

‘Post-Election Analysis – Queensland 2020’ by TJ Ryan Foundation

In normal times the Foundation would have hosted a face-to-face post-election event with a panel of guest speakers. However, with COVID-19 and the constraints of social distancing, we have instead invited commentators and leading state political figures to give their assessments of the key issues of the election campaign and what this means for Queensland politics over the next four years.

The Foundation thanks all contributors for their time and valuable input. [Please note: all claims expressed herein are the responsibility of the contributors]



Overview – *Dr Paul Williams, Senior Lecturer, School of Humanities, Languages and Social Science, Griffith University*

The ‘grateful’ electorate

It’s all too easy to attribute the easier-than-expected return of the Palaszczuk Labor government to COVID-19.

While it can be true that moments of crisis can be sufficient to corral anxious voters back toward incumbents, it’s not always so. The federal Coalition’s easy defeat at the 1943 election – less than 18 months after the Japanese bombing of Darwin – remains a case in point. Moreover, while the trappings of incumbency this year clearly assisted the Labor [or Labour] governments in the Northern Territory, the Australian Capital Territory and New Zealand, they did not save Donald Trump in the United States.

In short, it’s not incumbency which saves governments during crises, it’s what incumbents do with that incumbency.

Election campaigns in a digital media age hinge more than ever on the rhetorical framing of issues and events. To put it simply, Labor won the election – 52 seats with an after-preference vote of 53.2 per

cent (a 1.9 per cent swing since 2017) – largely because it won the confidence of a Queensland electorate that, not unexpectedly, assessed both government and opposition through a COVID-19 lens.

More specifically, Labor won that confidence by tacitly framing the election – long before the writs were issued on 6 October – as a referendum on three questions: whom, Anastacia Palaszczuk or Deb Frecklington, do Queenslanders prefer as premier? Which party, Labor or the LNP, do Queenslanders trust to manage the state’s post-pandemic economy? And were the border closures an effective way to keep Queenslanders safe?

Happily, for the Palaszczuk government, and as evidenced by opinion polls, Queenslanders – by margins exceeding 20 points – preferred Palaszczuk to Frecklington. When voters focused on pandemic leadership generally, those margins blew out even further, with 76 per cent of voters in October approving of Palaszczuk’s handling of COVID-19. Indeed, while the electorate long ago lost its affection for state Labor, Queenslanders’ significant regard for Palaszczuk personally remains the government’s most tangible electoral asset.

But, according to a Roy Morgan poll, a narrow majority of Queenslanders – even in October as the COVID-19 urgency appeared to abate – still insisted on a closed border with New South Wales.

A third referendum question, on state economic management, was also answered in Labor’s favour in October when 40 per cent of Queenslanders supported Labor’s post-COVID-19 economic blueprint. Just 29 per cent endorsed the LNP’s. For a party that long enjoyed the mantle of superior economic manager, this finding was a blow to the LNP’s re-election chances.

Another interesting result is found in the fact support for Pauline Hanson’s One Nation collapsed by almost half since 2017 despite the party standing candidates in more seats, with the Greens’ primary

vote also declining marginally. Of the principal minor parties, only the Katter's Australian Party vote grew, albeit slightly.

The reason is two-fold. Not only were minor parties starved of media oxygen as government and opposition dominated pandemic media discourse, but it also appears that anxious voters – fearful for their personal health and economic future – returned to the material concerns of the major parties (the LNP also saw a rise in its primary vote) and abandoned a long flirtation with post-material 'protest' parties voters can afford only in propitious times.

In sum, while Queenslanders appear to have been an anxious electorate, they also appear to have been a grateful one.

ALP View – *Senator Anthony Chisholm, Labor Senator for Queensland (interviewed by Dr Mary Crawford)*

2020 was without doubt the best campaign performance by the Premier, Annastacia Palaszczuk. She was strong, on message and dealt with any challenges that arose. This was important as she was the focal point of the campaign.

This election campaign was held in the middle of a COVID-19 pandemic and it was the government's response to this that influenced enough people to vote Labor. People had seen the Premier and the Queensland Government Health Officer daily stressing the science and developing the government's response. It was, in the end, an emphatic performance by the Premier.

Holding onto the Townsville seats was imperative to winning government and they came back to Labor very late in the campaign. This followed multiple visits by the Premier herself and other senior Ministers. It was also helped by the ALP having a very good candidate in Les Walker in Mundingburra. While the opposition campaigned on a law and order platform, this was rejected by voters as being too simplistic for what remains a very complex issue.

It is worth remembering that the election campaign was held in a very tough political climate. The pandemic has meant that many Queenslanders had lost their jobs and the government was seeking a third term. However, the government built on its record of being dedicated and disciplined in working to ensure Queenslanders' health and that they remained the focus of the government. The Ministerial team remained strong and united. Ministers continued to support the Premier and demonstrated their ability to work hard and remain focussed on implementing policies that were needed. This discipline was in contrast to the opposition.

One of the keys to understanding Anastacia Palaszczuk is that she is the same to people whether in public or private. She always treats people as equals. While Queenslanders may know the Premier is a little cautious and can be risk averse, they trusted her and her government. They acknowledged that she had kept them informed and they understood the actions that needed to be taken.

Labor was also helped in the campaign by a field of very good candidates. These were people who were well known in the communities they lived in as well as being part of a strong and united team. The campaign was also assisted by having a strong and supportive administration. The QCU played a key role in ensuring regional Queenslanders were fully informed on major issues. Hence Labor was able to retain all but one of its seats and win a further five, giving it a comprehensive majority of 52 in the 93-seat parliament.

However, the ALP is conscious of the high vote for the Greens in inner-city Brisbane and their winning the seat of South Brisbane. The party will need to examine the key issues carefully and work with its young members to ensure that policies that address the concerns of young voters are considered.

Given the solid majority of the new Labor government, the view for the future is optimistic. It is united and functional while confident it has won endorsement from Queenslanders across the state. It will

have to continue to work on the impact of the COVID-19 virus not just in health but on the economy and the job market. The election win has reinforced the purpose and focus of the Palaszczuk government for making life better for all Queenslanders, and branch members will be happy to see policies for which they have worked now implemented.

LNP View – *Sam O'Connor, LNP MP for Bonney*

With the global pandemic this was very much an incumbent's election. This is similar to what we're seeing in many Western democracies around the world (with the exception of a major one where the incumbent was turfed out because of their poor handling of COVID-19). When the world is in crisis, people stick with what they know unless they are disappointed with the management of the crisis.

I found many people I spoke to were only looking at the government's record in the last six months, rather than the last term (or even two terms) covering the last six years. They didn't think about the lacklustre state of the economy before the crisis, they didn't think about the mismanagement on a range of issues and instead it was about the management of the pandemic that the vote was based on.

Good incumbents were rewarded with swings to them and that included this incumbent government. Except in the open contests with retiring members in relatively marginal seats, there was simply too big a threshold for candidates (especially candidates from the opposition party) to cross and the fact that this Parliament has the lowest number of new MPs in almost seven decades shows that.

The LNP put forward what I believe was a positive, big-picture plan for the future whereas Labor focused on their performance during the pandemic and offered very little new or visionary projects. It was

very much business as usual and we've seen that in the subsequent state budget.

Whilst Labor gained four seats and the LNP lost five, as mentioned three of our losses were in seats where the MP was not re-contesting their seat. We lost two sitting members who were on very tight margins. In Bundaberg it was a loss by just 9 votes, and in Nicklin it was 84 votes. It's been a sad loss to our team to lose these MPs as they were hard-working in their communities, but it reflected the overall swing to Labor.

It is clear the Labor communications plan worked in keeping the pandemic at the forefront and putting fear in people that a change would lead to a resurgence of the virus. We heard this on the polling booth with a Labor campaign worker saying, "she kept us safe, we are safe because she is strong" or "don't risk change, stick with Annastacia".

On a local level I was humbled and in some ways surprised by the result. I haven't stopped working since I was elected. I knew this was a marginal seat and in many ways a 'Labor' area on demographics so I didn't take anything for granted. I have found my community wants to see genuine representation and engagement, and that's what I've always tried to do. I've been to every school event, sporting and community event and cooked a whole lot of sausages!

I aimed to make myself as available and approachable as possible because I knew it was only then that people would feel comfortable bringing issues to me and would be more engaged in the political process.

I think this garnered a lot of personal support, so people were willing to back me as they voted. I was hoping to gain a slight swing, but was surprised by the size of it. For me it has further proven that knowing your representative makes a big difference, and it can lessen the impact of state-wide media coverage.

From what I've seen, there was a move toward Labor rather than a particular move away from the LNP. It was the incumbency of the government in a crisis that led many to vote Labor for the first time, rather than a dislike for the LNP.

We still have a solid team of MPs which gives us good hope for the future for when we move out of this pandemic period and have a chance to get back to normal (or a new normal) where people will be open and desiring change.

Having said that, the LNP has won only a single state election victory in the past 30 years, meaning we've only been in government for around five years in that entire generation.

We've got a lot of work to do.

Greens View – *Michael Berkman, Greens MP for Maiwar*

Despite a state-wide collapse in other minor parties' vote this election, the Queensland Greens doubled our representation in Parliament. We held our state-wide vote at just under 10 per cent, with a 0.5 per cent drop likely due to a more crowded field of independent and micro or single-issue parties than ever before. The Queensland Greens have now leapfrogged Pauline Hanson's One Nation to become the third-largest political party in the state, which represents a significant reframing of the third-party vote from right-wing reactionary populism to a radically progressive anti-establishment party.

One of the major factors in the Greens' success was our field campaign. In every seat where a significant field strategy was deployed, the Greens saw positive swings. In Maiwar, we had 8,730 conversations with voters at their doors and on the phones and received a 13.5 per cent swing. In South Brisbane, we had more than 9,500 conversations to successfully take on former Deputy Premier and leading Labor figure Jackie Trad.

The Greens have a much smaller advertising budget than the major parties, largely due to the fact that we don't take corporate donations. Therefore, these in-depth persuasive conversations were an essential tool for the Greens to counteract the unprecedented number and intensity of attacks we faced this election from major parties, Labor-aligned unions, corporate interests such as the Queensland Resources Council and conservative lobby groups such as Cherish Life.

Our volunteer capacity tripled on 2017 levels, with around 2,000 volunteers working on campaigns across the greater Brisbane area. Declining trust in institutions, including news media, makes face-to-face conversations an even more effective tactic.

Our policy platform this election was the most comprehensive and transformative platform we've ever presented, underpinned by a proposal to increase mining royalties, raising an additional \$55 billion over four years to fund universal, free public services and infrastructure, and a transition to renewable energy. Feedback from voters indicates that, through this platform and its delivery via our field campaign, the Greens are steadily gaining credibility beyond environmental issues. This means there is growing recognition of the Greens as a genuine alternative to the major parties.

The redistributive nature of the Greens' platform may be one of the reasons the party is particularly popular with young people and renters¹ – those with few assets, stagnant wages, and precarious employment have little interest in maintaining a neoliberal economic system that predominantly benefits corporations. As the number of people defined by these characteristics grows (which it is likely to do given the increasing concentration of home ownership, growing number of renters and rising job insecurity), this could lead to a further growing Greens vote.

It is worth noting that the two Greens seats in the Queensland Parliament have a significantly higher proportion of renters than the

state-wide average of 36 per cent: around 47 per cent of households in Maiwar rent, and more than 52 per cent in South Brisbane.

As the Greens threat grows, particularly to Labor in the inner-city, major parties may be under pressure to adopt Greens policies like stronger climate action, higher corporate taxes and universal public services. This would represent a reversal of the strategy Queensland Labor appears to have taken in recent years, adopting more socially conservative policies (such as increased funding for police), limiting taxes on corporations (with a freeze on mining royalties) and supporting the expansion of coal and gas.

¹ <https://australianelectionstudy.org/wp-content/uploads/The-2019-Australian-Federal-Election-Results-from-the-Australian-Election-Study.pdf> (page 20)

Katter's Australian Party View – *Robbie Katter, KAP MP for Traeger (interviewed by Dr Mary Crawford)*

In the 2020 Queensland election, the Katter's Australian Party (KAP) defended its 3 seats and contested 13 overall in the hope of expanding its representation and influence in north Queensland. Incumbent members increased their margins in two seats – now 72.5 per cent in Hill (based around the Atherton Tablelands as well as Innisfail, Mission Beach and Tully), and 64.8 per cent in Hinchinbrook (which covers some of the outer suburbs of Townsville, Ingham, Cardwell and Hinchinbrook Island); despite a 3.8 per cent swing to Labor after preferences, Robbie Katter still maintained a 74.7 per cent winning margin in Traeger (based around Mt Isa). However, despite commentators suggesting the party would pick up one or two extra seats, this did not happen.

The election campaign focussed more on Robbie Katter as leader and was strong on policy. KAP is identified with local representation and a focus on the regions. It was felt that the Palaszczuk government's focus on south-east Queensland with the bid for the Olympics, the

Cross-River Rail and Vegetation Management policies would provide a platform for KAP to campaign for more policies directly related to north Queensland and would resonate with voters. This proved not to be the case.

In his press conferences, Robbie Katter emphasised that KAP was a “policy party”. It wants more government intervention to lead the economic development in the regions.

Other policies centred around help with the drought, building a publicly owned rail line in the Galilee Basin, and the role of coal. For communities in the north-west to survive and thrive (given the current declining populations), the party proposed a need for a large water scheme, as well as a push for the use of ethanol in cars to reduce emissions and bring down price of fuel as this was important in areas where people have to use their cars.

KAP had some success in the election campaign when Annastacia Palaszczuk, during a flying visit to Mt Isa, offered support to the CopperString 2.0 plan which currently supports 1,300 jobs. This had been something Robbie Katter individually and KAP generally had been campaigning on for some time, and was an indication to voters that KAP could not only develop policy but have it implemented and delivered.

One of the big issues for the party during the campaign was the lack of media coverage throughout the regions. This is exacerbated by the closure of some of the community newspapers and the fact that regional television studios have been shut. For the three sitting members this meant a practice of ‘represent, know, listen’ and it certainly seems to have worked to entrench the sitting MPs. As Robbie Katter noted, “It is necessary to work every day and night to ensure you fully understand the needs of the electorate.” It certainly seems to have paid off.

However, this lack of access to IT raises serious concerns not just for election campaigns but for health delivery by telehealth (an issue already identified by the TJ Ryan Foundation's research), education delivery and business operations. KAP will continue to campaign for IT coverage throughout regional Queensland on grounds of equity and sustainability.

Robbie Katter believes that in the end people voted for the certainty of a Palaszczuk majority government, given there had been some scare campaigns around the notion of a hung parliament and further insecurity.

KAP will continue to pursue its policies in the Parliament through presentation of Bills and through its press conferences and on the ground. The party will also continue to focus on north Queensland issues and hopes to expand KAP's representation in the future.

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