

Polls show deepening rejection of major parties in Australian election

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19 April 2022

The first week of the campaign for the May 21 federal election in Australia has only deepened the underlying crisis of the capitalist political establishment, which confronts a groundswell of hostility from ordinary people.

There is widespread disgust toward the two traditional ruling parties, Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition, because of their bipartisan commitment to the profit-driven policies demanded by the corporate elite and to Washington's escalating confrontations with Russia and China, which raise the prospect of catastrophic US-instigated wars.

According to media opinion polls, the loathing for the major parties has reached record levels. That is being intensified because none of the burning issues facing working-class households—the soaring cost of living, growing poverty and social inequality, and the mounting toll of infections and deaths in the unchecked COVID-19 pandemic—are being addressed in the official and media election campaign.

Media polls provide only a muted and partial measure of the discontent, but they indicate that after the first week of the campaign, which was dominated by diversionary mud-slinging, the already-low voting support for both Labor and the Coalition slumped further.

The Murdoch media's Newspoll, published in today's *Australian*, showed Labor's first preference support had fallen to 36 percent, down one point from the previous poll a week earlier, even though the Coalition's primary vote also declined one point to 35 percent.

The combined voting support for the Coalition and Labor was at the lowest level on Newspoll's record for an election campaign. At the same point in the 2019 election—which produced a debacle for Labor—Newspoll said the Coalition's primary vote was 38 percent while Labor was on 36 percent.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison's unpopular Coalition won that election, and clung to office with a bare majority of 77 seats in the 151-seat House of Representatives. That was only because Labor's vote plunged to a near-record low of 33.3 percent on election day, with the biggest losses in

working-class electorates, even as the Coalition vote fell too.

Labor responded to that defeat by installing Anthony Albanese as leader to execute a sharp shift to the right, junking its phony “fair go” election pitch to pledge pro-business policies to ensure “wealth creation.”

This week, as Albanese doubled down on his appeals for the backing of the financial elite, his approval rating, as measured by Newspoll, fell to its lowest level since he became Labor leader in 2019. His low of minus 14 percent pulled him below that of the widely detested Morrison, on minus 9.

According to Newspoll, 29 percent of voters indicated they would vote for a minor party or an independent. Significantly, this shift is not going in a right-wing direction. Rather, more people are trying to find anti-establishment alternatives.

The two most promoted far-right parties, billionaire Clive Palmer's United Australia Party and Pauline Hanson's One Nation, remained stuck on about 4 percent each. The Greens rose marginally to 12 percent, with the rest going to “independents,” many of whom are appealing, within the capitalist profit system itself, for action on climate change.

A Resolve Strategic poll published yesterday by Nine Media outlets had similar results. It estimated that Labor's primary vote had fallen from 38 percent to 34 percent while the Coalition's stayed at around 34 percent to 35 percent. It said 27 percent of voters described themselves as uncommitted, up from 21 percent two weeks ago.

The sinking support for Labor and the Coalition is producing visible fears in ruling circles of political instability. In the first place, there is concern about the prospect of another “hung” parliament, with neither party winning enough seats to form a majority government.

More profoundly, alarm is being sounded in the corporate media about the decaying base of the political system itself, particularly under conditions in which the next government, whichever party leads it, will be the most right-wing and militarist in Australia's history.

The incoming government will quickly move to slash

health, education and other essential social spending to make the working class pay for the \$1.2 billion debt created by the handouts to big business during the pandemic, and impose sacrifices of living standards to spend billions on the military and other requirements of US-led war preparations.

Morrison yesterday raised the spectre of political “instability, chaos and uncertainty” if people voted for independents. At the same time, he was forced to express his readiness to horse-trade with independents to form a minority government.

The fragility of the political order began long before this election. It is the accumulating result of decades of successive governments, both Coalition and Labor, enforcing cuts to real wages and surging social inequality, which has spiralled further during the COVID-19 pandemic. This corporate-government offensive was set off by the Hawke and Keating Labor governments of 1983–1996, which inflicted pro-market restructuring on workers in close partnership with the trade unions.

As a result, the gulf between the political establishment and working people, and the fragility of the parliamentary order, has grown. Morrison was only the first prime minister to survive a full parliamentary term since the landslide defeat of the Howard Coalition government in 2007.

Australia’s last hung parliament was in 2010 when Labor’s Julia Gillard negotiated a supply-and-confidence arrangement with the Greens and three independents. Propped up by the Greens, that government signed up to the US military “pivot” to Asia targeting China, cut education and health spending and resumed the indefinite offshore detention of asylum seekers, paving the way for the return of the Coalition in 2013.

The Greens are again bidding for a power-sharing arrangement with Labor to try to hold the parliamentary order together, but the political crisis has escalated over the past decade of short-term prime ministers.

The depth of ruling class nervousness was indicated in a column today by *Australian* foreign editor Greg Sheridan, who reflects the views of the US-aligned military and intelligence apparatus. He warned of a “political culture crisis” generated by “the fatigue if not exhaustion of the Westminster [parliamentary] system.”

Sheridan tried to blame social media for the collapse of trust in the political elite. But he pointed to the fact that rifts in both Labor and the Coalition had led to party bosses selecting candidates. Labor in Victoria is under federal executive control, while Morrison hand-picked 12 Liberal candidates in New South Wales. “Unless they were seeking paid employment in politics, why would anyone bother being a member of the Victorian Labor Party or the NSW Liberal Party?” Sheridan asked.

This anxiety is that any government formed after the election may not be able to deliver the agenda required by big business and Washington. Sheridan complained that “fundamental issues,” such as “the giant structural deficit we’ve built into our budget, our shocking productivity performance” and “our dreadful failure to provide any meaningful defence capabilities,” were being neglected.

The increasingly frenzied demands for a “strong government” after the election are a warning to the working class.

They give a hint of the scale of the austerity offensive that is being prepared, under conditions of mounting global economic turbulence and demands from the financial elite for the national debt, approaching one trillion dollars, to be paid down through vicious cuts to social spending. As in every country, the already disastrous public healthcare, education and welfare systems are on the chopping block, with the ruling elite seeking a return to social conditions not seen since the 1930s Great Depression.

At the same time, the heated denunciations of an “unworkable parliament” point to the turn by the capitalist class towards more authoritarian forms of rule.

This found expression prior to the election, with Labor and the Coalition joining hands to pass anti-democratic laws aimed at deregistering alternative parties without parliamentary representation. In 2016, at a far earlier stage of the political crisis, multi-millionaire Gerry Harvey called for a dictatorship in response to the dysfunction of the parliamentary set-up.

While the ruling elite is lurching ever further to the right, the working class is moving to the left. Hostility to the major parties is intersecting with the first stages of a resurgence of the class struggle, spurred by opposition to inflation, wage suppression and the social crisis.

The Socialist Equality Party is standing in the elections to provide this emerging movement with a voice and a perspective. The SEP has put forward a fighting socialist program of action for workers to advance their independent interests, in opposition to all the parliamentary parties and the profit-system they defend. Register for our election launch meeting on Monday, April 25!

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