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Low-key NSW election likely to reveal a city-country divide

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Low-key NSW election likely to reveal a city-country divide

Abstract

It may come as news to many people living in New South Wales, but there is a state election to be held on March 23. There has been little of the hullabaloo associated with elections, although I have noticed the occasional election poster in the front yards of houses as I walk along the street.

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Country voters may be deciding the fate of NSW in the upcoming election. Dean Lewins/AAP

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It may come as news to many people living in New South Wales, but there is a state election to be held on March 23. There has been little of the hullabaloo associated with elections, although I have noticed the occasional election poster in the front yards of houses as I walk along the street.

This may have something to do with the fact I live in a safe Labor electorate, or it may reflect the somewhat low key approach to politics taken by Premier Gladys Berejiklian, and the low profile of her rival, Labor leader Michael Daley.

Plus federal politics has been far more exciting, especially as high-level Liberals choose to leave in advance of the upcoming federal election.

This may give the impression the NSW state election is a somewhat mundane affair. Given the relatively robust state of the NSW economy, one might expect the Liberal-National Coalition will be re-elected.

Yes, they have been in office for eight years but, on the surface at least, they appear to have done little to arouse the ire of voters, especially voters in Sydney.

However, there is a good chance that, after the election, NSW will have some sort of minority government, with an outside chance of a Labor government.

This would have enormous ramifications for both the Liberal and the National parties. If, as seems very likely, they lose office in Canberra after the federal election, they could find themselves out of office not only federally but also in Australia's three largest states.

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NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian has kept a reasonably low profile. Jeremy Piper/AAP

In the 2016 federal election, it was the Liberal Party that was battered and lost seats while the National Party held its ground. Similarly, at the 2015 NSW state election, the Liberals lost 14 seats while the Nationals lost only one.

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Since 2015, the Coalition has lost two further seats at byelections: Orange (National) to Shooters, Fishers and Farmers and Wagga (Liberal) to an independent.

The current situation in the NSW Legislative Assembly (lower house) is that the Liberals hold 35 seats, the Nationals 16, the ALP 34, the Greens 3, Shooters, Fishers and Farmers 1, and Independents 3. The seat of Wollondilly is currently vacant but the Liberal Party faces a high profile independent.

In 2019, the expectation is that it will be the National Party that primarily will lose seats, thereby putting the NSW Coalition government majority at risk. Should the Coalition lose five seats, the current government will be reduced to minority status (a majority requires 47 seats). The Coalition

holds seven seats with a margin of less than 3.5%, five of which are held by the Nationals, while Labor has four such seats.

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ABC election analyst Antony Green has emphasised, however, it is almost impossible to predict the results of this election on the basis of a uniform swing. This is because electorates and their interests vary widely with regard to age, income, ethnic origin and interests.

The state is far from homogenous, and this is reflected in what policies find favour and where. It's been reported that in Barwon, in the state's far west, polls show the primary vote for the National Party has dropped from 49% in 2015 to 35%.

The Coalition government under Mike Baird attempted to implement two extremely unpopular policies in many rural areas: the amalgamation of small councils and the attempt to close down greyhound racing. Both policies may have seemed sensible to city dwellers, but they didn't resonate with the bush.





Issues such as the demolition of the Allianz stadium don't matter so much to those living in the bush. Joel Carrett/AAP

In recent days, two issues have come to the fore. The Sydney Cricket Ground Trust and the demolition of Allianz Stadium. Fascinating as such matters may be to Sydney-siders, they are hardly issues of great import to the inhabitants of Dubbo or Grafton.

There has always been a tension between Sydney and the bush but it appears this tension has increased considerably since the 2015 election.

There are a number of reasons for this. In the case of Barwon, there is the impact of the drought and water issues, including the mass death of fish in the Darling River. The provision of health services is a perennial issue in rural NSW – what is just down the road in Sydney can often be a long drive if one lives in a small country town.

There appears to be a growing discontent in the bush, one that can be seen in by-elections over the past few years, including Orange, Murray, Cootamundra and Wagga. The Nationals lost Orange and experienced substantial swings against them in Cootamundra and Murray, while the Liberals lost Wagga to an independent. In 2019, the Nationals will be contesting Wagga on behalf of the Coalition.

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It's difficult to pin down this discontent in terms of specific policies – rather, it's a matter of attitude. Gabrielle Chan's book *Rusted Off* provides the best analysis of that attitude. At its root is a feeling of being taken for granted.

Chan, who lives near the town of Harden-Murrumburrah, believes the issue for many country people is that they know that the Nationals will always be the junior partner in a coalition with the Liberal Party.

Country voters are attached to the Nationals by a bond rooted in their identity. Where are they to go if the Nationals fail to deliver and become too subservient to their senior urban partners? By instinct they will not vote Labor.

Country people are, so to speak, caught in a bind. Chan puts it eloquently: “‘make it marginal’ should be the catch-cry of country electorates”.

If country voters are to “make it marginal”, then it will not be by supporting Labor because it goes against the grain. They also value independence. This means they look to independents and parties such as Fishers, Shooters and Farmers.

If Chan is correct, then what might very well determine the outcome of this election will not be disputes over particular policies but a desire to punish the National Party for what is perceived to be its neglect of the bush. It is simply a matter of respect.

NSW Election 2019

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