

On Saturday, March 23, the people of New South Wales will head to the ballot boxes for a state election. It is looking [increasingly close](#), with polls showing government and opposition neck and neck on about 50% of the two-party preferred vote. This is a decline in the Coalition vote of 4% compared to the 2015 election.

The current campaign is reminiscent of a 1950s “I’ll see you and raise you” one. Government and opposition are engaged in an auction to outbid each other in the amounts committed to schools, hospitals, transport and other basic services. The campaign is one of the quietest in a long time, with little excitement about the respective leaders and no major clash of visions for the future.

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Mike Baird’s victory in 2015 laid the foundation for this. The then Coalition leader won a mandate to privatise the state’s electricity network, although sacrificing seats his successor would be glad to have in reserve. The mountains of money produced by this and other privatisations have allowed Premier Gladys Berejiklian to go to the election with a massive war chest.

In addition, the [NSW economy is in good shape](#), performing well compared to most other states. The budget is in surplus and predicted to remain there. Net debt is negative. Unemployment is at a record low.

The Coalition government has a large array of infrastructure projects in progress, including the Westconnex and Northconnex motorways, Sydney Metro – the largest public transport project in Australia – and the CBD and South East light rail. The amount committed for infrastructure over the next four years is just under A\$90 billion.

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Written by David Clune, Honorary Associate, Government and International Relations, University of Sydney

Berejiklian's pitch is: don't jeopardise all this by electing Labor. She is keen to remind the electorate of the factional bloodletting, policy paralysis and corruption that marked the final years of the last ALP government in NSW. The [release during the campaign](#) of Ian Macdonald, another ex-ALP minister, after his conviction was quashed, assisted the government by putting their misdeeds back on the front pages.

The Coalition also has some significant problems. Overdevelopment is devastating many Sydney suburbs. Residents angry at the disruption to their lives are likely to turn against the Liberals. The premier will not be presiding at many opening ceremonies for infrastructure projects before the election. More apparent are cost over-runs, delays and short-term inconvenience.

The general unpopularity of the federal Coalition government is a handicap for its NSW counterpart. In rural NSW, a belief that the Nationals have neglected voters' interests could cost the government seats.

Read more: [Low-key NSW election likely to reveal a city-country divide](#)

Opposition Leader Michael Daley struggled at first to gain momentum and attention. His campaign ignited three weeks out from polling day when [he took on influential radio commentator Alan Jones](#) over the Sydney stadiums issue. This has been a festering sore for the government since November 2017, when Berejiklian announced that both Allianz Stadium at Moore Park and ANZ Stadium at Homebush would be simultaneously demolished and rebuilt at an estimated cost of A\$2.5 billion.

The public outcry at what was seen as wasteful expense was so great that she quickly backed off. The rebuilding of Allianz would proceed, but ANZ would now be renovated, saving A\$1 billion.

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Labor quickly seized on the issue, opposing the demolition of Allianz and coining the effective slogan of “ [schools and hospitals before Sydney stadiums](#) ”.

Jones is a member of the prestigious Sydney Cricket Ground Trust, which controls Allianz and has lobbied strongly for its rebuilding. Daley attacked Jones and promised to sack him and most members of the trust.

Daley instantly became the people's politician, unafraid to stand up to a powerful broadcaster and an elite board. He put the stadium issue back at the centre of the campaign. It crystallised the perception that the government is more concerned about developers and big business than the community.

But does Daley have anything more positive to offer? There is some policy differentiation.

Labor has promised there will be no more privatisations and will re-regulate the electricity industry. Labor also has stronger policies on the environment and climate change than the Coalition. It will be more generous to the public sector. But the main thrust of Daley's campaign is: we will give you more of the same but do it better.

The government has 52 of the 93 seats in the Legislative Assembly. The opposition holds 34. A uniform swing of nearly 9%, just under what it achieved at the last election, would be needed for Labor to gain a majority in its own right.

A feature of this poll is the difference between Sydney and the bush. In 2015, Labor picked up most of the low-hanging fruit in Sydney and only a handful of seats are in play this time. In rural and regional NSW, the Nationals face a strong challenge from independents and minor parties.

If the government loses six seats, it will be in a minority. After appointing a speaker, its numbers would drop to 45. The crossbench would be in a crucial position.

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Currently, there are seven crossbench MPs in the lower house: three Greens, a Shooter and three independents (Alex Greenwich, Joe McGirr and Greg Piper). The Greens have already indicated they would support the Coalition. Greenwich is on the left and has close links with his predecessor, Sydney Lord Mayor Clover Moore. The other three are more conservatively inclined. The election of additional crossbenchers would add to the unpredictability.

Daley is hoping the electorate has forgotten about Obeid and that accumulated dissatisfaction with the government will translate into a victory for him. The result hinges on whether voters have lost faith in the Coalition to the extent that they are prepared to trust Labor again.

David Clune 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.

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