

Independent Kerryn Phelps has dug herself into the Sydney seat of Wentworth, with the Liberals facing a tough battle to dislodge her, according to focus group research done this week.

“Traditional Liberal voters who gave Phelps a go at the byelection like what they’ve seen, or haven’t seen enough and are prepared to give her another go,” the report on the research says. “The byelection handed these voters a brave new world of life with an independent”.

The four groups, held on Monday and Tuesday, totalled 41 “soft” or “switched” voters (those who are undecided or have switched their vote to a different party or person since the November byelection, which was prompted by Malcolm Turnbull’s resignation). The work was done by Landscape Research for The Conversation.

It should be stressed this is qualitative research - a guide to attitudes, and not predictive. Also, campaigns are moveable feasts, sometimes right to the end.

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Wentworth, which has borne its name since federation, stretches along the southern shore of the Harbour, and traditionally has been Liberal.

The Australian Electoral Commission describes its commercial makeup as including “finance, property, service, wholesale and retail trade, tourism, education, sport and recreation”. Its voters are more prosperous than average: in the 2016 census the median weekly household income was \$2380, compared with the national figure of \$1438.

The seat's voters tend to be politically switched on, especially given the attention they received at the byelection.

The government has been hopeful that, with the efflux of time since the August coup that so angered these voters, the electorate might move to Liberal candidate Dave Sharma, who lost by just 1,850 votes in November. Sharma, 43, a former diplomat who served as ambassador to Israel, has moved into the electorate since the byelection.

But the research found that while some people might have voted for Phelps initially in reaction to the skewering of Turnbull, "they now see her as a viable option in her own right. The genie is out of the bottle and the Liberal party may struggle to get it back in, if enough switched voters are prepared to give Phelps a go of a full term," the report says.

"Phelps should be given more time," said an older semi-retired salesman who'd been a lifelong Liberal voter.

Phelps, 61, is also appealing to younger voters in a way Sharma, though much younger, so far is not. "I feel she's very in touch with us youth much more than any other politician," said a 19-year-old university student.

Phelps' professional background and personal profile appeals to voters as much as that she is an independent. In spite of high name recognition, Sharma is far less well-known. "I have no sense of his personality," said a semi-retired woman from Waverley.

Sharma has been campaigning as a self-proclaimed "Modern Liberal" - a moniker used by high-profile Victorian Liberal Tim Wilson - which has voters guessing about what that really means. "Caring while still staying economically grounded?" suggested a 20-year-old university student from Clovelly. And voters have widely noted Sharma has removed traditional Liberal branding from his campaign posters, causing them to wonder if he's trying to distance himself from the party.

"I question his motivation by removing the Liberal logos," said a 46-year-old project manager

from Bellevue Hill. “It’s like a marketing ploy. It’s trying to incentivise people to vote for him,” a Rose Bay university student said.

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Unsurprisingly, given the nature of this electorate, Scott Morrison is almost universally more trusted to lead Australia than Bill Shorten. But that alone isn’t doing enough to help bolster Sharma.

“Morrison is not the charismatic Turnbull or the statesmanlike Howard. At best, he is seen as ‘basically decent’, ‘honest’, ‘genuine’, ‘pleasant’, ‘well-meaning’, a ‘family-man’; a ‘larrikin’, and ‘approachable’ - someone who can ‘relate to an ordinary guy in the street’,” the research found.

At worst, Morrison is seen by older voters as a “Sharks-supporting salesman’, ‘a typical bogan’, ‘a typical politician’, a ‘bully’, and by younger voters as ‘the local butcher, not the PM’, ‘a privileged white guy’, ‘insipid, religious, racist’, ‘sly’ and an ‘arrogant hypocrite’”.

“Some see him as opportunistic for the way in which he claimed the leadership, describing him as ‘smirking’, ‘smug’ and a ‘backstabber’. The youngest voters (aged 20-23) don’t buy that Morrison wasn’t involved in Turnbull’s downfall. Middle-aged and older voters don’t particularly blame Morrison but see the Liberals as undifferentiated from Labor with respect to toppling their leaders,” the report said.

The PM’s message about strong economic management resonates in this affluent inner city seat, as does the Liberal advertising message “The Bill you can’t afford” with those who are financially engaged. Labor’s “Top end of town” tag for Morrison isn’t achieving the desired cut through here because they don’t see themselves as the top end of town. Middle-aged and older voters feel Shorten’s policies will hurt many of them, even if they are not personally affected by franking credits and negative gearing. One young student lamented the cutting back of

investment opportunities in the future.

Labor is viewed as playing class politics with its negative gearing and franking credits policies. While many voters agree with the intent (to make things more equitable), they think the policies are poorly crafted and have unintended consequences not thought through. This leads them to question Labor's credibility and capability in government, if they can't target these policies correctly. "It's a wrongly-targeted, mean policy," one older voter said of changes to negative gearing. "It's ideological, but a damp squib because it's grandfathered and still allows negative gearing on new properties," said another.

(Phelps is opposing Labor's negative gearing and franking credits policies "in their current form".)

A factor working for Sharma is voters having an eye to the national outcome - as distinct from that in Wentworth - and not wanting a Labor win. "An independent vote is a wasted vote, as much as I like Kerryn. I want my vote to help go towards a Liberal government," said a 52-year-old female travel specialist from Bellevue Hill. And as one switched Liberal described voting for an independent: "A change is as good as a holiday. But sometimes holidays have to be short."

Shorten isn't much liked, and some voters are sceptical of his stress on stability. Despite Labor's adoption of rules making it hard to change its PM, some think Shorten's "wishy washy" leadership is being tolerated by Labor for now, until someone replaces him later. "He's likely to join the revolving door that is our prime ministership," said a woman in her 30s from North Bondi.

As they lament Australia's uninspiring leadership, these Wentworth voters gaze across the ditch. As one puts it: "We are all looking at [Jacinda] Ardern and saying: why can't we have a leader like that?"

Most of these voters include climate change when they name the issues important for the nation. (Indeed a couple of sceptics were howled down.) But in Wentworth this is not a "climate change election". Rather, seen to be having the right views on the subject is just a necessary condition for being in the race.

“You can’t be elected now by saying you don’t believe,” said one younger voter from Bellevue Hill. “Even Tony Abbott is talking about the environment in a more sustainable way.”

Notwithstanding their views on climate change, some are more circumspect when it comes to specifics like coal mining. While both younger and older voters are looking for a transition away from coal, and many eschew the Adani mine going ahead, they acknowledge there is no quick fix in the short term. “We’re not ready to go 100% to renewables yet,” said one younger voter. “You take away coal and a company like BHP will go broke,” said another.

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A stable economy and budget surplus are also seen as critical for the nation. Even those with scant understanding of fiscal policy intuitively believe a budget surplus is a good thing. “It means more money to spend on hospitals and schools,” said a 40 year old administration officer from Paddington.

Wentworth voters are also concerned about living in an equitable and inclusive country, including treating refugees and indigenous people better, and they point to the policy failures of both major parties in this regard.

“It’s all about expectations. You expect the Liberals to be opposed to refugees, whereas Labor, you expect to be disappointed,” said one participant.

Local issues weighing on these voters included housing affordability in the area, over-development, traffic congestion and public transport.

Wentworth remains one of the most interesting individual contests in this campaign, in which

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there has been so much talk about centre right independents, often women, who are small-l liberal on social issues but inclined to be Liberal-leaning on key economic questions. One could argue that Wentworth voters are spoilt for choice, in that both Phelps and Sharma tick many of the boxes important to them.

*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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