State of the states: New South Wales and the issues resounding in bellwether seats

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Abstract
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Long before the election was called, Labor leader Bill Shorten was in Eden-Monaro talking about the cost of living. Andrew TaylorAAP

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Ahead of polling day on July 2, our State of the states series takes stock of the key issues, seats and policies affecting the vote in each of Australia’s states and territories. We begin today with a look at Queensland and New South Wales.

Elections in Australia tend to be won and lost in regional and outer suburban areas, often including semi-rural areas. This is certainly the case in New South Wales, which has a good number of such seats, both surrounding Sydney and up and down the coast.

These areas have a number of characteristics that distinguish them from the Sydney electorates, which are much more stable in their voting patterns. First, they have a higher proportion of Australian-born residents. This also translates into more people identifying as having some sort of affiliation with a Christian church.

Outer suburban electorates tend to have a younger demographic with young families and a higher proportion of children than elsewhere. Regional electorates, especially on the coast, usually combine a demographic of young families with a significant number of people over the age of 65.

This demographic can be seen quite clearly in three ‘bellwether’ seats: Lindsay, Robertson and Eden-Monaro. All three of these seats have been won by the party that formed government for at least the past three decades – or in Eden-Monaro’s case, going back to 1972.
Key seats

Lindsay is on the fringes of Western Sydney, Robertson is north of Sydney covering Gosford and Woy Woy, while Eden-Monaro combines urban Queanbeyan with coastal retirement areas such as Narooma and country towns such as Tumut.

All have more than 70% of their population born in Australia, with more than 80% speaking only English at home. All are still about 25% Anglican. While the median age in Lindsay is 34, it is more than 40 in both Robertson and Eden-Monaro.

All three seats recorded a lower Green first preference vote than the NSW average in 2013. The Green vote in Lindsay was only 3.1%. Eden-Monaro had the highest green vote at 7.5%, but this reflects the presence of Queanbeyan, almost a Canberra suburb, in the electorate. Clearly “post-materialist” policies matter, including environmentalism, but are not of determining importance in these electorates.

These seats can be seen as having a strong element of what could be described as ‘old Australian’. The variations in their age distribution will, however, affect the policies that are significant for these seats.

Key issues

It is difficult to identify specific issues that are relevant only to NSW unlike, say, South Australia, which has the highest unemployment rate in the country. Council amalgamations, which are a state matter, have angered many people, but it is difficult to know to what extent this will affect federal voting.

The factional infighting within the Liberal Party has little interest for the average voter, although it may well affect the amount of resources and effort the party puts in on polling day in terms of workers on the ground in particular electorates.

Lindsay could be affected because the current member, Fiona Scott, seems to have become caught up in this struggle by refusing to say who she voted for in last year’s leadership ballot. A survey reported in The Daily Telegraph earlier this month indicated that only 35% of voters in Lindsay knew who the Liberal candidate is. However, a Fairfax/ReachTEL poll released on June 12 still put Scott ahead of Labor’s Emma Husar, 54% to 46%.

What will determine the election is the distinctive nature of these bellwether seats. The policies that matter are those relevant to their particular demographic.
As an electorate composed of people who have to watch their spending, it’s not surprising that Lindsay voters surveyed by ReachTEL said the economy was the biggest issue influencing their vote – as did voters in the six other Coalition-held marginal seats nationally that were polled. Issues such as childcare, health and education will also be crucial in Lindsay.

At the same time it could be noted that as the parties need to win seats such as Lindsay, they will adjust their policies accordingly, thinking that all they need to do is spend on areas such as childcare and education to win votes. How the electorate will respond to these tactics remains to be seen.

Lindsay has a large number of candidates, including from the Nick Xenophon Team and the Australian Liberty Alliance. As recent polling suggests there has been a move away from the major parties, the votes for such parties will indicate how much of a trust deficit for the major parties there is in Australia.

To date, both Eden-Monaro and Robertson have much smaller fields of candidates than Lindsay. More importantly, both electorates have a greater proportion of people aged over 65, including retired public servants in Eden-Monaro.

Consequently, issues regarding the aged come much more into play in these electorates. This could play out in terms of reaction to the Coalition’s policies on superannuation. Many people will have arranged their affairs according to the rules that are being superseded.

In Eden-Monaro, health could also be an issue, especially for those living on the coast and who need to travel for medical services. In both these electorates, as in Lindsay, it will be matters pertaining to core services of health, education, childcare and aged care that will matter most.

There is a certain irony in the fact that in an age when Australia looks at itself as a multicultural society, it may well be the case – in NSW at least – that constituencies much closer to the Australia of old are deciding elections. This has to do with the ageing of the population and the movement of people of a certain kind out of the cities into areas with crucial marginal seats.

To win government, parties must win these marginal seats – and that means devising policies targeted at voters in those seats. In this way, such seats exercise an influence on the major parties of which those us living in safe Liberal or Labor seats can only dream.

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