

One week into the extended federal election campaign, climate has not featured prominently. While prime minister Malcolm Turnbull campaigns on “ [jobs and growth](#) ”, opposition leader Bill Shorten has [emphasised education](#) and employment conditions. Climate also warranted no mention in the government’s [pre-election budget](#).

This week’s [National Press Club debate](#) between federal environment minister Greg Hunt and his shadow counterpart Mark Butler largely [retrodicted party lines](#), and received limited coverage.

Yet 2016 could still be a climate election. Here’s why.

Points of difference

There are major climate policy differences between the Coalition government and Labor opposition.

The government has committed to a target of 26% to 28% reduction in greenhouse emissions by 2030 (relative to 2005), and remains committed to its incentive-only [auction scheme](#) for industry to reduce emissions.

By contrast, Labor has committed to a 45% reduction in emissions over the same period, with a 50% renewable energy target. It has also pledged to set up an [emissions trading scheme](#) that is more consistent with how other countries are approaching climate policy.

These are substantial differences, especially given criticisms that the government’s Direct Action model is [expensive and inefficient](#) and offers [no guarantee of achieving its stated targets](#). So there are opportunities for climate to feature prominently as a point of policy difference.

Public opinion

Public opinion tends to move in favour of the opposition on climate policy. For the past several years, the Lowy Institute has polled Australians on [climate policy, among other international issues](#) . It has found, perhaps surprisingly, that Australians tend to be most supportive of strong action when the government of the day is perceived as inactive.

The high point for public support was 2006. Conversely, the low point for public support on strong climate action was 2012, as the Labor government under Julia Gillard [introduced the carbon tax](#) .

There is evidence now of a [rebound in support for climate policy](#) , with perceptions that the government is dragging its feet on climate change. This clearly creates incentives for Labor to campaign on climate.

Green pressure

The Greens loom as a threat to Labor if it doesn't emphasise its commitment to climate action. The Greens surprised many by winning the lower house seat of Melbourne in 2010, and Adam Bandt has held it since.

Now the Greens have their [sights set on other lower house seats](#) , and perception that it is the party that takes climate action seriously will have damaging effects for Labor in electorates most vulnerable to Greens campaigning.

Political opponents of all stripes have a real opportunity to wedge the prime minister on climate change. It appears likely that prime minister Turnbull is [playing a long game](#) and hoping that an election victory will allow him to marginalise those parts of his government that still oppose climate action.

This view involves placing weight on the claims Turnbull made on losing the coalition leadership to Tony Abbott in 2009. Then, he declared that [he did not want to lead a party not serious](#)

[about climate action](#), and questioned any policy that claimed to be cost-neutral. These statements may come back to haunt him.

Finally, civil society groups are mobilising aggressively on climate change. Groups such as [Get Up!](#) will be out in force come election day and are promoting climate action, while environmental groups are pushing hard to ensure that climate change will not be forgotten in the election.

Building on devastating reports of [coral bleaching](#) and [David Attenborough's most recent television series](#), many are using the Great Barrier Reef as a [symbol of the need to take climate action seriously](#).

Dangers of a climate election?

For some analysts, Australia's 2007 contest could rightly be described as "[the world's first climate election](#)".

The then Labor opposition leader Kevin Rudd rode a wave of support for strong climate action, and took office from a Coalition government perceived as weak on climate change.

In 2013, Coalition opposition leader Tony Abbott declared that the forthcoming election would be a "[referendum on the carbon tax](#)", and in those terms he scored a resounding victory.

In both of these accounts, the role of climate policy in the election result is probably overstated. But it also helps to explain why leaders of both parties appear spooked by the idea of campaigning strongly on their climate policy. It may be easier for Labor to announce its climate position softly, and the government to run a scare campaign on economic costs of any stronger action than its own platform.

Election 2016: climate politics off to a chilly start, but could still heat up

Written by The Conversation USA

Indeed, for some advocates of climate action, a climate election may not be a good thing. The climate consensus that characterises the position of progressive countries has not been reflected in Australia. This undermines policy consistency, [economic predictability for business](#), and [public support for climate action](#).

But it is also the case that Australia's most recent brief window of bipartisanship on climate policy in 2009 did not end well. The carbon pollution reduction scheme (CPRS) was never enacted. And both the then prime minister Kevin Rudd and current prime minister Malcolm Turnbull lost their jobs, at least partly because of it.

We may well see climate feature prominently in the weeks to come. And while there may be some dangers, it's hard to think of a climate policy situation in Australia that's any more problematic than [what has come before](#).

Matt McDonald has previously received funding from the UK's Economic and Social Research Council.

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