

Zali Steggall is a poster person for a batch of high profile centre-right independents contesting seats in the May election.

Her bid to oust Tony Abbott from his Liberal heartland Sydney seat of Warringah is receiving national attention and the former prime minister is clearly feeling under pressure.

But according to qualitative research in the seat this week, Steggall - former Olympian, lawyer, local - is yet to embed herself in the minds of those voters who are potentially willing to turn against Abbott.

The focus groups, sponsored by the University of Canberra's [Democracy 2025](#) project and conducted by Landscape Research, found mixed feelings about Abbott, who has held the northern beaches seat since 1994, but uncertainty about alternatives.

The four groups, each of seven to nine “soft” voters (who haven’t made up their minds), drawn from across the electorate, were held on Monday and Tuesday. This research is not predictive but taps into general attitudes.

Federal politics isn’t top of mind for these Warringah residents, many of whom display conservative views on economics while being socially progressive (for example disdaining the use of border security as a political weapon).

Read more: [*Politics with Michelle Grattan: Tony Abbott and Zali Steggall on Warringah votes*](#)

Their concerns focus more around infrastructure, particularly roads and traffic congestion,

population growth, environmental concerns on the northern beaches and housing affordability for their children.

Older voters are more engaged, more readily able to discuss current issues in federal politics and more concerned with the impact on their area. Younger voters have largely tuned out, feeling powerless.

Interestingly, in view of Steggall's very strong pitch on climate change, that issue barely rates a mention, with people's environmental concerns more on the loss of farmland to mining, the decline of the Murray Darling Basin, and the impact on the local beaches of population growth in the longer term.

Older Warringah voters trust Scott Morrison more than Bill Shorten to run the country. But for quite a few this is grudging. Morrison is the "least worst" option – they don't trust him that much, but they trust Shorten less.

Younger people are divided as to which leader they trust more. Shorten is regarded as having the more progressive and inclusive policy agenda. Those younger voters who trust Morrison more see him as more likeable and sympathetic and a "straight shooter" as well as having stronger economic credentials.

But there is some concern among both older and younger voters about Morrison's religious beliefs, and their possible influence on policy and pushing the Liberal Party to the right. "Morrison's too much of a radical Christian, a bit of a loose cannon," an older woman says.

Some voters see Shorten's leadership position as more stable than Morrison's (suggesting they haven't tuned into the Liberals' new rule that a Liberal PM winning an election would see out the term).

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A positive for the prime minister is the Liberals' historical reputation as better economic managers. Shorten's union background and character are cited as negatives for him.

While a few younger voters support Labor's policies on capital gains tax, negative gearing and franking credits as being more equitable, most older voters are highly critical of the policies. A 66-year old woman admin officer laments: "I will be a self-funded retiree when I retire, and my whole life is stuffed up, because everything I've worked for is about to go arse-up".

Stability – or lack of it – is a recurring theme among these voters. They see politicians from both sides as focussed on themselves, and the leadership coups as evidence they are more preoccupied with power than "doing the right thing by the people".

For his critics in these groups, Abbott's trenchant stand against same-sex marriage is clear evidence of being out of touch. Three quarters of Warringah electors voted yes in the 2017 plebiscite.

A younger female says Abbott "has lost a lot of trust over his whole attitude towards women, and the same sex marriage issue". A female nurse from Curl Curl declares he's "past it and hasn't got his finger on the pulse. He's very old school, very set in his ways, bit of a misogynist. He's very 1950s in his thinking".

On the other hand, for some participants Abbott's sticking to his beliefs has been a plus, a sign of strength of character and convictions.

There was passing reference to Abbott as a climate change sceptic, but his stance on same-sex marriage, which people cite repeatedly to illustrate his being out of touch with the electorate, aggravates them far more than his views on climate change.

Some voters who might disagree with him on issues see him as tenacious and committed to a life of public service. "He's one of the most principled politicians I've ever seen," says a 59-year old male musician from Dee Why.

Running in Abbott's favour is his local activism. His lifesaving, firefighting and general community engagement are well known. But his long tenure of itself can work against him. A 47-year old mother of two from Allambie Heights says: "I don't dislike Tony Abbott. I just think he's been in the job too long".

Others regard him as untrustworthy and bitter. A female retiree from Mosman says it is clear he "has spent a lot of time in the parliament getting revenge and caused the most enormous amount of damage to the party".

But the challenge for Steggall is to turn discontent with the incumbent into support for her.

As the researcher's summary of the findings puts it: "What might appear to be a high-profile candidature to those looking in from outside the peninsula, does not yet appear to have penetrated the streets of Warringah.

"Some participants had never heard of Steggall. Some had only heard her name and knew nothing else about her, while a few knew she was an Olympian and/or a lawyer, and that she has children and has been married twice; certainly their knowledge of her at this time is not enough to make her an obvious alternative vote choice to Abbott.

"The dilemma for Steggall's campaign is that neither the former Liberal-voting Abbott defectors nor the 'anyone-but-Abbott' voters are automatically falling her way," the report says.

"The very fact of deciding (definitely or probably) not to vote for Abbott causes these Warringah electors to consider their vote more carefully, to ponder the issues and weigh up their options on candidates (seriously for the first time in more than two decades).

"Some are aware that there is a 'strong Indigenous female candidate' (Susan Moylan-Coombs) and while her name is not top of mind for them, 'she looks interesting'. The Labor candidate did not rate a mention across all four groups. Minor parties such as the Greens and the Liberal Democrats, as well as potential other independent candidates, are also under consideration by some".

Grattan on Friday: Warringah Votes – Abbott's challenger has yet to 'penetrate the streets'

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Older voters are more aware of Steggall, her legal career and her father's local legal practice. The fact she's been an Olympian is a plus for some, indicating discipline; they see her legal qualification as indicating intelligence. A couple of the participants have received direct marketing information from her, making them feel more positive towards her. A 40-year old male from Freshwater who's been getting "a lot" of Steggall material says: "She's an independent, she's moderate. Perfect."

The assessment from a male business development manager from Balgowlah reflects the ambivalence in some voters' minds: "There is something exciting about her, and she's different, but you can't have that trust in her because there's no track record there, so you're really just taking a leap of faith".

As the researcher sums up from the group discussions, at this stage Steggall "is a local by geography but has yet to prove her mettle as a worthy community advocate."

But this contest has a long way to run.

Postscript: [Listen](#) to interviews with Abbott and Steggall on The Conversation's Politics with Michelle Grattan podcast

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

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