Can we trust Australian Polls after the 2016 US experience?

June 2017

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The polls have failed in the US and in the UK.

Can we have confidence in Australian polls?

Answer

Yes we can…

but there are some challenges we need to be aware of.

So how do I get to that answer?

- Polling 101

  - Three basic rules of polling and social research

- Main causes of recent polling controversy

  - Conditions specific to the US generally and at this election

  - Self inflicted wounds of US pollsters and media

  - Problems endemic to polling everywhere

- Reasons for confidence in Australian polls

- A big challenge faced by pollsters ands social researchers

  - Why you have a stake in fixing the problem

  - What you can do about it

Polling 101

Three basic rules for good polling

- 1. Every voter needs a chance to participate in the survey
  - So choose a method that gets to everybody eligible to vote/ likely to turn out
  - Weight results to reflect all voters because you always miss a few.
  - Phone has been gold standard – landline/mobile is now the issue

- 2. The sample has to reflect the population
  - Set quotas to be sure groups are excluded
  - Sample by electorate and project the same way

- 3. To project a state, sample a state
  - Use surveys that are big enough to be reliable at the unit level (electorate, state etc)

Main causes of recent US polling controversy

Specific to US system unavoidable

- **Complexity**
  - Electoral colleges
    - Difficult to estimate
    - Costly to measure
    - Big impacts from small mistakes
  - Hard to follow rule 3
- **Turnout**
  - Makes estimating difficult
    - Voluntary
    - Variable
    - Inconsistent
  - Hard to follow rule 1
- **One off**
  - Disaffected voter
  - 'Un-pollable' voter
  - Hard to follow rule 1

Self inflicted wounds 2016 avoidable

- **Focus on national polls**
- **Poor quality state polls**
  - Failure to weight for education in many
  - Use of cheaper systems affecting quality
  - Broke rules 1, 2 and 3
- **Self reinforcing predictions**
  - Nate Silver – Five Thirty Eight
  - Real Clear Politics
  - NY Times 'Upshot'
  - No rules to cover this!

Issues affecting everybody fixable (some)

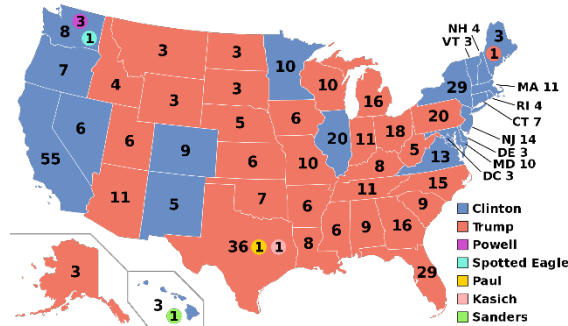- **Cost/quality squeeze**
  - Pollsters (and their clients) turning to cheaper methods
  - Hard to follow rules 2 and 3
- **Access to good sample**
  - Telephone 'Gold Standard' now under serious threat (even if you have the money)
  - Hard to follow rule 1

Complexity

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Complexity – Electoral colleges v Electorates

- **Estimation unit is 50 State Electoral Colleges**
  - Different populations
  - Different seat values
  - Optional, unpredictable turnout
  - National estimation entirely useless artifact and gives misleading impression

- **Get two close calls wrong and you have a big problem**
  - E.g. Florida +- 26 Wisconsin +- 10
  - 36 out of 270 required or 13% error in college votes projected

- **Estimation unit is 150 electorates**
  - Same populations
  - Same seat value
  - Compulsory, predictable turnout
  - National 2PP gets it close (mostly)

- **Get two marginal electorates wrong and they just cancel one another out +1 and -1**
  - Or both wrong the same way = 1.3% error in seats projected

Complexity – higher risk using national vote in US

	Australia 2013		USA 2016	
Swings in incumbent vote and seats lost at two recent elections				
	Swing	Seats to change hands	Swing	College votes to change hands
Poll swing and theoretical result	-4.1%	14	-2.6%	30
Actual swing and theoretical result	-3.6%	13	-2.9%	16
Actual seats lost		17		105
Difference from simple poll result		3/150		89/538
Difference as % of available Seats/ Votes		2.6%		16.5%

Swings based on: In Australia – final Newspoll, In US Average of polls as at election eve published by 538
Seats/College votes based on: In Australia – MacKerras Pendulum, in US estimate given by 'Five Thirty Eight' on election eve

So if you want to precisely estimate a US election…

What should have happened

- 150 separate polls

- State level

- High quality polls

- Ignore national estimates

- Get state polls right

What did happen

- **There were at least 39 national polls**
  - Irrelevant to the outcome
  - Got it right

- **There were at least 208 state level polls**
  - Critical to the outcome
  - Got it wrong

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And anticipating turnout ?

In 2016, turnout nationwide typically grew more in heavily Republican counties than in heavily Democratic counties, relative to 2012.

A number of polls were adjusted to align with turnout patterns from 2012. Based on what happened in 2016, this adjustment may have over-estimated turnout among, for example, African Americans, and under-estimated turnout among rural whites.

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An Evaluation of 2016 Election Polls in the U.S.
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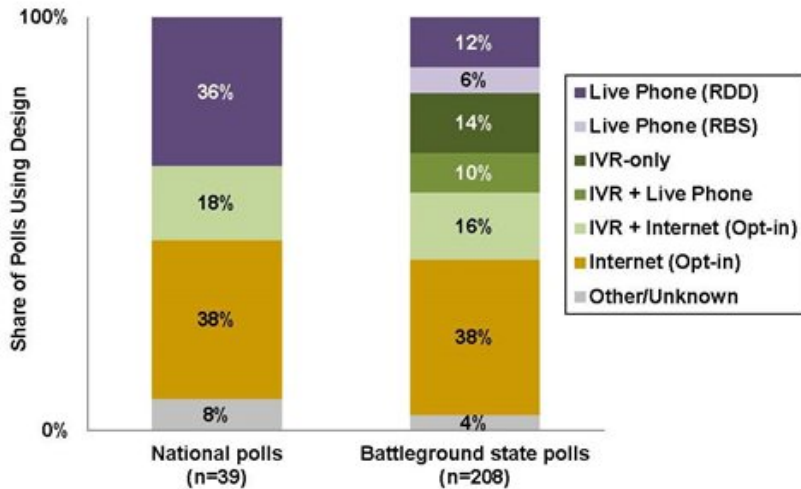
One off features

- Lopsided turnout
  - Trump supporters were under polled but turned out

- Strong divide on education
  - This time, meant models devised from 2012 (that assumed no educational divide) were not valid and over called it for Clinton

- Disaffected voters
  - Yet to be studied but possible link to long time non-voters turning out for the first time or the first time in a while – effectively 'un-pollable' and impossible to factor in

Self inflicted wounds
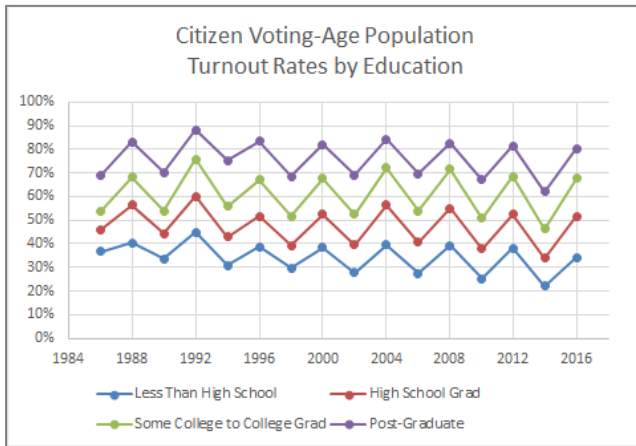
Self inflicted wounds

Cost pressure probably main cause for poor Quality state polls

- State polls are critical to understanding electoral college vote flows

- Yet, these were the most sporadic, least well funded and most poorly executed

- Error rate of 5.1% overall

- Low use of high quality (expensive) phone based polls at state level

- Ambiguity around some polls may have contributed to a focus on national poll estimates by pundits
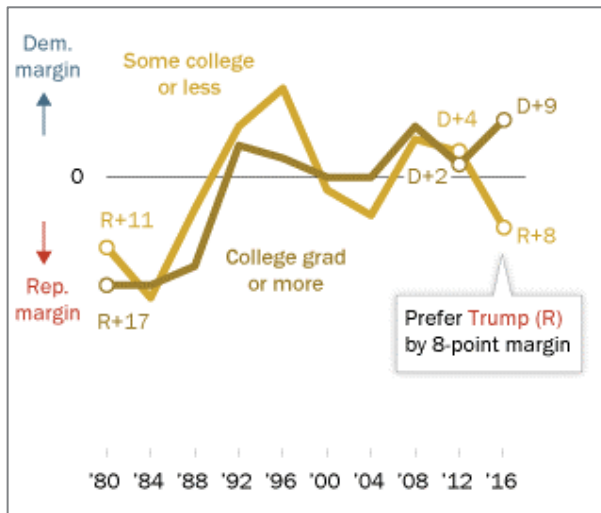
Self inflicted wounds

Citizen Voting-Age Population Turnout Rates by Education

Many state polls did not weight for education

- Failure to weight appropriately by education - a big '*No No'* in the US system especially

- Relates to turnout and party preference two big complicators in the US system

- In 2016 Trump = Lower educated/ Clinton = higher educated was starkly evident
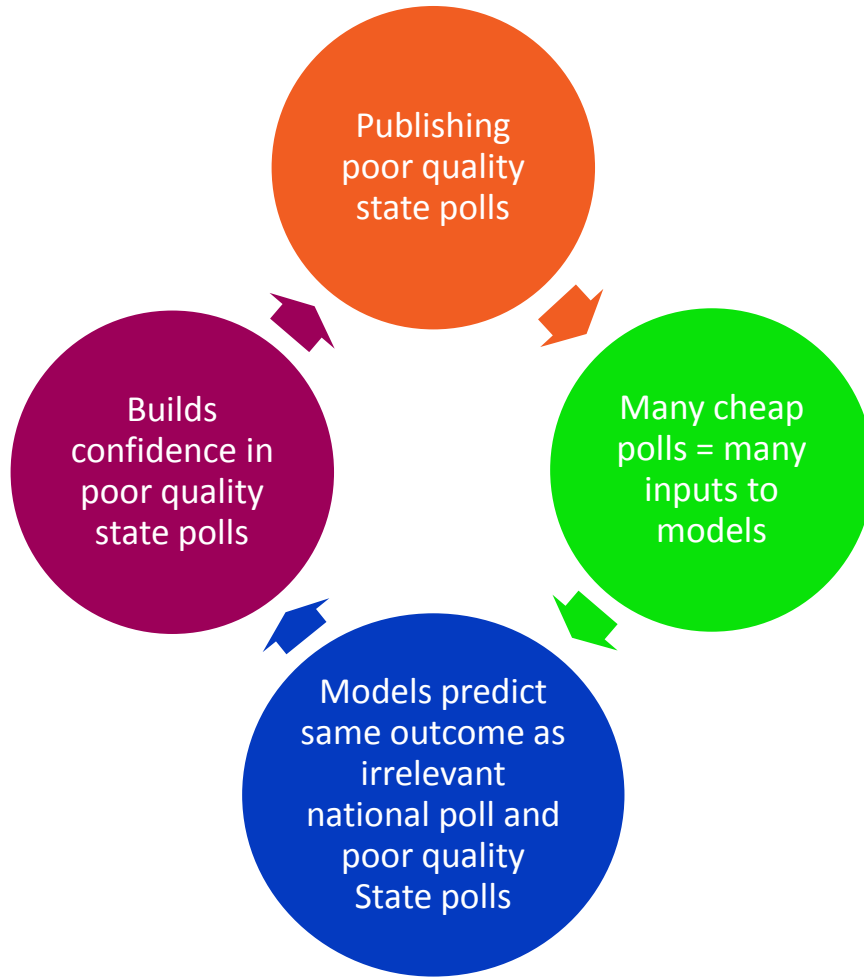
Self inflicted wounds

Aggregators amplified bad results…

- Are not pollsters
- Rely on other polls
  - Poor quality state polls in this case
  - Garbage in Garbage out
- Weights inputs based on a self-devised system
  - A good one…
  - but still subject to confirmation bias
- So, at best, aggregators are as good as the polls they take into account

Self inflicted wounds

Publishing poor quality state polls

Many cheap polls = many inputs to models

Models predict same outcome as irrelevant national poll and poor quality State polls

Builds confidence in poor quality state polls

...and became part of a vicious cycle

- Poll aggregators react to volume of inputs

- Poll aggregators made unambiguous predictions of 70% to 90% change of a Clinton victory

- These statements
  – Reinforced the belief that Trump could not win
  – Entrenched the face value of the (incorrect) state polls and predictive value of the (irrelevant) national polls

- Media outlets now freely admit that they were focussing on the polls that confirmed their beliefs

Self inflicted wounds - Theresa May

Party	2015 Result	'Trigger' Poll Ipsos Mori 12-13 April	Final 2017 Poll (Ipsos Mori 6-7 June)	Final count	Difference
Conservatives	36.8	44	44	42.4	-1.6
Labor	30.4	23	36	40.1	4.1
Others	12.6	12	8	4.6	-3.4
UKIP	12.3	10	4	1.8	-2.2
Lib/Dem	7.9	10	7	7.4	0.4

- Polls have had the conservative vote spot on since April

- But the Labour vote shown in polls is open to interpretation
  - Under estimated by 4% on the eve of the election
  - Makes the 23% of April seem questionable

- But who in their right mind would chance election on a *honeymoon poll* in the first place?

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Australia - reasons for confidence

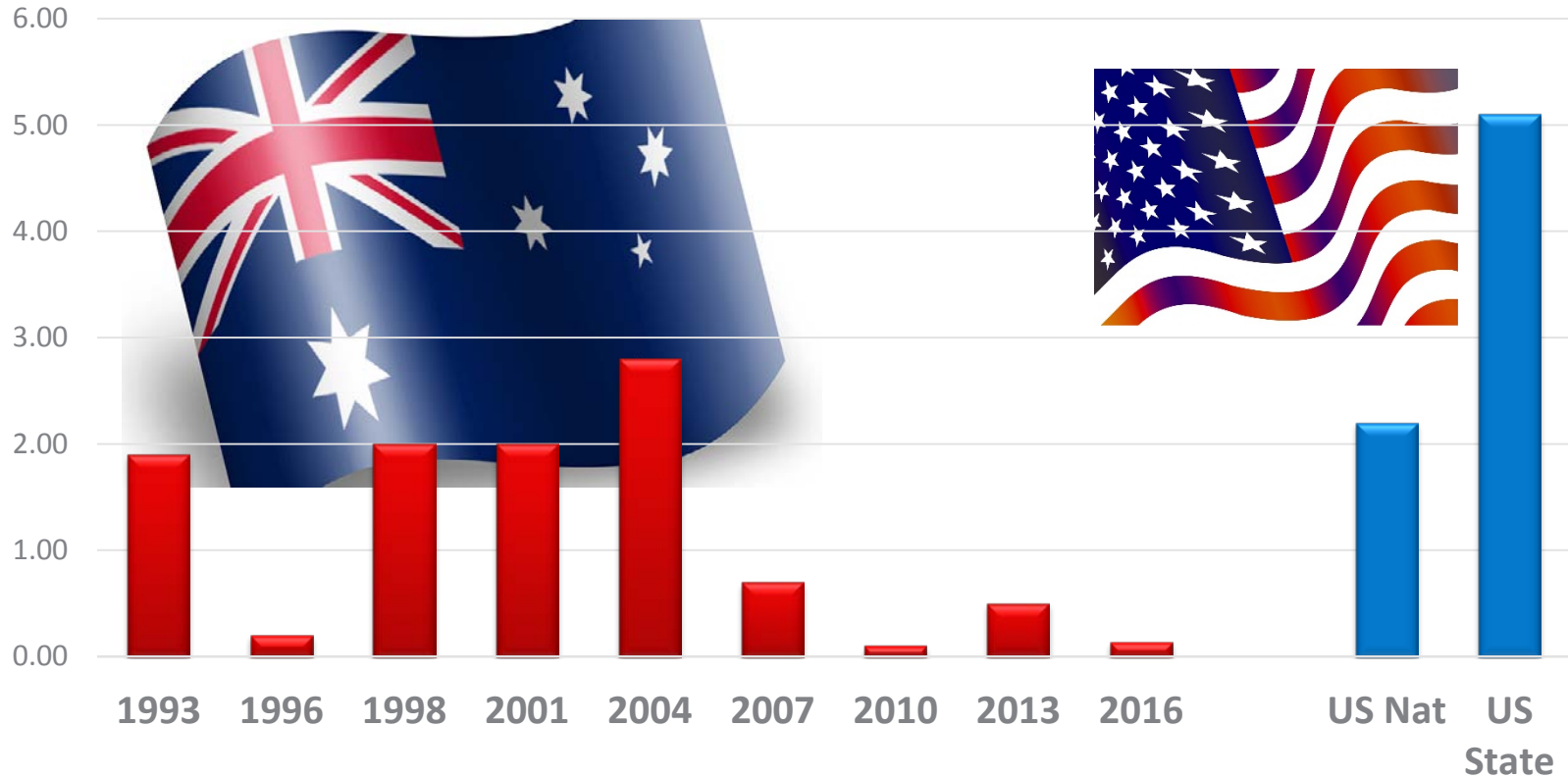# Australia – reasons for confidence

- Our voting system is more monolithic

  - Less granulated and polling units (electorates) are similar not variable

  - Turnout is compulsory and therefore relatively stable

  - Enrolment is encouraged and campaigned by AEC

  - System even allows unenrolled voters a declaration vote

  - So…a poll of everybody is pretty much a poll of likely voters

- Our polling systems

  - Relevance of national estimates to actual outcomes is high

  - Reading our pendulum for seats to change hands has proved (mostly) reliable

  - A good result can be achieved with two good polls (not 150)

    - National

    - Marginal

Australia – reasons for confidence

- Our polling landscape (mostly) favours quality
  - Few, high quality polls
    - Mainly live phone and opt in panel in combination
  - Sampling and weighting (Newspoll pre 2015)
    - Age and sex within area
    - *Education!*

- Our ABS and AEC – two treasures beyond measure
  - Highly accurate elector statistics at state and national level
  - Allows very accurate, representative sampling and precise weighting

So how do polls perform in Australia compared to US?

Absolute Error - Newspoll Historical v 2016 US polls

But surprises can happen

Bob Hawke

1990

49.9

John Howard

1998

49.0

Mike Rann

2010

48.4

Each formed government with less than 50% of the popular vote

Three must haves for good polling

Know the population	ABS	Funding
Know the electorate	AEC Stats	Funding
Get to everybody	Good phone lists	IPND access for industry

An emerging issue for pollsters everywhere

about half of adults do not have landlines. This half of the population would not have any chance of selection… Such substantial noncoverage usually increases the risk of bias.
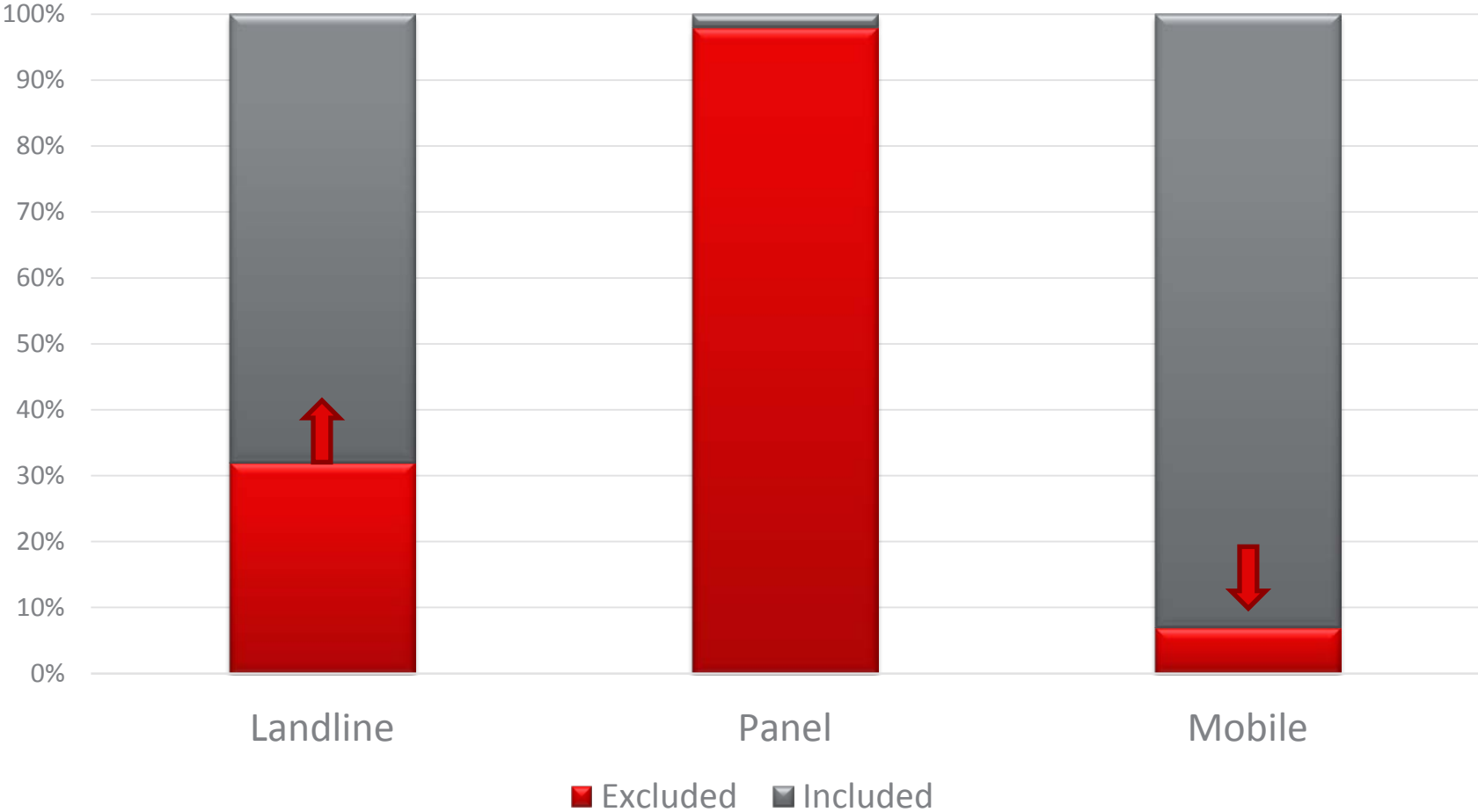
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How Australians are excluded from research

Percent of adults 18+ excluded by survey method

Why government has a stake in fixing the problem

- Government relies heavily on research - uses same techniques as polling

  - Planning services and assessing community need

  - Managing quality of service delivery

  - Assessing communication needs and performance

- Government is largest single buyer of research in Australia

- Telephone research is the most inclusive, representative and fair way

  - Including everybody

  - Representing reality

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How to fix it

- Need to replace the old 'phone book'

  - Landlines and mobiles are recorded in a central list held by Telstra for government (IPND)

  - Researchers working for government have access to IPND

  - But only landlines

  - Mobile numbers are available but are not released

- The scheme needs to be varied to include mobile numbers

- Industry (AMSRO) will be asking for your help

  - Minister responsible - Communications

  - All non-silent numbers including mobiles

  - All privacy compliant researchers

Fin