

BLIND FAITH?



Give me market research any day!

Blind Faith was a great rock band in its day, but ask people to faithfully believe that just 400 people out of WA's total population can predict who's going to win an election or support a particular proposal and you're in for a solid dose of scepticism.

Frankly, I'm over trying to convince the doubters so I recently asked Keith Patterson of Patterson Research Group to explain how just 400 anonymous Western Australians can accurately 'predict' who will or will not get to hold the seat of power for the next four years, or whether Elizabeth Quay is such a wonderful idea.

The following summary flowed from Keith's 'pen' - in less than 400 words:

"It seems that in every reported survey result, there will be detractors who "just know" that the survey is "wrong". Like the last election that the Democrats contested in WA where we showed 2% support (published as WestPoll) - the poor journo who reported the result copped a bollocking from the Democrat management for bias and that the survey result was "clearly wrong". Yep, on election night the journo took great pleasure in pointing out the results to the Democrat team in the tally room - a 2% primary vote.

Having conducted community attitude surveys for over 30 years the reality is that our polling of a sample of 400 routinely produced pre-election predictions that were within 2% of the actual polling day outcome.

The key to these outcomes, in addition to a properly designed and conducted survey, is in fact sampling theory which says that a survey result from a 'properly selected' random sample of 400 people from a very large population will have a 95% chance of being within 5% of the real world result.

The critical issue in accurate polling therefore is the proper selection of the sample. It means that every person in the population has an equal chance of being selected as part of the sample. In fact the aim then is not to get the 'right individuals', but to reduce the risk of picking up a 'rogue' respondent. Which also explains why it is necessary to increase the sample size as the total population decreases. For example, if we have a population of just 5000, we would need a sample of 372 to limit the same survey error to just plus or minus 4.9%."

So Keith, what happened to 'Blind Faith' and why do people continue to shoot the survey messenger?

"Well the answer is a phenomenon of human behaviour and perhaps even more so in WA in that we tend to mix with people of similar views. Voters of one political party or the other, or supporters of a particular proposal, tend to mix with friends of the same or similar views. Consequently, it is easy to form the view that 'everyone' is of a particular opinion."

So there you have it. For you hopefully it means you can argue the case based on expert advice and for those who will not listen, then maybe it's time they expanded their social circle.

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