

## Major parties have a lot to answer for in the drift to minor players

Written by The Conversation USA

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For those who might feel this election campaign will never end, it is worth revisiting why the voters are enduring eight weeks rather than the normal five.

Calling a double dissolution – the specific circumstances of which made this length of campaign necessary – was all about minimising pesky crossbenchers in the Senate.

The blocked industrial relations legislation was the formal reason. But the motive was to get a more amenable upper house, though the Coalition was never going to win a majority there. In this quest, the government changed the Senate voting rules, to boost the chance of holding out “micro” players.

But it has all got rather messy.

In a double dissolution, as distinct from an election for half the Senate, the quota is small enough to open the gate for “micros” even under the new voting system.

And public disillusionment with the major parties is such that the trend for people to support minor players, including the Greens, shows no prospect of abating.

The latest Newspoll has only “other parties and independents” increasing their support in the past fortnight.

One sign of the disillusionment is the high level of support for the Nick Xenophon Team in South Australia. Xenophon, an absolute vote magnet, appears likely to get at least three senators including himself, which would be a substantial slice of the non-Green Senate crossbench.

Goodness knows who else will comprise that crossbench, which ABC election analyst Antony Green predicts could be about the same size – but with a different composition – as in the last

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parliament when it was eight.

If the government is returned it would regard the Xenophon Team as potentially easier to deal with than some of the previous crossbenchers. But this could be quite complicated in practice. Xenophon is running a very populist agenda which he would presumably try hard to deliver on. Also, being leader of a group is rather different from his previous role of acting as an individual senator.

While Xenophon is not another Clive Palmer, the fragmentation of the Palmer United Party shows what can happen in a disparate group.

The government is deeply worried about Xenophon's pulling power in South Australia, including in the lower house seat of Mayo, held by former minister Jamie Briggs who had to quit the ministry after an incident abroad involving a public servant. The Liberal jitters come despite the billions of dollars the government has promised to the state.

As the polls stay more or less level, the talk of a possible hung parliament inevitably increases.

On Saturday Turnbull, campaigning in Adelaide, made a strong appeal for people not to use their vote to protest.

"A vote for anyone other than my Coalition team is a vote for chaos. It is a vote for returning to the Gillard days, the Green-Labor-independent alliance.

"Every single vote for Nick Xenophon, the independents or Greens or Labor brings us closer to Bill Shorten and the Greens running Australia.

"So now is not the time for a protest vote or a wasted vote; it is time to use your vote carefully, to prevent the chaos of a hung parliament – a hung parliament that would bring government and our economic transition to a grinding halt, costing your jobs and your future."

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A hung parliament is only a possibility. A Senate that would be difficult for a re-elected Turnbull government is a probability if not a certainty. The question is how difficult. If Turnbull is re-elected but the new Senate is not an improvement for the Coalition over the old one, the double dissolution will have achieved little, notwithstanding that the government would be able – presuming it had a majority of the whole parliament – to get the industrial legislation through a joint sitting.

Whatever the precise composition of the Senate a re-elected Coalition would have to find a way of working with it more effectively than happened during the last term. This would be the challenge of “winning the peace”, as one government man puts it.

There is another, more difficult and longer term challenge to which both Coalition and Labor should turn their minds after this election. One reason – not the only one - that people are registering protest votes is that they are so alienated from the whole political process. They are protesting not just against a specific government – a traditional reason for a protest vote – but against how politics operates. And this has a lot to do with how the Coalition and Labor have conducted themselves over a long period. If the major parties want to stem the drift to a larger protest vote, they need to treat the voters and the democratic process with more respect and a lot less cynicism.

**Read more** <http://theconversation.com/major-parties-have-a-lot-to-answer-for-in-the-drift-to-minor-players-60527>