

Sharp swings in Australian by-elections underscore political instability

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14 February 2022

Large anti-government swings in by-elections in the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW) last Saturday provide some indication of the widespread hostility toward all the governments responsible for the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic disaster.

The Liberal-National Coalition state government of Premier Dominic Perrottet suffered double-digit losses of votes in two of the four electorates contested, and lost Bega, a regional NSW south coast seat, for the first time since the electorate was created in 1988.

The loss of Bega reduces Perrottet's government, which has been a spearhead of the deadly national "live with the virus" campaign, to minority status. It now holds just 45 seats in the 93-member lower house of the NSW parliament.

Final results in the four electorates may not be known for weeks because record numbers of voters lodged postal or pre-poll votes, showing the level of concern about being infected by COVID while standing in line at polling stations.

Nevertheless, the early figures were clear enough to confirm sharp swings against the Coalition. That mirrors the collapse of support shown by media polls for the federal Coalition government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison.

The by-elections were the first electoral test of the decisions made by the Morrison and Perrottet governments, aided and abetted by the opposition Labor Party and the state and territory Labor governments, to scrap most pandemic safety restrictions and let loose the highly-transmissible Omicron mutation.

Infections have soared as a direct result, followed by hospitalisations and deaths, and this is being compounded by thousands of cases among students and staff because the state and territory governments

reopened schools this month.

The by-elections were held on the eve of today's statewide nurses' strike, the first in a decade. It is part of a growing opposition throughout the working class to the toll of infections and deaths, and the intensified government-employer attack on workers' real wages, workloads and conditions.

While damaging for the Coalition, the results confirm a lack of active support for Labor. It has maintained "constructive" bipartisan backing for the profit-motivated "reopening" policies of big business and the NSW and federal governments throughout the pandemic, and for the Morrison government's war-mongering escalation of accusations against China and Russia.

In the three seats Labor contested, it had an average two-party swing (after the allocation of other candidates' second preferences) of just 5.5 percent. That is well below the double-digit swings the Coalition has usually suffered at NSW by-elections since it took office in 2011 through a landslide defeat of the previous long-term Labor state government.

Labor's only big swing came in Bega, an area severely affected by government failures since 2019, starting with the devastating bush fires of the 2019–20 summer, followed by the pandemic. Both disasters have exposed the decay of the chronically underfunded and under-staffed public hospitals, healthcare, aged care and social services systems.

Compared to the previous NSW state election in March 2019, Labor's vote in Bega rose 13.5 percent to 43.7 percent, while the Liberal vote fell 11.2 percent to 36.5 percent. Both the Greens and the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party lost about a quarter of their votes, down to 8.0 percent and 5.6 percent respectively.

Thus Labor is set to narrowly gain the seat with the

help of second preferences from the Greens. To capitalise on the dissatisfaction, Labor chose a local doctor, Michael Holland, as its candidate. Of added concern for the Liberal Party is that its candidate was heavily promoted by the outgoing Liberal MP, Andrew Constance, who is contesting the overlapping federal seat of Gilmore in the looming national election.

The Liberals also suffered a heavy loss in the Sydney north shore seat of Willoughby, which had been vacated by former Premier Gladys Berejiklian. She resigned last year, ostensibly because she is subject to a corruption inquiry. In the affluent “blue ribbon” electorate, the Liberal vote dropped 13.5 percent to 43.5 percent. An independent picked up 32.2 percent and the Greens 11.9 percent. Labor did not contest the seat.

In the largely rural electorate of Monaro, near Canberra, the National Party is likely to hold on, despite a 5 percent negative swing in the seat vacated by John Barilaro, the former party state leader and deputy premier.

Perhaps most revealing of the underlying political crisis are the results in Strathfield, an inner-west Sydney electorate vacated by Labor’s ex-state leader Jodi Mackay. The seat is likely to be retained by Labor, but its vote fell by 3.0 percent to 41.1 percent. The Liberal vote dropped too, by 0.8 percent to 38.2 percent. An independent capitalised on the alienation from both the main parties by obtaining 9.5 percent of the vote.

Perrottet described the overall results as “disappointing across the board” but he and Morrison sought to downplay the consequences and vowed to continue the “reopening” drive.

The fragility of the political situation is underscored by the fact that both their governments are effectively in minority, unable to pass legislation unless they have the support of Labor or various “crossbench” parties and independents.

Perrottet’s government depends on the votes of two ex-Liberals who are under separate corruption or criminal investigations, plus an “informal” agreement with three independents. Morrison has numbers of MPs who have refused to vote for government bills, and had five MPs vote last week against the government’s centrepiece religious discrimination legislative package.

More evidence of political disaffection appeared in recent days. The latest instalment of an Australian National University survey of wellbeing during the pandemic found that in January satisfaction in the country’s direction and the federal government both dropped.

Only about one in three people said they had confidence in the Morrison government, its lowest approval since the 2019–20 bushfires. The longitudinal survey of 3,472 people was conducted in the final two weeks of January, as the Omicron wave and the dismantling of safety measures resulted in some days with more than 100,000 new COVID cases, and record numbers of deaths.

Media polls continue to show a disintegration of support for the Morrison government, which is increasingly wracked by infighting. An *Australian Newspan* published yesterday showed the Coalition’s primary vote at 34 percent, its lowest rating since winning the 2019 federal election, with Labor on 41 percent.

Indicating the underlying disillusionment with the entire capitalist political establishment, both Morrison and Labor leader Anthony Albanese had negative approval ratings. Albanese was just ahead on minus six, compared to minus 16 for the prime minister.

With the Greens’ polling plunging by 3 points to 8 percent, support for “other” parties rose to a record high of 17 percent. Without providing any details, the *Australian* said this indicated support for right-wing or libertarian groups, as well as “hard core leftist parties.”

That last disparaging reference may be to the Socialist Equality Party (SEP). It is the only party fighting for the independent mobilisation of the working class, against the existing capitalist economic and political order, including Labor, the Greens and the trade unions. The SEP is doing so on the basis of a genuine socialist program to totally reorganise society to meet human need, and protect lives and health, rather than satisfy private profit and wealth accumulation.



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