

Queensland election: Another blow to Australia's two-party system

By Mike Head
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With thousands of votes still to be counted, the results of Saturday's election in Queensland remain unclear. Widespread hostility to the two traditional ruling parties, the Labor Party and the Liberal National Party (LNP), which has intensified over decades, may prevent either from forming a majority government.

It could be days before the shape of the next government is decided, possibly involving backroom negotiations to cobble together a coalition. As of yesterday, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation projected that Labor was likely to win 43 to 46 seats in the 93-member legislative assembly, with the LNP on 38 or 39 seats. Other parties have 2 seats, with the rest undecided. Majority government requires 47 seats.

More than 30 years of attacks on working class jobs, living conditions and basic services, mainly by state Labor governments, with two interludes of one-term LNP governments, have led to deep political disaffection. In polling booth interviews conducted by the WSWs, voters voiced disgust and distrust toward the political system, and a readiness to consider a socialist alternative.

The result in Australia's third-most populous state points to an ongoing breakdown of the two-party system, which has seen no federal government survive a full term since 2007.

Despite the ever-more evident disintegration of the federal Liberal-National Coalition government, which the Labor Party hoped to exploit by calling a snap early state election, Labor's vote fell by about 1.5 percentage points to 36 percent. In working-class electorates, Labor's vote dropped by up to 9 points.

Most significantly, the LNP's vote crashed by some 8.3 percent, on top of 7 percent fall in the previous state election in 2015, reducing it to 33 percent. Yet Labor's vote still went backward. In numerous seats, Labor is relying on second preference votes from the LNP or Senator Pauline Hanson's rabidly xenophobic One

Nation to get across the line. The combined vote for the two major parties was the lowest in a Queensland state election since 1906.

On election night, Labor Party Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk declared she was "confident" of a majority victory, but immediately backtracked on her election campaign pledge not to strike deals with other parties and independents to retain office. She performed a similar manoeuvre following the 2015 election. After three weeks of horse-trading, she eventually formed a minority government with the support of the right-wing rural-based protectionist Katter's Australian Party (KAP).

This election has demonstrated an even more volatile situation. Nearly one-third of the electorate voted for other parties and independents that falsely claimed to provide an "anti-elite" alternative to the two big business parties. The backlash against the major parties took unpredictable forms across the large state, with several locally-based independents poised to win seats, pointing to a further fracturing of the parliamentary establishment.

For now, reflecting global trends, the main beneficiaries have been nationalist, protectionist and anti-immigrant formations. They are preying upon the economic and social devastation in many working-class and regional areas. With unemployment officially near 20 percent in some electorates and youth unemployment closer to 50 percent, these parties are trying to divert the disaffection away from the root causes, which lie in the capitalist profit system itself.

Hanson's One Nation picked up almost 14 percent of the vote statewide, but it was concentrated—as high as 35 percent—in electorates hit hardest by the collapse of the mining boom and related employment that once underpinned much of the Queensland economy. However, One Nation may fail to win a single seat, dashing its hopes of being the kingmaker in the formation of the next government. One Nation's state leader, Steve Dickson,

lost his seat, as did its highest-profile candidate, ex-senator Malcolm Roberts. This was a far cry from Hanson's boast that One Nation would reprise its peak 1998 result, when it secured 11 seats.

Bob Katter's KAP vied with One Nation in several northern seats, as well as retaining its two western outback seats, largely exploiting the financial ruin facing smaller farmers to pick up votes ranging from around 20 to 65 percent, but only 2 percent statewide.

The Greens marginally increased its vote share by 1.4 points to 9.9 percent, but its vote was heavily concentrated in affluent suburbs of the state capital Brisbane, ranging as high as 35 percent in gentrified South Brisbane. The Greens may gain its first-ever seat, in an inner-western suburb long dominated by the LNP. This reflects a calculated political orientation by the Greens to upper middle-class professionals and business entrepreneurs.

No statistics are yet available on the rate of abstention from the poll. Enrolment and voting is compulsory and non-participation can lead to fines of \$126. In working-class Brisbane electorates, up to 8 percent of voters cast informal ballots. That is, they voted but refused to support any of the candidates.

The disastrous result for the LNP has ominous implications for Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's federal Coalition government. Increasingly, it has been wracked by divisions, particularly involving its most right-wing elements, and cancelled next week's parliamentary session for fear of a defeat on the floor of the House of Representatives. The government also has been destabilised by the reactionary nationalist campaign to disqualify members of parliament accused of holding or being entitled to foreign citizenship, and therefore lacking "undivided loyalty" to the Australian nation state.

The poor outcome is likely to exacerbate the rifts tearing apart the Coalition, which has been represented in Queensland by a single party, the LNP, since an acrimonious merger in 2008. In middle-class suburbs of Brisbane, once the base of the Liberals, the LNP vote evidently haemorrhaged because of its decision to allocate second preferences to One Nation, and leave open the option of forming a government with One Nation's support.

This prospect cut across the interests of more globally-dependent professionals and businesses. Turnbull, as federal Liberal Party leader, refused to intervene to veto the unprecedented preference deal with Hanson's party.

At the same time, in rural and regional areas in the state's north and centre, formerly dominated by the National Party, One Nation gained swings of around 30 percent, almost exclusively at the LNP's expense, reflecting anger toward Turnbull's government. Leading Liberals and Nationals within the federal Coalition are already blaming the Turnbull government's "dysfunction" for the outcome.

Regardless of who forms the next Queensland government, the offensive against the working class will escalate. The financial elite is demanding deep cuts to social spending because of the economic slump, which is being aggravated by signs of tumbling apartment prices, threatening to burst a five-year housing bubble.

In her election night speech, Palaszczuk gave a clear indication of Labor's rightward, pro-business trajectory. She thanked former Liberal voters for deserting the LNP to vote Labor for the first time.

Labor's main pitch in the election, backed trenchantly by the trade unions, was entirely deceitful. It campaigned almost entirely on a negative basis, warning of "cuts and chaos" under an LNP-One Nation coalition government. It traded on the fact that LNP leader Tim Nicholls was the treasurer in the last LNP state government, headed by Campbell Newman, which sacked 14,000 public sector workers and decimated health, education and other basic services.

The Labor and union leaders suppressed any discussion about the previous Labor government of Anna Bligh, in which Palaszczuk was the key transport minister. Bligh's administration was defeated in a landslide in 2012 after privatising services and destroying thousands of jobs.

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