poll, conducted after the Budget, and published on the internet on 24 May, shows the centre-left margin increasing from 1.6% to 4.0%. Yet most media reports continue to claim that National has enough support at present to command, without recourse to support from other parties, a majority of the next Parliament. While this poll fell below the media radar, I feel sure that the combined support for the smaller parties in the 26 of November election will be closer to that shown in the May Horizon poll than the results reported by the media-contracted polls.

The 24 May Horizon Poll shows that about two per cent of respondents shifted from National/Maori to undecided. It also showed a small fall in support for Labour and the Greens. The centre-left group appears to have increased its margin over the centre-right group by shedding fewer supporters than the centre-right group.

There are some other differences between the Horizon poll and the media-contracted polls. The Horizon poll is particularly well suited to monitoring trends, due to the stability of its respondent base.

Horizon uses a larger sample size, which suggests less sampling error. And it uses email rather than telephones to access its interviewees. Some argue that the use of email makes the Horizon poll less representative than other polls. However, phone-based polls are becoming less reliable than before as more people at both ends of the income spectrum have no landline telephone. Further, email polls can be more easily answered in their own time by busy people who don't always have time to take telephone calls.

We might expect that an Internet-based poll – conducted professionally – might nevertheless incur a bias towards the young, and towards higher income groups. To compensate for any such selection bias, Horizon weights its samples both demographically (as do the other companies) and in proportion to voter choices in the 2008 general election (which the other companies do not).

All political polls use samples that involve a degree of selection bias. There is always a trade-off between cost and accuracy. Internet polling is potentially much cheaper than telephone polling, for a given level of selection bias. At present we see that the four media-contracted polls incur essentially the same bias as each other, as well as being subject to the same simplified reporting processes. Horizon's bias, while different, is unlikely to be greater.

While people who tend to vote for the smaller parties are more likely to be undecided months before an election (and therefore under-reported), they also appear to be under-pollled by all except Horizon. Act and Green supporters are almost certainly over-represented in the income-demographic cohorts who are hard to access by landline phones. New Zealand First on the other hand is probably disproportionately supported by self-employed persons whose routines may be less amenable to polling techniques that rely on the assumption that most people work in nine-to-five jobs.

We ignore at our peril the polls that give more detailed and complete answers to the questions that we seek answers for.

Links to recent polls:

[ONE News Colmar Brunton Poll](#) 29 May 2011

[Reid Research 3 News Poll](#) 29 May 2011

[Post-Budget Horizon Poll](#) 24 May 2011

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