

The status quo state: in 2019, Queensland failed to deliver election fireworks

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“Queensland will be the battleground state, *as it always is.*” So said a Sydney-based journalist seeking comment ahead of the 2019 federal election. In the aftermath, however, it was clear that the state had again fallen short of its ‘election battleground’ billing. While the national media, by and large, depicted Queensland as the state where the election would be won or lost,¹ it’s far from certain that the ‘battleground’ status is fully deserved.

Undoubtedly, Queensland has been a focus of recent federal election campaigns. The state has witnessed the Prime Minister’s and the Opposition Leader’s repeated bus tours, cabinet meetings, and campaign launches, as well as playing host to both major parties’ campaign headquarters.² Ostensibly, the proliferation here of so many marginal electorates goes a long way to explaining all this attention. But what does the presence of those targeted marginal seats signify about this state – are more Queensland voters in the ‘swinging centre’, or are they more given to flirting with minor and fringe parties? What aspects of the state’s (heavily regionalised) demographics make this so?

Without offering definitive answers to those underlying questions, it’s illustrative to analyse past shifts in voter support in Queensland relative to the rest of the country. For instance, there were big swings (either way, respectively) against sitting governments in 2007 and 2010, but at the last three federal elections swings were relatively stable, if comparatively more pronounced in Queensland in 2019. Might this be a sign that Queensland’s reputed volatility has settled down? In that light, does Queensland deserve a reputation as a ‘make or break’ state?

Given the knife-edge hold the Coalition had on many of its Queensland seats in 2019 – yet managed to retain all of them – this would seem to counter against such an assumption. At the same time, there were nearly as many, if not more, marginal seats in New South Wales (12) and Victoria (14) as in Queensland (13); results in either of those southern states could just as easily prove to be the difference when it comes to deciding which party forms government at the next federal election. Eleven of Labor’s 25 marginal seats are now in New South Wales, and seven of the Coalition’s 21 are in Victoria; both major parties hold only four marginals in Queensland. The key difference in 2019

¹ See, for example, Allyson Horn, ‘Queensland will be ground zero for the federal election campaign,’ *ABC News*, 12 April 2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-04-12/federal-election-queensland-battleground/10975570>; Judith Ireland, ‘Everything you need to know about the election, and where it will be won and lost,’ *Brisbane Times*, 11 April 2019, <https://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/federal-election-2019/explainer-everything-you-need-to-know-about-the-election-and-where-it-will-be-won-and-lost-20190327-p51858.html>; and Mark Ludlow, ‘Queensland the crucial battleground for Shorten’s ambitions,’ *Australian Financial Review*, 11 April 2019, <https://www.afr.com/politics/federal/queensland-the-crucial-battleground-for-shorten-s-ambitions-20190404-p51ax9>.

² Michael Koziol, ‘Campaign behemoths take shape as Coalition and Labor gear up for election,’ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 January 2019, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/campaign-behemoths-take-shape-as-coalition-and-labor-gear-up-for-election-20190111-p50qgu.html>; Amy Remeikis, ‘Pseudo election campaign heats up as Morrison joins Shorten in Queensland,’ *The Guardian*, 18 January 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/jan/18/pseudo-election-campaign-heats-up-as-morrison-joins-shorten-in-queensland>; Amy Remeikis, ‘Shorten to hit the road in Bill’s bus for Queensland campaign,’ *The Guardian*, 11 January 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/jan/11/shorten-to-hit-the-road-in-bills-bus-for-queensland-campaign>.

being that most of the Queensland marginals were held by the Coalition and at risk of falling to an assumed anti-government swing – although it’s noteworthy that Queensland hadn’t swung against the government as much as some other states in 2016 either.

A Google search for “Queensland”, “election” and “battleground” over a six-month period up to the 2019 federal election date returned well over 100 results, nearly all of them relevant news articles. Taking “Queensland” out of that search equation only increased the results by a few pages. Victoria was also characterised as a ‘battleground’ state, in a similar sense as Queensland, a characterisation that also extended to other states and regions or even election issues (though not nearly as often).³

Looking back as far as the 2007 federal election, where there was a change of government (and the ‘Kevin Rudd factor’ featured strongly in Queensland), there were earlier uses of that same ‘battleground’ characterisation in election reporting as there was in media coverage at the last two elections.⁴ So, this isn’t a recent phenomenon, but still not necessarily an accurate one.

Lines drawn for an uphill battle

For Labor, Queensland in recent elections has perhaps evoked memories of the Second World War’s ‘Brisbane Line’ – the jurisdiction where the party looked to defend at all costs and make important inroads, but in the end was resigned to ‘consolidate’ territory on the opposite side of the Tweed border. The ‘battleground’ status is unsurprising given the number of marginal seats in play in Queensland at past elections, but also underlines the reality that – certainly since Rudd’s landslide heyday in 2007 – this state has been the jurisdiction where Labor needed to make up most ground on numbers of Coalition-held seats.

Bob Hawke’s death just two days before the 2019 election reminded of times when Labor won a majority of seats in Queensland at 4 out of 5 elections between 1983 and 1993 (the exception being in 1984). Instead of engendering a ‘sympathy vote’, however, Hawke’s passing possibly brought into sharp relief that Bill Shorten was no ‘Hawkey’.⁵ Nor, for that matter, was Shorten like Rudd in terms

³ Lisa Martin, ‘Australian election 2019: Morrison and Shorten head to battleground state of Victoria,’ *The Guardian*, 15 April 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/apr/15/australian-election-2019-morrison-and-shorten-head-to-battleground-state-of-victoria>; Henry Sims, ‘Wages are a key election battleground,’ *The Junction*, 14 May 2019, <http://junctionjournalism.com/2019/05/14/wages-are-a-key-election-battleground/>; Laura Tingle, ‘Federal election 2019: Both sides see Western Australia as a major battleground,’ *ABC News*, 2 May 2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-05-02/federal-election-2019-western-australia-key-for-liberal-labor/11064150>.

⁴ Stefan Armbruster, ‘Queensland shaping up as election battleground state,’ *SBS News*, 26 August 2013, <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/queensland-shaping-up-as-election-battleground-state>; Steve Gray, ‘Queensland battleground for election,’ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 July 2010, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/queensland-battleground-for-election-20100717-10etd.html>; George Roberts, ‘Queensland a key battleground in upcoming federal election, nearly half its seats on small margin,’ *ABC News*, 12 April 2016, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-04-12/federal-election-queensland-shaping-up-key-battleground-state/7321274>; Unnamed, ‘Fight starts for a place in the sun,’ *The Age*, 25 October 2007, <https://www.theage.com.au/politics/federal/fight-starts-for-a-place-in-the-sun-20071025-ge64u9.html>;

⁵ Catherine Taylor and Annika Blau, ‘How Bob Hawke’s death could affect the federal election result,’ *ABC News*, 17 May 2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-05-17/how-will-bob-hawke-death-affect-the-federal-election-campaign/11123438>.

of appeal for Queensland voters.⁶ The latter's popularity in his local turf in 2007 helped deliver a nation-high state swing against John Howard's government of over 7.5 per cent in Queensland, and the loss of more Coalition seats (8) than anywhere else in the country.

Federal election seat totals in Queensland, 1996-2019

Election	Coalition seats won	ALP seats won	Other seats won	Changing seats	Coalition marginal seats at election (QLD/AUS)	ALP marginal seats at election (QLD/AUS)
1996*	23 (+11)	2 (-11)	1 (+1)	11	5 / 29	7 / 32
1998	19 (-4)	8 (+6)	0 (-1)	6	7 / 34	1 / 13
2001	19	7 (-1)	1 (+1)	2	10 / 39	7 / 25
2004	21 (+2)	6 (-1)	1	1	6 / 27	5 / 21
2007*	13 (-8)	15 (+9)	1	9	3 / 23	4 / 23
2010	21 (+8)	8 (-7)	1	7	6 / 27	10 / 30
2013*	22 (+1)	6 (-2)	2 (+1)	3	10 / 30	5 / 25
2016	21 (-1)	8 (+2)	1 (-1)	3	6 / 26	6 / 31
2019	23 (+2)	6 (-2)	1	2	8 / 22	5 / 25

Sources: ABC, AEC⁷ [*change of government]

The 2019 election shaped to play out in ways mirroring the 2013 poll and its preceding events: Labor in a panic that saw them replace Prime Minister Julia Gillard with Rudd to 'save the (Queensland) furniture', much as the attempted, and badly executed, push to install Peter Dutton as PM in August 2018 was meant to;⁸ Rudd endorsing 'captain's picks' for candidates, such as Peter Beattie in Forde in southeast Queensland, then recently Scott Morrison selecting Warren Mundine for Gilmore on the New South Wales south coast (both cases unsuccessful);⁹ a recent rush of Coalition resignations echoing the departure of several Labor MPs 'deserting a sinking ship' in 2013;¹⁰ also (and similar to 2016), so much campaign effort devoted by the major parties to Queensland and its many marginal seats.¹¹ Morrison's 'frenetic pace' after taking over the leadership in 2018 and a perceived sense of

⁶ David Crowe, 'Bill Shorten least popular leader since 1990: election study,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 December 2019, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/bill-shorten-least-popular-leader-since-1990-election-study-20191208-p53hz3.html>.

⁷ Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 'ABC Elections,' <https://www.abc.net.au/news/elections/>; Australian Electoral Commission, 'Federal elections,' https://www.aec.gov.au/Elections/Federal_Elections/.

⁸ William Bowe, 'Is Dutton popular enough with voters to save the Coalition?' *Crikey*, 21 August 2018, <https://www.crikey.com.au/2018/08/21/is-dutton-popular-enough-to-save-the-coalition/>; Matthew Knott, 'Why unpopular and unknown Peter Dutton is on the verge of becoming PM,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 August 2018, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/why-unpopular-and-unknown-peter-dutton-is-on-the-verge-of-becoming-pm-20180821-p4zyr0.html>.

⁹ Laura Tingle, 'Scott Morrison's Gilmore plan looks like it is straight from Labor's 2013 playbook,' *ABC News*, 26 January 2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-01-26/scott-morrison-cunning-plan-in-gilmore/10751088>.

¹⁰ Stephanie Dalzell and Jade Macmillan, 'Indigenous Affairs Minister Nigel Scullion to become third minister to quit politics,' *ABC News*, 26 January 2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-01-26/nigel-scullion-quits-politics-indigenous-affairs-national-clp/10747898>.

¹¹ Katharine Murphy, 'Scott Morrison to pledge 1.25m new jobs as he begins four-day Queensland trip,' *The Guardian*, 29 January 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/jan/29/scott-morrison-to-pledge-125m-new-jobs-as-he-begins-four-day-queensland-trip>; Katharine Murphy, 'Stand by for Liberal fightback as Labor steals march in marginals,' *The Guardian*, 9 February 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/commentisfree/2019/feb/08/stand-by-for-liberal-fightback-as-labor-steals-march-in-marginals>; Katharine Murphy, 'Morrison and Shorten target key states as Labor makes pitch on workers' pay,' *The Guardian*, 22 April 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/apr/22/morrison-and-shorten-target-key-states-as-labor-makes-pitch-on-workers-pay>.

panic in government actions¹² again mirrored Rudd's shambolic 'mile-a-minute' approach with Labor heading towards the 2013 election.

Queensland: battleground one day, burial ground the next

The current prominence of (mainly) right-wing minor parties and independents – the latter less a feature in Queensland than eponymous populist-leaning outfits – is one reason behind the emergence of a so-called 'north-south divide' in the 2019 election campaign. It was recognised that both the Coalition and Labor had to straddle different-leaning constituencies in different regions in relation to sensitive policy areas like climate change policies and mining-related projects or jobs.¹³

Coalition MPs (largely Nationals) in Queensland in particular, due to the many marginal seats here, were acutely aware of pressure from the growing popularity of minor parties,¹⁴ such as Pauline Hanson's One Nation, Katter's Australian Party, the United Australia Party and briefly Fraser Anning's Conservative National Party – all 'Queensland-grown' and led by outspoken and/or inflammatory figures. The primary vote for minor parties in seats around Townsville at the 2017 state election was over 40 per cent; in Herbert at the 2016 federal election, it was over 30 per cent. With a series of surveys and research findings showing decreasing trust in the political 'establishment',¹⁵ it's unsurprising that many voters in Queensland and elsewhere, especially in regional areas, are increasingly disengaged from the major parties and have been turning for some time towards 'charismatic' figures on the fringe.

Overall, the minor party vote at the 2017 state election was over 30 per cent, and in Queensland at the 2016 federal election it was 24 per cent. This isn't a phenomenon restricted to Queensland – in the 2019 New South Wales election, the minor party vote was 25 per cent (over 20 per cent there at the 2016 federal election), and in the 2018 Victorian election it was 22 per cent (over 22 per cent there at the 2016 federal election). This anti-major party sentiment doesn't routinely translate to winning numerous lower house seats, though – only 6 of 93 seats (up 3) at the 2017 Queensland election were won by minor parties or independents; 6 of 88 (up 3) at the 2018 Victorian election; 9 of 93 (up 4) at the 2019 NSW election; and 5 of 150 (no change) at the 2016 federal election, where

¹² Katharine Murphy, 'How the Coalition's panic over polls set the stage for a radical reshaping of Australian politics,' *The Guardian*, 26 December 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/dec/26/how-the-coalitions-panic-over-polls-set-the-stage-for-a-radical-reshaping-of-australian-politics>.

¹³ Aaron Patrick, 'Labor split over Adani's Carmichael coal mine reveals new political divide,' *Australian Financial Review*, 20 February 2019, <https://www.afr.com/politics/labor-split-over-adanis-carmichael-coal-mine-reveals-new-political-divide-20190220-h1bhbb>.

¹⁴ Chris Aulich, 'Discontent with Nationals in regional areas could spell trouble for Coalition at federal election,' *The Conversation*, 23 April 2019, <https://theconversation.com/discontent-with-nationals-in-regional-areas-could-spell-trouble-for-coalition-at-federal-election-115364>; Gabrielle Chan, 'You reap what you sow': why furious rural voters are pulling the plug on the Nationals,' *The Guardian*, 31 March 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/mar/31/you-reap-what-you-sow-why-furious-rural-voters-are-pulling-the-plug-on-the-nationals>; Michael Koziol and Lisa Visentin, 'Barnaby Joyce says Nationals must shift to the right to counter Shooters threat,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 March 2019, <https://www.smh.com.au/nsw-election-2019/barnaby-joyce-says-nationals-must-shift-to-the-right-to-counter-shooters-threat-20190325-p517go.html>.

¹⁵ Mark Evans, Gerry Stoker and Max Halupka, 'Australians' trust in politicians and democracy hits an all-time low: new research,' *The Conversation*, 5 December 2018, <https://theconversation.com/australians-trust-in-politicians-and-democracy-hits-an-all-time-low-new-research-108161>.

the minor party vote was over 20 per cent (compared to just under 20 per cent in 2013). However, a nationwide minor party Senate vote of over 35 per cent at the 2016 federal election resulted in a record 20 crossbenchers – helped, it should be remembered, by then PM Malcolm Turnbull calling a double dissolution election requiring lower quotas for Senate election.

Federal election primary votes and two-party-preferred swings in Queensland, 1996-2019

Election	Coalition primary vote % (QLD/AUS)	ALP primary vote % (QLD/AUS)	Minor party primary vote % (QLD/AUS)	2PP swing to or against Coalition (QLD/AUS)
1996*	55.21 / 47.25	33.17 / 38.75	11.62 / 11.59	+8.65 / +5.07
1998	40.85 / 39.51	36.11 / 40.10	23.04 / 18.46	-7.17 / -4.61
2001	45.60 / 42.92	34.70 / 37.84	19.71 / 16.25	+1.81 / +1.93
2004	49.15 / 46.71	34.78 / 37.63	12.88 / 13.17	+2.23 / +1.79
2007*	44.47 / 42.09	42.91 / 43.38	9.62 / 12.29	-7.53 / -5.44
2010	47.42 / 43.32	33.58 / 37.99	15.47 / 16.19	+5.58 / +2.58
2013*	45.66 / 45.55	29.77 / 33.38	24.04 / 19.66	+1.84 / +3.61
2016	43.19 / 42.04	30.91 / 34.73	23.98 / 20.36	-2.88 / -3.13
2019	43.70 / 41.44	26.68 / 33.34	28.29 / 21.83	+4.34 / +1.17

Sources: ABC, AEC [*change of government]

In 1942, Robert Menzies delivered his oft-cited radio broadcast, ‘The Forgotten People’, aiming to mobilise the support of a voting bloc hitherto untapped ... in 2019, it appeared Morrison hoped to reprise this appeal but pitching instead to ‘fearful people’ (or so-called ‘quiet Australians’).¹⁶ In so doing, Morrison would play on ‘ordinary’ Australians’ fears about weak borders, rising power prices, falling house prices and ‘Labor taxes’. This type of appeal seemed to find fertile ground among middle class, aspirational and retiree voters in Queensland as much (if not more) as anywhere.¹⁷

If, as it’s said, John Howard’s political offspring was Tony Abbott, then it’s also the case that recent Liberal Prime Ministers are each inheritors of Howard’s legacy – a Coalition dominance in Queensland at federal elections. Even despite – or maybe in part owing to – the prominence in Queensland at different times of the likes of Pauline Hanson and Clive Palmer (and, to a lesser extent, Bob Katter Jr), the federal Coalition has won the lion’s share of seats at all but one election in the last quarter of a century. Coincidentally, it’s now to these ‘faux populist’ figures and their right-leaning Queensland supporters that the Coalition increasingly pitches its electoral appeal,¹⁸ hoping to retain that nebulous ‘conservative base’ of Coalition parties’ voter support in this northern state.

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¹⁶ Rodney Tiffen, ‘Nothing to fear but fear itself,’ *Inside Story*, 14 February 2019, <https://insidestory.org.au/nothing-to-fear-but-fear-itself/>.

¹⁷ Michael Koziol, ‘If you’re not a retiree in Queensland, you’re just camping out,’ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 February 2019, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/if-you-re-not-a-retiree-in-queensland-you-re-just-camping-out-20190201-p50v4o.html>.

¹⁸ David Crowe, ‘Just don’t do it, PM: trading votes with Hanson is playing with fire,’ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 March 2019, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/just-don-t-do-it-pm-trading-votes-with-hanson-is-playing-with-fire-20190321-p5165f.html>; Paul Karp, ‘Clive Palmer and the Liberals are pairing up – just forget those Nazi references,’ *The Guardian*, 25 April 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/apr/25/clive-palmer-and-the-liberals-are-pairing-up-just-forget-those-nazi-references>; Katharine Murphy, ‘The Coalition is normalising the far right with its pursuit of One Nation and Palmer,’ *The Guardian*, 1 May 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/may/01/the-coalition-is-normalising-the-far-right-with-its-one-nation-and-palmer-deals?CMP=share_btn_link.