

Voters see through Turnbull, but cool on Shorten: Queensland research

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Malcolm Turnbull's cancellation of next week's House of Representatives sitting has been received sceptically by Queensland "soft" voters, but they still prefer the Prime Minister over Bill Shorten, according to focus group research ahead of Saturday's state election.

Participants were dismissive of Turnbull's claim he was rearranging the sitting times to concentrate on the same-sex marriage bill. Nor do they believe the marriage issue will boost his fortunes.

But when pressed, these voters don't agree Turnbull is a dead duck for the next federal election. They think Australia is headed in the right direction, and there is still some hope for him.

The four groups of 10 people each were conducted on Monday and Tuesday, two in Brisbane and two in Townsville. There was a mix of gender, age and socio-economic characteristics. They were run by Landscape Research for the University of Canberra's Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis.

In Brisbane participants were drawn mainly from the marginal seats of Ferny Grove (ALP, 0.82%) and Everton (LNP, 1.77%) in the LNP-held federal electorate of Dickson. In Townsville they came predominantly from Mundingburra (ALP, 2.76%) and Townsville (ALP, 5.69%) in the Labor-held federal seat of Herbert. These voters, most of whom took part in the research's earlier round, were "undecideds" when the campaign started.

In the discussions, Turnbull's cancelling of the House's sitting was variously described as weird, ridiculous, a "bit naughty"; a Townsville electrician thought it was done for "non-altruistic reasons, probably more political. ... to push everything else out of the way."

A retired Townsville manager declared it "opportunistic", bound up with the citizenship crisis and fear of losing a vote on the floor of parliament. "I read this morning there's 53 Bills that they could be dealing with that they're not now," said a Townsville retailer.

Voters see through Turnbull, but cool on Shorten: Queensland research

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

As for any government hope of a boost from same-sex marriage, a Brisbane retiree opined that voters would “forget about it” come federal election time.

The latest [Newspoll](#) had Shorten breathing down Turnbull’s neck on the “better PM” measure. But for people in these groups Shorten still carries baggage, especially of the union kind. Voters struggle to produce positives about Turnbull, but they agree he is better than the alternatives, in his own party and in Labor.

While some see Turnbull as weak and having to toe the party line, Shorten remains an unknown quantity for them, and choosing a weak Turnbull is still preferable for many.

Contributions from the Brisbane group of working-age voters capture their views. “I don’t think Bill Shorten is a done deal to get in”. “Bill Shorten’s got some bad things behind him, I think, when the union movement did some underhand deals”. “If he had some decent competition, Malcolm Turnbull, then I think it would be all over for him”.

Working Townsville soft voters also, when pressed, prefer Turnbull over Shorten. As one put it, it’s “the devil you know versus the devil you don’t know – what he will do”.

This research is qualitative, so numbers have no statistical significance. Bearing this in mind, as the state campaign went into its final week the result of a “mock” ballot for Saturday’s vote across the four groups was ALP 23 and LNP 17. That result is counting which of the two major parties people put first, even if that party was not given their number 1.

Many of these soft voters are eschewing the traditional flow of preferences along broadly ideological lines. If this happened widely on Saturday, it could have unforeseen consequences in key marginals.

For example among voters from Mundingburra, held by Disability Services minister Coralee O’Rourke, a number gave Katter’s Australian Party (KAP) their first vote, preferencing Labor or Greens above the Liberal National Party. Similarly, one voter in the seat of Townsville gave the Greens her number one vote followed by KAP as number 2.

Voters see through Turnbull, but cool on Shorten: Queensland research

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

In this north Queensland city, KAP doesn't have the same extreme right wing stigma that some attribute to One Nation, and Pauline Hanson isn't as popular as in regions further south. The appeal of KAP is as a sort of reinvention of the old Country party, giving it some attraction for disgruntled LNP and Labor people alike.

Unable to decide who to put first, many participants started with who they might put last.

"It's a bit of a toss up between Greens and One Nation," said a Townsville retiree, adding "they're divisive and would make parliament unworkable". Another Townsville participant said he would put the LNP last because "I don't trust them – I don't know how they're funded".

An Everton personal trainer was "putting Labor last. There are lots of promises on expenditure but no explaining where the money is coming from, or why they've not done it already".

Opposition leader Tim Nicholls continues to carry the burden of the Newman government, in which he was treasurer. "If they were a racehorse, their form is not good," said a Brisbane retiree. Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk is criticised in the wake of her [Adani](#) flip flop, the perception of achieving little for Queensland, and gaffes by treasurer Curtis Pitt.

While some voters have firmed their views on who to vote for, many remain undecided, either waiting for something to cement their decision or so disengaged that they've almost shut down from the barrage of news and canvassing. "I'm getting three to five phone calls a night. I've had it", said a Mundingburra voter.

Despite the widespread disappointment with the major parties, very local policy decisions help some people decide. One was choosing Labor because it would renovate local schools; another, the LNP because of a commitment to fix district traffic problems.

Participants cared little about the backroom preference manoeuvrings that were receiving publicity, seeing them as "political". Whether they will take more notice when handed how-to-vote cards on election day – the system has moved to [compulsory preferential](#) - remains to be seen.

Voters see through Turnbull, but cool on Shorten: Queensland research

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

A desire for stability ran through both Brisbane and Townsville groups, which pushed some soft voters into putting Labor first. This also steered some away from One Nation, which for many seemed riddled with internal strife, not making for a responsible crossbench presence.

Instability flows on to the government not being able to govern, and therefore not doing its job. These voters are frustrated with the lack of action and achievement at both state and federal level.

A notable part of the discussions was about a subject that, politically, is more current in Victoria and NSW than in Queensland – euthanasia (which is a state government area). The same-sex marriage ballot opened the way for opinions on direct democracy and other matters that might be considered appropriate for a people's vote.

Voluntary assisted dying was narrowly defeated in NSW last week, but is set to pass in Victoria, once the lower house considers the amended bill which cleared the upper house in a marathon sitting this week.

Almost to a person (38 out of 40 participants) there was support for euthanasia – it galvanised younger and older voters, regional and metropolitan participants. Some saw it as more complex and important than same-sex marriage. As a Townsville voter put it, “this affects everyone”.

Twenty eight of the 40 supported a public vote to indicate to MPs how people felt. But notwithstanding their support for euthanasia some opposed a plebiscite, seeing it as a waste of money.

While many agree with the idea of tapping into voter opinion on euthanasia, they are universally unhappy with what they see as the outrageous cost of the marriage vote. They believe cheaper methods should be used for future exercises in direct democracy, such as online voting, or plebiscites held with elections.

They want to be heard – but it shouldn't cost so much.

Voters see through Turnbull, but cool on Shorten: Queensland research

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

Authors: Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Read more <http://theconversation.com/voters-see-through-turnbull-but-cool-on-shorten-queensland-research-87994>