

Government loses 30th consecutive Newspoll, despite slight improvement

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

As widely anticipated, the government has lost its 30th Newspoll in a row, although it slightly reduced Labor's two-party lead.

The Coalition trails 48-52%, compared with 47-53% a fortnight ago. [The Australian reports](#) it is only the second time since April last year that the government has come within this striking distance.

Given a universal expectation of a bad poll, the Coalition will breathe a sigh of relief at the numbers overall, especially after last week's [controversial push](#) by dissident Coalition backbenchers on energy policy which created bad media.

Despite its continued lead, the poll contains some disappointments for Labor. The ALP's primary vote fell 2 points to 37%, while the Coalition vote rose a point to 38%. The Greens are on 10%, and One Nation stayed at 7% in the poll, taken Thursday to Sunday.

Bill Shorten is only 2 points behind Malcolm Turnbull as better prime minister, an improvement of a point. But Shorten's satisfaction rating fell 2 points to 32% and his dissatisfaction rose 3 points to 57%, to equal Turnbull on both measures. Turnbull's ratings were largely unchanged.

Turnbull can also be grateful for the competitive instinct of newspapers. Before the Newspoll, Fairfax Media – which polls only intermittently - had a “spoiler” out in its Saturday papers that suggested the government's position mightn't be as dire as it had been painted.

The [Fairfax-Ipsos poll](#) had the Coalition trailing 48-52% on the two-party vote, when preferences were distributed, as is usual, on the basis of the last election. But distributing preferences according to how people said they would allocate them brought the result to 50-50%.

Even more encouraging for Turnbull, 62% said the Liberal party should stay with him as leader, rising to 74% among Coalition supporters.

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The Fairfax poll formed a useful bit of inoculation for Turnbull, who was also out in the media ahead of Newspoll with a round of interviews.

When he was informed of the Newspoll, he [told The Australian](#) the “electoral contest is very close and the election is there to be won”.

Turnbull had ensured that if his government had a 30th consecutive Newspoll defeat it would turn into a faux crisis because he used the Abbott government’s 30 lost Newspolls as one of his grounds for challenging the former prime minister.

Since then he has to contend with a disruptive Abbott who on Monday is “pollie pedalling” in the Latrobe Valley, making sure he is best placed to exploit simultaneously Turnbull’s pain over the Newspoll and his difficulty with the energy issue.

Abbott, who has been stirring since he was ousted, declared on Sunday: “the last thing I want to see is instability in government”.

Interestingly, “Newspoll” has been rather different in Turnbull’s time than it was in Abbott’s, as former Nielsen pollster [John Stirton wrote](#) at the weekend.

In mid 2015 the Newspoll organisation closed and Galaxy was commissioned to do the poll, which retained its name but has undergone some changes in methodology. “When Tony Abbott lost his 30 Newspolls they were almost entirely the old Newspoll which tended to bounce around a bit, as polls do,” wrote Stirton on Sunday. “The new Newspoll is a very different poll. Turnbull’s 29 losses have all been the new Newspoll, which doesn’t move around much at all”.

“Everything else being equal, Turnbull was always more likely to lose (or for that matter win) 30 polls in a row than previous prime ministers because the new Newspoll simply doesn’t move around as much as the old one.”

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Stirton stressed he was not suggesting there is anything wrong with the poll results. “Newspoll is a very good poll and there is no suggestion that the individual poll numbers are in some way wrong. It’s just that the poll is much less variable than it used to be and short-term changes in sentiment are less likely to show up”.

The climactic hype around this poll reflects the degree to which polling has been driving political judgements and media analysis, often to the detriment of both.

The plethora of polls, which now never let up between elections, has made “leading” harder. When things are going poorly for a government, the followers are endlessly and quantitatively reminded of looming disaster, increasing their agitation. And polls are easy stories for the media, falling on especially fertile ground in the 24-hour news cycle.

This Newspoll confirms what seems to be a constant message – that it is more likely than not Turnbull will lose next year’s election. So inevitably, the previews have been accompanied by leadership speculation.

But there is no sign of any move against Turnbull, and the Fairfax poll shows why any such a move would be ill-judged.

Even if Liberal MPs believe they are heading into opposition – and the Coalition received another blow last week when the [proposed redistributions](#) in Victoria and the ACT helped Labor - they would need to face the question: who would be best to save the furniture?

Labor’s changing back to Kevin Rudd before the 2013 election was about furniture-saving – and he did indeed do that. The switch was rational and benefitted Bill Shorten in the 2016 election.

But how many Liberals would think Peter Dutton or Julie Bishop would attract more voters than Turnbull? There is nothing to suggest that Dutton could improve the Coalition vote, and Bishop would be an almighty gamble in a role that would throw her into the rigours of a tough economic debate.

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Turnbull remains the Coalition's best bet, whether to give it a chance of pulling off a victory or limiting its loss.

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