

Australian voters' trust in political system falls to historic low

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An Australian National University study of the country's May 18 federal election has given an indication of the mounting popular dissatisfaction with the political system and the breakdown of support for the two main parties of capitalist rule—Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition.

The Australian Election Study, conducted after each federal election, surveyed more than 2,000 voters. It found that just 25 percent believed governments can be trusted, the lowest level since such data began being collected, 50 years ago, in 1969. Only 12 percent thought the government is run for “all the people,” while 56 percent believed it is run for “a few big interests looking out for themselves.”

The decline of support for the parliamentary order reflects an historic political crisis. People are drawing conclusions from decades of bitter experiences. Throughout the working class, the deepening political discontent is driven by years of corporate restructuring enforced by successive administrations since the Hawke and Keating Labor governments of the 1980s and 1990s. Assisted by the trade unions, they destroyed jobs, conditions and living standards and transferred staggering levels of wealth to “a few big interests.”

Just 59 percent of those surveyed were “satisfied with the way democracy is working.” This was down 27 percentage points from a high point in 2007, when illusions were fostered in the incoming Rudd Labor government. The study noted: “While starting from a higher base, the rate of decline in satisfaction with democracy has been steeper in Australia than in the United Kingdom following the 2016 Brexit referendum and in the United States following Donald Trump's 2016 election win.”

The lack of support for the Australian political establishment expresses international processes that are

producing the unrest sweeping the major “democracies” and much of the world, producing strikes and mass protests from Chile to Iraq and Hong Kong and Indonesia. These uprisings are motivated by common underlying sentiments: hostility to social inequality, corruption, militarism and authoritarianism.

The study's data confirms the implosion of working class support for the Labor Party, which has been instrumental in policing the requirements of the ruling class for more than a century. In 1987, in the early stages of the Hawke-Keating government, 60 percent of self-identified working-class voters still voted Labor. By 2019 this had decreased to 41 percent and the trend accelerated after the 2016 election, when the figure was 48 percent.

The survey further dispels the myth promoted by the mass media that the Coalition's survival at this year's election was a “miraculous” win achieved by Prime Minister Scott Morrison, giving him a strong “mandate” to push ahead with the corporate agenda.

The results underscore the fact that the Coalition actually lost votes, but won more seats than in 2016. The Coalition's first preference votes fell by 0.6 percent, yet Labor's fell by 1.4 percent. The rising discontent produced a contradictory result. The government clung to office with the help of second or third preference votes from right-wing populist formations, such as Pauline Hanson's One Nation and Clive Palmer's United Australia Party, which postured as anti-elite “outsiders.”

Significantly, the Coalition's support plummeted to a record low among young voters. In the under-35 age bracket, the vote for the Liberal Party fell to 23 percent, and it was less than 5 percent for its coalition partner, the rural-based National Party. By contrast, the Coalition relied heavily on voters over 65, where it won

60 percent of the support.

Despite the hostility toward the Coalition among young people, Labor's support among the voters who were 18-35 years old fell to 37 percent, down from more than 50 percent in 1987. Some of this disillusionment was channelled behind the Greens, who primarily campaigned on the issue of climate change. Support for the Greens among the under-35s rose to 28 percent, up from about 5 percent in 1996, soon after the party was launched.

Another measure of the political alienation is the loss of loyalty to the main parties. Voters were asked: "Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as Liberal, Labor, National or what?" The study concluded: "Partisanship for the two major political parties reached its lowest level on record in 2019, with 30 percent of Australians identifying as Labor partisans, and 32 percent as Liberal partisans." The proportion of voters who do not align with any political party reached a record high of 21 percent.

Similar trends showed up when voters were asked to rate political leaders on a scale running from 0 (strongly dislike) to 10 (strongly like). While Morrison was said to be the most popular political leader since Kevin Rudd in 2007, he scored only 5.1. Bill Shorten, who led Labor into the election, was described as "the least popular leader of a major political party since 1990, scoring 3.9."

More broadly, these results plumb new depths from already low levels. Not even the supposedly "most popular" leaders rated well at the heights of their media-driven political honeymoons. Rudd scored 6.3 when his Labor government was first elected in 2007, while Bob Hawke scored 6.2 in 1987, just as his Labor government was about to step up its assault on working class conditions.

Significantly, nearly half (43 percent) of those surveyed identified economic issues as the most important for them when they voted in 2019. The second biggest issue was "Health and Medicare" (22 percent)—another major problem for millions of people who face lengthening public hospital waiting times and rising private insurance premiums. The environment and global warming (a combined total of 21 percent) came a close third. That was a sharp rise from 10 percent in 2016, indicating mounting anxiety over the ever-more visible impact of global warming.

Australian editorialised the

"satisfaction with democracy is at its lowest level since the constitutional crisis of the 1970s," when the governor-general dismissed the Whitlam Labor government after it failed to contain a huge upsurge in the working class over wages and conditions. The Murdoch-owned newspaper declared that without "far-reaching institutional change, fresh policy ideas and reform of structures and cultures," the "democratic deficit will continue to rise, as populist vandals quicken their steady, destructive march."

The real concern in the ruling class is the re-emergence of the class struggle globally, even if right-wing populists have so far exploited the discontent and sought to channel it in reactionary nationalist directions. These far-right elements have no mass base of support. The combined vote for One Nation and the United Australia Party was 6.5 percent. They have been able to benefit, however, from the decades of betrayals and suppression of working class struggles by the Labor and trade union bureaucrats, aided by the pseudo-left groups that satellite around them.

Under Anthony Albanese—installed unopposed as Labor leader after the party's May 18 election debacle—the Labor and union apparatus is lurching even further to the right, pledging its support for big business and "wealth creation."

In a third post-election "vision" speech last Saturday, Albanese signalled his support for censorship, blaming social media for "the increased volume of anger and misinformation [that] is robbing our political debates of civility and making the public's poor opinion of our political system much, much worse."

Albanese's comments not only reflect the gulf that exists between the political establishment and broad layers of the population but are a warning of its anti-democratic response to social unrest.



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