

Independent member for Indi Cathy McGowan is seen very positively in focus group research in her Victorian seat of Indi – except for one thing.

The political non-alignment that helped her turf out Liberal MP Sophie Mirabella in 2013 is regarded as her greatest weakness in the 2016 contest.

In contrast, Mirabella is stridently criticised for her manner and behaviour – but her affiliation with a major party is a plus.

The University of Canberra's Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis has commissioned Landscape Research to do three rounds of focus groups with "soft" voters in Indi. These are people who have not yet decided definitely who they will vote for on July 2.

Two groups were conducted in Wodonga on May 24, with participants from Wodonga, Wangaratta, Beechworth and Yackandandah. One had eight voters, predominantly retirees, aged between 55-75; the 18-54 age group had nine participants who were mainly working or at home with children. Both groups had roughly equal numbers of men and women and a mix of socioeconomic backgrounds. Each discussion lasted two hours.

A sense of disappointment was evident about the choice of candidates on offer at this election, as well as the wider issue of the quality of candidates generally that the major parties put forward.

For their own representative, these Indi voters want the best of all worlds: someone approachable and accessible who listens, communicates, follows up, fights for them – and has influence in government to get things done.

"We need to know we are heard," said one participant, while another believed the ideal representative should be "approachable, be a local and know where the needs are and [be] a party member so the member has influence and power". But not too senior – "if they become

too important then they can't do their job".

McGowan rates strongly for fighting for Indi, being hard working, approachable, responsive and a good communicator.

"I wrote to her and Cathy wrote back and had a different view to mine, but at least she responded," an older voter said; another had noted she'd "jumped on the [dairy] issue" – which is big in this electorate – "and been very supportive".

But only one person cited her status as an independent as a positive.

"She ticks a lot of boxes as a good local member, but her independent status is also seen as her greatest weakness, and there is a strong sense that the quality of representation for the electorate is seriously compromised as a result," the research report concludes.

This was reflected in comments such as: "helpful although she couldn't progress my issue personally"; "no influence. Difficult to get things done. She can't get funding to the area"; "independent, so little influence in major decision-making".

Mirabella's positives are her experience, personal strength, legal background and having affiliation with a major party. "With the backing of a large party, she is more likely to get things done," said one participant.

But while McGowan's only – but significant – downside is seen as her being an independent, Mirabella carries heavy baggage.

She draws fire for "her apparent aloofness from the people and the appearance of personal ambition over the interests of the electorate. Some are quite scathing of her and more than one refer to embarrassing", the report says.

The cutting assessment from a member of the older group was that “she’s embarrassing. She got thrown out of Question Time for very belligerent behaviour. She’s brought ill-repute to Wodonga”; another described her as “a show pony, glory-seeking, embarrassment to the electorate”. A younger participant said she was “entitled, stubborn, obtuse, egocentric”.

“There is a sense from some that Mirabella has blotted her copybook so badly there is no coming back,” the report says. “However, this view is balanced by others who applaud her strength, value her party affiliation and potential influence in government, and would vote for her because she is the Liberal candidate.”

The younger voters had heard of the Nationals' Marty Corboy, but there was less recognition of him among the older people. So far, he had been largely defined by his comment that he'd found “people in the electorate are pleased to have a bloke to vote for”.

These Indi voters were, for the most part, still disengaged from the election. They are “cranky and indignant about the way their electorate has become the focus of national attention vis-a-vis the intensely personal McGowan/Mirabella contest”, the research found. “They are embarrassed about the subject matter that is gaining them national attention and about the skewed portrayal of them and their electorate, and it convinces them the electoral process really is removed from their everyday lives.”

This is particularly evident in their struggle to name issues at the fore of the election campaign. They see the election as a spending game, or a blame game, or both. “It should be called a money fight. It shouldn't be called an election,” said one in the younger group. Younger voters are particularly disappointed in their political representatives, noting the broken promises of politicians all round.

Such is the disengagement of these Indi soft voters that they expect the election to be about the “same normal stuff”, “schools, hospitals, etc”, yet they were unable to recount any specific announcement they had heard on these issues.

When pushed on what they remembered of the campaign, economic issues dominated, particularly jobs, the budget and taxation. Younger soft voters especially are sceptical about promises on jobs, feeling the numbers are rubbery and that the jobs prospects are likely to be

short-term, part-time or casual positions when they want long-term meaningful employment.

Issues about Wodonga hospital make health funding a significant issue. Various aspects of ageing, from aged care to superannuation, were mentioned. People had not heard much about education. Training, employment, and recreational opportunities for young people in the area were a concern.

The issue of refugees/boats people/detention was seen to be to the fore early in the national campaign. But “interestingly, these Indi soft voters do not see it as an ‘election issue’ but rather an ongoing, complex shambles that neither of the major parties can, or is willing to, solve”, the report says. The current policy of offshore detention is seen as not working but people are divided on whether there is a solution.

“If there is a demand for workers, let them in”, said a member of the younger group. But an older person believed “there are rules for immigration and these need to be followed”.

Indi voters' immediate response when talking about the local campaign is the head-to-head Mirabella-McGowan contest and their annoyance at the media coverage. Beyond that, a key concern is jobs. They talk with animation about mobile telephone black spots (although it is not an unprompted issue of concern) and are frustrated by the inability of governments to deliver an uninterrupted rail link from Wodonga to Melbourne. There is a strong perceived need for greater health funding locally and a wish for more investment in infrastructure.

“Indi voters have a keen sense that they are missing out as a regional area, when compared to more populous locales. Lack of support for local farming, fruit growers, health, and hospitals, are all cited as evidence of lack of interest from government,” the report says.

When discussion turns to the national leaders, these Indi voters had no strong opinions on Malcolm Turnbull and his performance in the campaign so far. Older voters see him tracking steadily. But this is early days and they are expecting more momentum from him.

While one in the older group found him “much more genuine” than Tony Abbott, it's also noted

that he is “not doing so well with the country people – talking jobs and growth – but needs to look to the regions”.

There is a sense of disappointment among some older voters that Turnbull is somehow being constrained and not living up to their expectations. “I’d like to see more fire,” said one; another noted Turnbull “hasn’t had the backing of his party to do what he wants to do”.

Younger voters don’t have the same sense of expectation about Turnbull and are unenthusiastic without being negative. “He is more emotionally stable than Bill, more experienced and [has] better knowledge of finance which means he is better at managing the economy,” said one.

In contrast, more voters find more to complain about with Bill Shorten – especially his “negativity” and big spending promises. He is “spending a lot of money which has me concerned” said an older voter; a younger one said “he seems cocky and I don’t feel I can trust him”.

Awareness of Treasurer Scott Morrison was particularly low among the younger voters, with fewer than half having heard of him. Older voters described him in the budget context: “the money spender”; “did OK with the budget”.

The possibility of a hung parliament disappoints many. Looking back, one participant said, “On the world stage we look foolish. We became a nation run by the Greens last time”. Looking forward, another said, “We have a problem with the system if it came down to this”.

These Indi voters have mixed views about McGowan holding the balance of power in a hung parliament. On the one hand they believe they could and should trust the local member they elected to make decisions on behalf of the nation. “She tends to listen, step back, make inquiries then step forward. I don’t think she is swayed by big carrots.”

On the other hand, some feel uneasy at the prospect of so much power in one person’s hands. “I am unsure which way she would vote on many issues, which scares me.”

People were asked how they voted at the last election. Of those who could recall, nine had voted for McGowan, four in the older group and five in the younger. Five had voted for Mirabella, three older and two younger.

Asked how they thought they would vote this time six said for McGowan, evenly split on age; four said Mirabella, also evenly split, while Corboy had the support of one in the older group and three in the younger. There were three “others”.

They were then asked who would get their second preferences. McGowan received five (two older, three younger), Mirabella got four (evenly split) and Corboy seven (four older, three younger), with “others” one.

The researcher notes that while these results have no statistical validity “a key finding is that conservative voters are not automatically giving their preferences to the other conservative (Liberal or National) candidate; some are preferencing McGowan. As well, both conservatives picked up preferences from McGowan primary voters”.

Further reading: [*The Indi Project: Sophie Mirabella in the bunker*](#)

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Read more <http://theconversation.com/the-indi-project-mcgowan-lacks-clout-mirabella-is-embarrassing-say-local-soft-voters-60220>