

Australian Federal Election 2019 :

The “Miracle” Election: A Result that Stunned the Nation

Defying the opinion polls of the last weeks that placed Labor clearly ahead of the Liberal Party, the Coalition delivered an unexpected election victory that stunned the nation and even resulted in a majority government. Described as a ‘shock’ or ‘miracle’ victory (after Morrison proclaimed “he believed in miracles” in his election night speech), the result has given way to much reflection, analysis and political soul-searching. This includes the baffling question of how the polls got the results so wrong, and examinations are underway of the manner in which opinion polls are conducted, the technology that drives them, and how results are interpreted – drawing attention to possible blinkers and selection biases that have hindered a more astute understanding.¹

While it may be tempting to run with the narrative of an election triumph for the Liberals – especially seeing that Labor’s primary vote dropped considerably in certain parts of the country – more nuance is required in understanding the election result and what it means for Australia.²

It has been argued that the Morrison government’s victory was fuelled by its tightly focused economic message, deliberately steering the voter away from the disunity and internal incoherence that characterized the Party in the past years. Morrison’s election as prime minister demonstrates that a clear, coherent campaign message can indeed cancel out the ill-effects of internal power struggles. Accordingly, it is hoped that Morrison’s election will signal the end of factionalism within the Liberal Party. The fact that the voters were able to look

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/may/20/mathematics-does-not-lie-why-polling-got-the-australian-election-wrong>; <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-05-19/federal-election-results-how-the-polls-got-it-so-wrong/11128176>; <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/australia-s-election-what-hell-just-happened>

² <https://www.afr.com/news/politics/national/the-election-s-uncomfortable-truths-20190519-p51oxh>

beyond the Liberal Party's tumultuous recent past is testament on one hand to an inherent conservatism in the Australian electorate, putting a desire for stability above the need for change when times seem to be uncertain. On the other hand it can be attributed to Scott Morrison's disciplined and tireless campaign that was aimed at restoring trust – not necessarily in the Liberal Party as a whole, but in him as a captain capable of steering the ship into calmer waters.

*As commentators put it, "Mr Morrison made the campaign a referendum on him and Bill Shorten, and downplayed the Liberal brand — cultivating a new Scott Morrison image and promising to be a steady pair of hands on the economy...."*³

He gambled, correctly, that Australians were a conservative lot who always preferred gradual evolution, not a simultaneous step-change on a number of policy fronts."⁴

The Liberal campaign had Morrison at the forefront of campaigning efforts, visibly positioning himself to represent Australian values. Both party leaders campaigning become more presidential, personality-focused in style as the election was approaching. Morrison's last televised address before the election in front of a small audience at the National Press Club in Canberra was a measured pitch to voters that emphasized the Coalition's stance on a number of key issues such as immigration, the economy and climate policies. Morrison's carefully calibrated, 'fact-oriented' approach stood in stark contrast to Bill Shorten's celebratory, almost triumphalist speech surrounded by banner-waving supporters, urging the electorate to "vote for change". This was helped by Bill Shorten's long-standing low popularity ratings and the fact that the Labor Party also was no stranger to internal power struggles, evidenced by the instability of the Rudd-Gillard leadership spills that brought Tony Abbott to power.⁵

³ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-05-19/federal-election-result-morrison-turn-labor-strategy-into-weapon/11116468>

⁴ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-05-20/election-morrison-gains-authority-to-change-coalition-direction/11128460>

⁵ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-05-17/the-real-bill-shorten/11119242>

The pronounced swing towards the Liberal Party, even able to form majority government, comes against the backdrop of what a 2018 study described as a ‘trust deficit’ in regards to democratic processes and the integrity of politicians. It was expected that the political developments of the past years both mainstream parties would suffer a significant loss in their primary vote, with a pronounced swing towards Independents and smaller parties like Greens or even right-wing populists parties such as One Nation or Clive Palmers United Australia Party.

“ We continue to find compelling evidence of an increasing trust divide between government and citizen reflected in the decline of democratic satisfaction, receding trust in politicians, political parties and other key institutions (especially media) and lack of public confidence in the capacity of government to address public policy concerns. Australia is currently experiencing a culture shift from an allegiant to a divergent democratic culture with an increasing number of citizens searching for a new politics to represent their values and defend their material needs and aspirations for the future”⁶

It is interesting that this observed “search for a new politics” didn’t manifest in a swing away from the mainstream, centre-right politics of the Coalition which appears to have won the trust of voters to be able to defend their material needs and aspirations for the future better than any new policies promising transformation. Labor’s agenda, descriptions ranging from ‘ambitious’ to ‘radically redistributionist’, was seen as an interventionist – a profound course of action by what promised to be a ‘big’ government, making far-reaching changes to the status-quo through sweeping tax reform (the franking credit and a reversal of negative gearing) in order to bring about greater housing affordability and decisive action on climate change. ⁷ Yet Shorten’s bid for fairness through such a wide-ranging redistributive agenda “fell flat” even in working class areas, the traditional Labor voter base, as his tax reforms reportedly had people worried that their

⁶ <https://www.thepolicyspace.com.au/2018/04/272-trust-and-democracy-in-australia-democratic-decline-and-renewal>

⁷ <https://www.afr.com/news/politics/national/the-election-s-uncomfortable-truths-20190519-p510xh>

economic status would be affected negatively by rising taxes.⁸ This way, Morrison managed to pull the conservative working classes into the Coalition's base, a shift that would have been impossible under the more progressive Turnbull. Some commentators highlighted that the Liberals did unexpectedly well in poorer, less-educated seats; one analysis even drew parallels between Morrison's 'miracle' win and the surprising election of Donald Trump to the US presidency – economic modelling showed the similar demographics voting for both leaders, with the share of blue collar workers in an electorate identified as a particularly strong driver.⁹ This should not, however, be interpreted as a direct parallel in the leadership styles of Morrison with Trump. A New York Times Article that declared Morrison's election as a 'victory for populism' was quickly denounced by Australian analysts and observers.¹⁰

At the same time there were notable swings against the Liberals in metropolitan areas where wealthier, better-educated voters expressed concerns for climate change and against the ousting of Morrison's predecessor Malcom Turnbull.¹¹ The most prominent case was former Prime Minister Tony Abbott, known for his deep conservatism and lack of support for renewable energies, who after 25 years lost his seat in a wealthy North-Sydney electorate to Zali Steggall, an independent candidate campaigning on a platform of championing climate change.¹² Overall, the election showed a desire for stabilizing the status-quo - lower taxes, a smaller state and strong borders. While it can't be concluded that Australians overall do not care enough about climate change, what these results highlight is that not enough Australians were willing to risk economic prosperity and immediate quality of life in exchange for more sustainable climate policies.

⁸ <https://www.smh.com.au/federal-election-2019/why-did-so-many-working-class-suburbs-back-the-liberals-20190523-p51qhn.html>

⁹ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-05-24/scott-morrison-s-trump-like-election-victory/11145406>

¹⁰ <https://www.smh.com.au/federal-election-2019/why-scott-morrison-s-victory-wasn-t-australia-s-trump-moment-20190521-p51pfc.html>

¹¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2019/may/22/the-eight-charts-that-help-explain-why-the-coalition-won-the-2019-australian-election>

¹² <https://www.theguardian.com/global/2019/may/18/australian-election-tony-abbott-loses-his-warringah-seat-to-zali-steggall>

After the dust has settled, the important question now is what the new government's policy agenda will be. Australia, as a middle power in a rapidly changing region, faces many challenges. One political analyst observed the following trends that are poised to shape the policy-making of the new government:

*"Global trends have had a transformative effect on our domestic politics. Globalisation, the economic liberalisation of the 1980, the decline of blue-collar jobs in advanced economies, the feminisation of the workforce, and the death of communism have all swept through Australia, leaving both our major parties behind..."*¹³

Despite the 'miracle' victory, commentators and experts have identified a myriad of challenges ahead for the newly-elected Coalition government. Key policy areas will remain the environment, taxes, education, the labour market, housing affordability and – even though foreign policy issues took a backseat to domestic matters, as is customary during an election campaign – Australia's relationship with China.¹⁴ Climate change in particular is expected to be remaining a hot topic since it is inherently about the relationship between government, economy and citizens – in particular, about potentially changing the dynamics of this. In regards to Australia's relations with China, in conjunction with the US-alliance, voices for greater nuance in tackling this triad relationship have been getting increasingly louder, with calls for a more independent Australian foreign policy that takes on a bigger role in shaping dynamics in the Asia-Pacific.¹⁵

All in all, an astounding win for the Coalition but no time to rest on its laurels – a reality Morrison and his new cabinet will be aware of.

¹³ <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/australia-s-election-what-hell-just-happened>

¹⁴ <https://theconversation.com/key-challenges-for-the-re-elected-coalition-government-our-experts-respond-117325>

¹⁵ <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-silences-of-the-australian-election/>

