

# Australian election surveys point to “fracturing” political establishment

Mike Head

12 December 2022

Two recent reviews of Australia’s May 21 federal election have underscored the underlying political fragility of capitalist rule produced by the implosion of support for the two main ruling parties of the past century: Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition.

This is the result of decades of restructuring, privatisation and other pro-business policies imposed by successive governments led by these parties, at the expense of the jobs, wages and conditions of workers, producing disaffection that finds no voice in the political establishment.

One review was the Australian Election Study (AES), a post-election survey of voters conducted by universities each federal election since 1987. It warned of a “seismic shift” that produced a record low combined vote for the two parties, and of continuing historic low levels of public “trust” in the political system.

The other was the Labor Party’s own review of the election. It voiced concern that despite the defeated Morrison Coalition government’s record unpopularity, Labor’s primary vote fell to 32.58 percent—its lowest level since a Labor split in the 1930s. Labor scraped into office with a narrow two-seat majority in the 151-member House of Representatives only because the Coalition’s vote plunged by 5.7 percent.

The surveys shed further light on the breakup of voting support for both parties, especially among working-class and younger voters. They show that the decades-long development of dissatisfaction was intensified, in particular, by discontent over the cost-of-living crisis and the failure of governments to protect the population from the COVID-19 pandemic.

By and large, the corporate media is seeking to bury, minimise or distort these findings, and promote illusions in the Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese as much as possible. But there is clearly nervousness inside the highest echelons of the ruling class. Paul Kelly, editor-at-large of the *Australian*, a Murdoch flagship, vented this anxiety on the weekend in a feature article under the headline: “Portrait of a politically fractured nation.”

“Australia is becoming a more fractured nation—loyalty to institutions, religions and political party is in decline,” Kelly lamented. “People are less ready to follow authority figures. And the 2022 election was a watershed with the major parties

winning only two-thirds of the primary vote.”

Mindful of Labor’s historic role of subordinating workers to the requirements of the financial elite, Kelly warned that despite Labor’s 2022 election victory, “its vulnerability is on display,” adding: “Labor won on a shrinking vote. That’s unsustainable.”

The AES, which surveyed a nationally representative sample of 2,508 voters after the election, sounded an alarm about “devastating” numbers for the main parties. The proportion of people saying they “always voted for the same party” had almost halved from 72 percent in the late 1960s to 37 percent.

Australia was not immune from what was a “worldwide trend.” Starting in the 1980s, surveys had shown weakening support for the traditional parties “across almost all the advanced democracies.”

One of the sharpest indices of this disintegration was the decline in support for both Labor and Liberal among the 41 percent of respondents who self-identified as working class. “[S]ince the 2016 election, both the Labor and Liberal parties have lost support from working class voters in favour of minor parties. While 48 percent of the working class voted Labor in 2016, this dropped to 38 percent in 2022. The Liberal vote declined to a similar degree” [down to 33 percent.]

Significantly, support for the Liberal-National Coalition was lowest among the highest income group whose households took home over \$140,000 a year. Labor outpolled the Coalition, 35 percent to 30 percent, in this better-off cohort. This points to the increasingly anti-working-class base of the Labor Party and its affiliated trade unions.

For the Coalition, the most precipitous drop in support came among Millennials and Generation Z. This unprecedented generational trend throws a question mark over the Coalition’s future. “Between 2016 and 2022, Millennials record a large decline in Coalition support, falling from 38 percent to 25 percent in just two election cycles. Changes of this magnitude and this pace are rare in Australian electoral history.”

Generation Z, born after 1996, generated meaningful data for just the 2019 and 2022 elections. “But in these two elections just 26 percent of this group reported voting for the Coalition, and 67 percent voted either for the Greens or Labor.”

Summing up, the AES noted: “Only about one in four voters

under the age of 40 reported voting for the Coalition in 2022. At no time in the 35-year history of the AES has there been such a low level of support for either major party in so large a segment of the electorate.”

Labor won the election “by default,” the AES concluded, because Scott Morrison became the least popular major party leader in the survey’s history, scoring 3.8 on a zero to 10 popularity scale, down from 5.1 in the 2019 election.

The AES results show that the hostility toward Morrison was not simply a personal one, however. Rather it was bound up with disaffection over declining living conditions and the disastrous pandemic. “With rising inflation and an associated cost of living crisis, two thirds of Australians thought the national economy had gotten worse in the year leading up to the election. This was the most pessimistic view of the economy in over 30 years...

“[P]eople’s evaluations of the Morrison government’s performance were inextricably linked to the pandemic. Only 30 percent of Australians thought that the federal government had handled the pandemic well, and overall people had much more favourable views of state than federal government performance.”

Although the AES does not explain this, during the first two years of the pandemic, the state governments mostly postured as being concerned to protect people by maintaining border closures, lockdowns and other safety measures that largely kept COVID-19 at bay. Two Labor governments won elections on that basis in Queensland and Western Australia.

Last December, however, all the governments, collaborating in a bipartisan “National Cabinet,” adopted a catastrophic “let it rip” policy in the interests of corporate profit. The Albanese government has only intensified this since May by further slashing public health precautions, services and funding.

The AES found that “after reaching record lows in 2019,” there had been a slight improvement in “political trust and satisfaction with democracy.” Just 30 percent of respondents believed people in government could be trusted. A majority (54 percent) believed that the government is run for “a few big interests.” Just 12 percent believed the government is run for “all the people”—a figure that has now persisted for 12 years.

The Labor Party’s 2022 election campaign review, led by former cabinet minister and past Australian Council of Trade Unions secretary Greg Combet, also revealed unease about the party’s fortunes. It cautioned against “misinterpreting” Labor’s victory. It acknowledged, based on “research,” that Morrison’s unpopularity was the “most significant” factor in Labor regaining office.

Despite a swing of nearly 7 percent to Labor in Western Australia—where the state Labor government had resisted the Morrison government’s demands for it to open the state’s borders in 2020 and 2021—Labor’s national primary vote fell to its lowest level since 1934, and even lower in the Senate (30.09 percent).

The review noted that Labor’s House of Representatives vote had remained at historically low levels for the past four elections, ranging between 34.73 per cent and 32.58, making it reliant on Green preferences to hold seats.

Also of concern was that large swings against Labor were recorded in several outer-suburban Melbourne working-class seats. “Some seats in Melbourne’s outer suburbs returned the lowest primary vote for Labor in the last 20 years.”

In Sydney, Labor lost the southwestern working-class seat of Fowler for the first time ever, suffering a negative swing of 18.5 percent. Fowler was “one of Labor’s safest seats” but there were no longer any “safe” seats.

Without providing any figures, the review worried about Labor’s membership, which has declined substantially over the past four decades, reducing it to a shell. “Labor needs a bigger, stronger and re-energised membership,” it stated.

The report underlined the Labor government’s dependence on the union bureaucrats to police its pro-business program in the working class. “A strong relationship between Labor in government and the trade union movement is pivotal to success, both economically and politically.”

Labor’s review expressed concern about the collapse of support for the Liberals and the two-party system itself. In effect, it appealed for a joint effort to shore up the discredited parliamentary order. “Both parties face a challenge to rebuild trust in political institutions and restore confidence in the Parliament,” it stated.

Yet there will be no change of course. Labor’s agenda, and that of the Coalition as well, will continue to be determined by the inflationary crisis of global capitalism, the US-led drive to a potential nuclear war against China and Russia, and the dictates of the corporate elite for an even greater onslaught on workers’ wages and conditions.

This offensive will deepen the hostility of millions of working people. Anger and disgust are not enough, however. As the election outcome itself shows, workers will find no way forward within the parliamentary order, nor any of the political parties, such as the Greens, that promote it. What is required is an opposed socialist perspective based on totally reorganising economic and political life to meet social need, not corporate profit and billionaire wealth.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**