

Scott Morrison couldn't wait for NSW opposition leader Michael Daley's concession speech on Saturday night. Morrison leapt to the stage at the Liberals' function, speaking ahead of Gladys Berejiklian, to hail the victory of her government.

For the federal Liberals, the night was a vital morale booster, though the result had been determined mostly on state factors.

Consider what could have happened. Months ago all the talk was how the NSW government feared that going to the people ahead of its federal counterpart meant it would take a serious knock from voters wanting to protest against the Morrison government.

That knock (and attendant backbiting) didn't come. The polls suggest it is in the pipeline, but if it had been delivered prematurely it would have blown away Morrison's messages.

The Liberals would delude themselves if they took too much heart from NSW. But at a psychological level it will lift the spirits of their MPs and campaign workers, and provide a better climate in which to launch the April 2 budget than if Labor had won or done significantly better.

Some in Labor are concerned the NSW result breaks the momentum for the federal opposition – that feeling of total inevitability about a Bill Shorten win. If, on the back of this result, the next Newspoll saw a tightening, there'd be a sharp intake of breath in ALP circles.

Both the NSW and federal Liberals have had change at the top since their previous elections. But the difference is dramatic. The federal Liberals tore down a leader in a coup driven by ideology and revenge. The NSW Liberals saw Mike Baird exit and a smooth handover to Berejiklian. The nature of the succession helped set her up for this election.

The Liberals are making much of the fact Berejiklian becomes the first woman to be elected as NSW premier. But that piece of history doesn't offset the reality that women are thin on the ground in the federal parliamentary party and will remain so after the election.

The failure of NSW Labor has reinforced the message that the actual campaign matters.

Perhaps the ALP wouldn't have come close even with a better final week. But until then the commentary judged the Berejiklian campaign as poor. Then the video emerged of Daley saying Asians were taking local jobs. He had another own goal when, questioned at a people's forum, he couldn't recall the detail of his own policies.

The contrast was stark: a premier who knew what she was doing, and an opposition leader who wasn't sure what he was promising.

Federally, the 2016 election showed the importance of the last few weeks before voters make their choice. Malcolm Turnbull performed poorly on the hustings and nearly lost.

Indeed, campaigns may matter increasingly. The contemporary electorate is very volatile. And are some voters so disgusted with politics they refuse to listen to the noise until close to election day?

The NSW results also underlined that local campaigns are pivotal. The performance of individual MPs and the quality of candidates can be critical when voters are often focused as much or more on what is happening in their own backyard as on the central messages coming through the media.

The Nationals have been big losers out of the NSW poll, with huge swings in some areas. Two of their seats have gone – Barwon and Murray, won by the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers – and a third, Lismore, is in the balance but likely to be lost to Labor.

In the first two, water was a crucial issue. More generally, the Nationals are having trouble convincing their constituencies they can deliver for them; they've become hostage to regional voters' belief they get a worse deal in services than city people. The siren call of protest parties is potent.

The federal Nationals – who are taking a little comfort from modest positive swings in some other areas - don't have to worry about the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers winning seats in May.

But, coming against the background of destabilisation in their ranks, the state losses will further unnerve them as they face their test with weak leadership and doubtful prospects.

Michael McCormack is safe until the election but he struggles to manage an unsettled bunch. It seemed very deliberate that Liberal senator Arthur Sinodinos on Sunday went out of his way to give a shout-out to McCormack.

“Let me make it very clear: Scott Morrison, Josh Frydenberg, Arthur Sinodinos for what it's worth, and all the other members of the Liberal-National coalition back Michael McCormack as the leader to go into the election,” Sinodinos said on the ABC.

The Nationals have several lower house seats vulnerable in May. They'll need to differentiate themselves from the Liberals – as they did in 2016 - but how effectively McCormack can execute this is another matter.

Former leader Barnaby Joyce, a campaigning asset for the Nationals - and by extension the government – in 2016, now runs off the leash, often sounding quite wild. His aggressive performance on Seven was the talk of the election-night TV coverage.

In a clear signal to Joyce, Sinodinos said his campaigning ability should be “used to the greater good of the Coalition”. NSW federal Liberal MP Trent Zimmerman put it more bluntly - Joyce should “spend more time in Tamworth and less time on TV”. But the man who declared on Saturday night “we've got to stop taking our political advice from the ABC” is unlikely to be tuning into those who want him to turn his volume down.

The NSW outcome probably puts even more eggs in the budget basket.

View from The Hill: NSW result gives federal Liberals a boost in the mind games

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Sinodinos highlighted its tax cuts as a campaigning counter to Labor's line on wages.

"When the ACTU and others are out there talking about 'we need a wage increase of X', that's a pre-tax wage increase. You can get an equivalent effect through a proper tax cut for low and middle income earners," he said. "So we'll be saying that until our policies kick in to help lift wages even further, the way to do this is through tax cuts focussed on low and middle income earners".

As is so often observed, people distinguish between their state and federal votes. For the federal battle, this NSW poll has not thrown any switch – it has just made some readjustment to the temperature.

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.

Authors: Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Read more <http://theconversation.com/view-from-the-hill-nsw-result-gives-federal-liberals-a-boost-in-the-mind-games-114153>