

Mark Textor, the Liberal pollster, has raged against the modern addiction to polls, in an article this week that shows he can indeed walk both sides of the street, as insider and observer.

[Textor writes](#) that the plethora of polls, with their usually small movements in the vote, rather than the issues, become the most frequent campaign stories. As one solution, he urges the public pollsters to produce more in-depth work – which he does privately for the Liberals - that would explore reasons for people's choices and attitudes on issues.

Textor if anything understates the insidious role of polls in contemporary politics.

It's less damaging that they get such attention during a campaign, when the horses have hit the straight, than in the period between elections.

Polls have been a major factor in the revolving door of recent prime ministerial politics. They were central in the replacement of Kevin Rudd, Julia Gillard, and Tony Abbott. Malcolm Turnbull cited the Coalition losing 30 consecutive Newspolls when he launched his challenge.

The polls give followers a real-time measurement of leaders' performances – or, to put it more accurately, how those performances are seen by the public at a given moment. The followers have become increasingly unwilling to tolerate leaders who, even if only in the short term, look like losers.

Polls play to challengers who want to destabilise. Sometimes it is necessary and desirable to get rid of leaders, but continuous churn is destructive.

Polls work against leaders being able to take tough decisions and live for quite a while with some community angst. Leaders become like students facing continuous assessment, rather than doing their work and sitting an exam at the end of it.

If Turnbull wins this election with just a narrow majority his ability to govern strongly, and potentially his political life, will hang on the polls. He has plenty of enemies in his party, and their ammunition would be the polls, if they were poor.

So for Turnbull this campaign is not only about winning. For him to be able to chart out bold policy in a second term, this has to be about winning well. Turnbull at the moment is more in the territory of having his nose in front, at least in the key marginals, rather than being strides ahead of Bill Shorten.

This week both sides have been diverted by mistakes. Labor frontbencher David Feeney, who had already caused massive trouble by his failure to declare a \$2.3 million negatively-geared house, gave another hit to his own team with a disastrous interview on Sky. Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce, who on Wednesday linked the suspension of live cattle exports and the arrival of boats, leaving the implication of some Indonesian government involvement, tossed a diplomatic grenade.

The Joyce gaffe was the more containable. As it happened Turnbull and Joyce were appearing together in Rockhampton on Thursday morning. Turnbull moved to defuse the issue by answering a question directed to Joyce with an unequivocal declaration that “there is no link between the Indonesian government and people smuggling”. Labor doesn’t want to talk too much about boats, which makes managing Joyce’s misstep easier.

Feeney has been the story that kept on giving. Last week he missed his regular Sky spot after the controversy about his house blew up. When he reappeared on Wednesday, the house affair quickly became the lesser of his problems. Grilled on the ALP position on the future of the schoolkids bonus and the government’s changes to the pensions assets test, he didn’t have answers.

His woes worsened when he left his “issues brief” on a couch in the small Sky waiting room in the parliamentary press gallery. In an incident that embarrassed Sky - which was completely innocent - the document was picked up (aka stolen, in my book) by someone who passed through the room. It was then provided to the Daily Telegraph, which described it as Shorten’s “secret campaign manifesto”.

Feeney is in serious trouble from the Greens in his Melbourne seat of Batman. His blunders have set back not just his own campaign but Labor's national campaign too, which is pretty amazing for a little known figure. He has provided the worst sort of publicity for the ALP's negative gearing policy. Unsurprisingly, he can't at this point be booked for interviews. Whether Labor tacticians allow him back on Sky will be closely watched.

There are differing views of the impact of the week's show stopper – the government's claim of a \$67 billion Labor black hole. It rebounded initially against ministers Scott Morrison and Mathias Cormann, when the "hole" shrank before their eyes during a news conference. But the counter argument is that anything putting a spotlight on Labor's big spending is a positive for the Coalition.

Morrison unblushingly walked away from specific numbers. "Who knows how big the black hole will be actually in government under Labor? ... I will let you guys do a running tally on this," he told reporters on Thursday. Earlier on the ABC he said: "No one's arguing about whether there is a black hole on Labor's promises. ... The question is just how big is it?"

Cabinet secretary Arthur Sinodinos said "the whole purpose of the press conference was to highlight the uncertainty around what Labor has actually promised".

After Feeney's blundering Labor announced that it wouldn't continue the schoolkids bonus, which is about to end, nor reverse the changes to the pension assets test. On the downside, the concession that these could not be afforded came with maximum publicity. On the upside, the ALP has saved itself billions of much-needed dollars.

On Sunday, the nationally televised debate between Turnbull and Shorten will move the campaign to its next stage. Whoever wins the debate will get a bounce into the start of week four, though the outcome won't matter for long.

With five weeks to go from this weekend, there is still what would be a normal campaign period ahead. For Shorten, who has been the superior campaigner, the danger is that, with his major policies out and Labor's spending an issue, he could lose some momentum. He is entering a particularly tricky stage of his campaign. This gives Turnbull an opportunity but if he can't seize it, all his negatives will be reinforced.

Grattan on Friday: Polls would present a risk for a narrowly re-elected Malcolm Turnbull

Written by The Conversation USA

[Read the Grattan Institute's analysis of the 2019 federal election, and its possible outcome, on the Grattan Institute's website.](#)