12. New South Wales

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Labor's ability to minimise its losses in New South Wales despite a major adverse swing and the election of two rural Independents was central to Julia Gillard's ability to form a government. The result revealed remarkable patterns of swing and an exceptional informal vote. Labor did win a majority of the seats, and lost only two (or rather four with the redistribution); and their primary vote was higher than in either 2001 or 2004 (when they did not win a majority of seats); on the other hand, 2010 was the third-worst federal result for NSW Labor since 1975.

Political Context and Themes

The 2009 federal electoral redistribution abolished the Labor electorate of Lowe and incorporated much of its enrolment into Reid. The number of electorates was reduced to forty-eight. Any estimate of the political impact of changed electoral boundaries must be imprecise. The redistribution increased the urban component of Gilmore, Greenway and Macarthur and as a result they would probably have been Labor electorates on 2007 voting. The already marginal Liberal electorate of Hughes became more marginal as it now included more of the strong Labor areas of south-western Sydney. Macquarie's boundaries shifted into the conservative north-western outskirts of Sydney and it was weakened for Labor. Independent candidate Rob Oakeshott had an easy victory in the Lyne by-election that followed the retirement of former Nationals leader Mark Vaile in September 2008.

The incumbent State Labor Government was narrowly re-elected in 2007 but since then its fortunes had dramatically declined (Green 2010). Labor was racked by voter anger at perceived infrastructure deficiencies, ministerial scandals and an acrimonious internal conflict over privatisation of the power industry that contributed to the replacement of Premier, Morris Iemma, with Nathan Rees in September 2008 and then his overthrow by Kristina Kenneally in November 2009. The Coalition constantly linked State and federal Labor. The reappearance of debates about asylum-seeker policy on the national agenda also generated particular anxiety within NSW Labor. John Howard's vigorous advocacy of 'border security' was believed by many Labor activists to have been one reason for the Liberals' strong performance in outer suburban Sydney in 2001 and 2004.

Labor endorsed all sitting members except in Robertson where Belinda Neal lost a preselection vote to university lecturer Deborah O'Neill. Neal's tenure as an MP had been dogged by controversy—in particular, an episode where she was accused of abusing restaurant staff (Welch 2008). In Dobell, sitting Labor MP, Craig Thompson, easily won a preselection ballot despite controversies arising from his tenure as a Health Services Union office-bearer prior to his election (Bowe 2010a, 2010f; Davis 2009).

In ultra-safe Chifley, Roger Price retired and was replaced with Ed Husic who had been defeated as Labor candidate for Greenway in 2004 after a campaign in which his Muslim religion counted against him. Bob Debus retired in Macquarie and media consultant Sue Templeman was endorsed after an acrimonious contest (Bowe 2010e).

Julia Irwin's retirement in Fowler removed Parliament's most outspoken Palestinian sympathiser and initiated a complex reshuffle of Labor candidates. Laurie Ferguson vacated Reid in favour of John Murphy whose electorate of Lowe had been abolished. Ferguson was endorsed for the distant Werriwa whose member, Chris Hayes, then contested Fowler. Branch members were ignored (Bowe 2010b). This exercise in musical chairs assisted the Liberals' local narrative that Labor took voters in safe seats for granted (Dang 2010; Raue 2010a).

Labor's preselection battles received more coverage than disputes within the Liberals. Some Liberal (non-)decisions could have been important. Greenway MP, Louise Markus, chose to contest Macquarie. The Liberals were slow to endorse candidates for Lindsay and Greenway apparently because private polling suggested they had little prospects in these electorates (ABC 2010). Two sitting MPs did not contest their marginal seats. Danna Vale retired in Hughes and Pat Farmer lost preselection for Macarthur (Bowe 2010c, 2010d). The Liberals endorsed candidates from non-English-speaking-background ethnic communities in the safe Labor seats of Fowler, McMahon and Watson and the marginal Greenway. In Riverina, the retirement of sitting Nationals MP, Kay Hulls, enabled the Liberals to nominate a candidate.

The Senate tickets of Labor and the Coalition attracted little attention. The Greens endorsed as their leading Senate candidate fifty-nine-year-old Legislative Councillor Lee Rhiannon. Her past membership of the pro-Soviet Socialist Party of Australia attracted hostile comment (Rhiannon 2010).

The campaign in New South Wales largely reflected national themes—indeed, both Labor and the Coalition shaped their campaigns towards an imagined Sydney suburban audience. Labor candidates in Sydney suburban seats embraced Julia Gillard's rejection of a 'big Australia' (Keane 2010). The most

notable election-specific promise was Labor's announcement of funding for a Parramatta-to-Epping railway link. Some argued that this would assist Labor to hold marginal Bennelong but others suggested that it merely increased voter cynicism given the State Government's perceived poor record on public transport (Alexander 2010; Saulwick and Besser 2011; Wanna 2010; West 2010).

Results

At the level of aggregate votes, New South Wales was a triumph for the Coalition. In 2010, New South Wales became the only State in which a majority of the anti-ALP swing in the House of Representatives went to the Coalition (a 4.6 per cent Coalition gain compared with a 2.1 per cent gain to the Greens). The 2010 primary vote for the Liberals was the highest since 1975, as was the 2010 vote for the Coalition, while The Nationals held their 2007 level.

Labor lost two seats to the Liberals: Bennelong and Macquarie. The Liberals were unable to retain Greenway after the unfavourable redistribution. NSW Labor strategists had complained in early 2010 that Kevin Rudd's policies failed the 'Lindsay test' (Crook 2011). Julia Gillard passed; Labor held Lindsay despite a two-party swing of 5.2 per cent. The Nationals outpolled the Liberals in Riverina almost three to one but were soundly defeated in Lyne. Oakeshott's fellow Independent from New South Wales, Tony Windsor, won easily in New England.

The success of Lee Rhiannon of the Greens to the Senate left Labor with two and the Coalition with three. The Greens' Senate vote of 10.7 per cent was, however, the lowest in Australia. The relatively poor Greens performance might have reflected a voter response to Rhiannon's perceived radicalism, or the particular hostility of leading NSW Greens to private education. It is also likely that Tony Abbott had a greater appeal to protest voters in New South Wales and that Labor's support base, with its large component of socially conservative ethnic communities, was less susceptible to the Greens' appeal. Many disaffected ethnic electors probably voted informally. The Greens also focused their national advertising more on the lower-cost markets of South Australia and Queensland.

Micro-parties polled poorly. The Christian Democratic Party, which was now more fixated on the Muslim threat than permissiveness, polled 1.9 per cent—more than double its more moderate Christian rival Family First, with 0.9 per cent. The Australian Sex Party challenged the Greens' appeal to social libertarians with 1.8 per cent. The informal vote of 4.2 per cent for the Senate was the highest in Australia.

There was a strong uniform swing from Labor to the Coalition and to a lesser extent the Greens within the Sydney metropolitan area. Greens' preferences reduced the two-party swing. Despite all the discussion and concern for Labor in the outer metropolitan mortgage belt and largely Anglo seats of Sydney, the swing against the ALP was greater in the inner metropolitan seats. Labor probably held most of its 2007 gains among outer-suburban working-class voters. The overall modest rural swing against Labor obscured good results for Labor members elected in 2007 but poor results elsewhere.

The Greens continued their advance in the inner city. In Grayndler, they won 25.9 per cent and outpolled the Liberals. They ended with 45.6 per cent after the distribution of preferences. In Sydney the Greens won 23.8 per cent but finished behind the Liberals. Compared with Victoria, in New South Wales, Labor's vote held up better in its inner-urban strongholds—a result that some Greens attributed to weaker candidates and a more narrowly focused appeal by their party than in Victoria.

While all States saw a rise in informal voting, New South Wales—with 6.8 per cent—registered by far the highest informal vote in the nation, even higher than the Northern Territory. Victoria recorded 4.5 per cent, Queensland 5.5 per cent and Western Australia 4.8 per cent, indicating something different occurring in New South Wales: were the NSW voters more alienated from both major parties than voters elsewhere?

The levels of informal voting were not related to the number of candidates, and appear to be part of the protest vote against Labor. While the ethnic make-up of electorates contributes to informal voting, it alone does not explain all the increases. There was also an element of disaffection in some electorates in terms of lower turnout, though this is more difficult to assess.

The nation's top-13 informal voting electorates were all in New South Wales, all metropolitan and all Labor. The fourteenth was also in metropolitan New South Wales: Macarthur, which the Liberals won. These seats recorded between 8.1 per cent and 14.1 per cent informal votes. No other seat anywhere in Australia saw the informal vote higher than 7.5 per cent.

Even Wentworth—the smallest electorate in Australia, one of the wealthiest and one with a highly educated electorate—recorded a 4.5 per cent informal vote, but it also was one of only two electorates in Australia to record a decrease in informal voting (−0.4 per cent).

Wentworth also recorded a turnout of 89.4 per cent—one of the lowest in Australia. There were only six electorates in Australia to record a turnout of less

than 90 per cent, and none of the others has the affluent profile of Wentworth. Perhaps part of the reason might lie in the very limited campaigning by all parties, but especially the ALP, in the electorate.

The other electorate that recorded a decrease in informal votes was Lyne, with only 3.7 per cent informal votes, which was a decrease of 1.3 per cent. It also recorded the highest turnout in New South Wales, with 94.5 per cent. These results further emphasise the unique character of that electorate.

The level of the informal vote means that a focus on vote share understates the magnitude of Labor's setback. The number of Labor voters fell by one-sixth from 2007 to 2010.

Table 12.1 House of Representatives Party Votes in New South Wales, 2007–10

	2007	2010	Increase 2007–10 (%)
ALP	1 791 171	1 494 490	–16.6
Liberal-Nationals	1 555 493	1 788 013	14.9
Greens	230 031	410 405	28.2
Informal	211 519	293 763	38.9

Source: All electoral statistics are from the final Electoral Commission report (AEC 2010).

Only three seats swung to Labor in primary voting: Charlton on 53.2 per cent—a 0.1 per cent swing to Labor; Eden-Monaro, which swung to Labor both on primary votes, by 0.3 per cent to 43.6 per cent, and on the two-party preferred vote, by 2 per cent; and Page where Labor's primary vote increased by 4.1 per cent and its two-party vote by 1.8 per cent.

Even on the two-party preferred vote, there were only two more seats where Labor made gains: Dobell (1.1 per cent) and Robertson (0.9 per cent). Robertson was one of the most surprising results of the election; the likely explanation is that Belinda Neal's personality hampered Labor in 2007.

The Liberals defied the redistribution to hold Gilmore, Macarthur and Hughes despite the retirement of sitting MPs in the last two. In Macquarie Labor held the swing to 1.5 per cent but still lost. In Greenway Labor narrowly held on with 50.9 per cent after a swing of 4.8 per cent. The anti-Labor swing was lower in the parts of the electorate that had been in the pre-redistribution Greenway. Louis Markus's decision to contest Macquarie rather than Greenway probably did not cost the Liberals this electorate.

There was one exception to the pattern of good performances by the class of 2007. Bennelong, the seat in which the sitting Prime Minister, John Howard, was

defeated in 2007, was widely predicted (by most) to be the first seat that Labor would lose. In 2010 the Liberals ran John Alexander, a well-known ex-tennis player and commentator. He won easily with a 48.5 per cent primary vote and 53.1 per cent of the two-party vote. In the words of former Labor State minister Rodney Cavalier, 'Maxine [McKew] could have won Bennelong only once since its creation and that was when she did—and only against John Howard. The Libs were very confident about getting it back a few months into 2008' (Cavalier 2010). The swing in Bennelong was, however, less than in all but one of the surrounding electorates and Labor's defeat might have been due to a Liberal rally among affluent voters and alienation of voters of Chinese background from Labor. Kevin Rudd's demise probably contributed to the latter.

Wealthy Sydney swung decisively to the Coalition. Malcolm Turnbull and Joe Hockey might have lost out to Tony Abbott for the Liberal leadership, but their electorates swung to the Liberals by 11 per cent and 8.6 per cent respectively. The Liberal base, at least in Sydney, returned after a flirtation with Labor in 2007 (Brent 2010).

The Coalition did well in rural marginal seats where Labor had come close in 2007 such as Paterson and Cowper. Notable was the 7.3 per cent swing in Calare, which gave The Nationals an easy win in an electorate Labor had held between 1983 and 1996 on similar boundaries. The Nationals carried Ben Chifley's hometown of Bathurst.

Lyne and New England registered extremely low votes for Labor, which polled 8.1 per cent of the primary vote in New England (−2.8 per cent) and 13.5 per cent in Lyne—dropping a massive 18.5 per cent in primary votes. There is irony here given the decisions by these two Independent MPs to support the new Labor government. In the 2008 by-election, Rob Oakeshott won with 73.9 per cent of the two-party vote. In 2010, Oakeshott retained the seat on 62.7 per cent of the two-party vote. Lyne had the highest turnout in New South Wales (95.4 per cent), and was amongst the top three in the country; New England also saw a healthy turnout with 94.8 per cent. New England and Lyne also had the lowest informal votes in New South Wales: 3.5 per cent and 3.7 per cent respectively. Lyne and Berowra—both NSW seats—were the only seats in Australia to record a drop in informal voting.

In 2007 there were 13 electorates with more than 25 per cent of their population born overseas in non-English-speaking countries, which we describe as 'ethnic' electorates. Labor's Bennelong victory gave it a clean sweep of these (Nelson 2007). In 2010 there were 27 electorates in this group. Labor's loss in Bennelong and the Liberals' retention of Menzies in Victoria meant that in 2010 Labor held 25 of 27 (Nelson 2010). There were, however, major swings against Labor in the Sydney ethnic electorates, driven by an increase in the Liberal portion of the

vote and a major rise in the informal vote. The three electorates in 2010 with the highest portion born in a non-English-speaking country were Reid, Watson and Fowler. Swings against Labor on primaries in these electorates were 11.4 per cent, 9.9 per cent and 15.1 per cent respectively, and much of this swing went directly to the Liberals. The informal vote also increased notably in the ethnic electorates. The two seats with the highest informal vote across Australia were the NSW seats of Blaxland (14.1 per cent) and Fowler (12.8 per cent), and these also saw the greatest increase in informal votes (5.2 per cent and 2.4 per cent).

Former NSW Premier Morris Iemma complained that Labor's espousal of a 'sustainable Australia' had alienated voters in these electorates (Carleton 2010). This is plausible although Labor's good performance in Victorian ethnic electorates reminds us that the different political cultures of each State shaped the response of ethnic voters.

Rodney Cavalier (2010) has noted: 'Labor did not lose more in 2010 only because the margin of safety in what Morris Iemma calls the middle-ring of Sydney is so large to begin with.' Continued ethnic disillusion with Labor and gentrification could make electorates such as Reid and Banks in this middle ring more vulnerable in the future. At the March 2011 State election, NSW Labor lost many previously safe seats in this region.

A total of 13 women were elected out of 48 seats (27 per cent). Labor elected nine out of 26 (35 per cent) while the Coalition managed only four of 20—a mere 20 per cent. Equality moves at glacial speed in New South Wales. The election of Muslim Labor candidate Ed Husic in Chifley was noteworthy although his background as a union official recruited from Young Labor conformed to the modern Labor template. Women have usually been better represented in the Senate, but while there were three men and three women elected, there were no NSW Labor women elected to the Senate in 2010.

Conclusion

In 2010, as in 1998, the incumbent government fell over the line by the retention of traditional suburban marginal seats such as Lindsay and Robertson. The NSW Labor organisation remained effective in marginal-seat campaigning. The Liberals engaged in post-election speculation as to whether tactical errors cost them key marginal seats, as Labor had in 1998 (Coorey 2011). In 2010 Tony Abbott went a long way towards reforging a winning coalition of support but fell just short, as did Labor in 1998. Some things in politics remain the same.

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