

View from The Hill: 'Soft' voters in Warringah focus groups expect Tony Abbott win

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Just two elections ago Tony Abbott was headed for the prime ministership. Now he's desperately trying to survive in his own seat.

A leader deposed by his party, turned on by Liberal voters in his own heartland, bruised and battle-scarred, Abbott is in one of the most vitriolic contests of this campaign.

His main opponent, former winter Olympian Zali Steggall, is among several high-profile independents challenging in Coalition seats.

Warringah takes in areas of Sydney's north shore and northern beaches. Abbott, its occupant since 1994, has a margin of 11.1%. He's been under pressure in a couple of previous elections but is now being pursued by posses of angry locals, some upset over his views on same-sex marriage and his "spoiler" role within the Liberal party, and highly-organised external activists, notably GetUp, mobilising particularly around climate change.

He's been frenetically working the electorate for months in a massive fight-back, locally focused (think a tunnel and toilets), and supporters are trooping into the seat for these last days.

On Monday John Howard (who in 2007 lost his own seat and the election) was lending a hand. Warringah voters were "not the big end of town," the former prime minister said. "Warringah is full people who've worked hard, they've done a bit better, they've accumulated a bit and they don't want it taken away through higher tax by Mr Shorten."

The Liberals, attempting to leap the barrier of anti-Abbott feeling, have been hammering the point that a vote for Steggall would be a vote for a Shorten government.

The University of Canberra's [Democracy 2025](#) project commissioned two rounds of focus groups in Warringah, done by Landscape Research. The first was in February. The second round, on Wednesday and Thursday last week, included four groups totalling 34 "soft" voters (people who had not decided definitely who they'd vote for). Half had participated in the

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February round.

Read more: [Grattan on Friday: Warringah Votes ‐ Abbott's challenger has yet to 'penetrate the streets'](#)

It is important to stress focus group research is not predictive – rather it taps into attitudes.

Both the older and younger voters believe Abbott will win, even if they aren't leaning towards voting for him. As a young first-time voter put it: "It's the demographics of the area". A middle-aged self-employed woman from Allambie Heights said: "People want certainty and security. They say they want change but they're resistant".

In the research's February round, many participants hadn't even heard of Steggall. By last week – unsurprisingly given the rash of publicity – everybody had, although some knew little detail about her.

"While many are open to the idea of voting for a strong independent, and see her as a welcome choice standing against Tony Abbott, she does not appear to have done enough to persuade them fully over to her side, yet," the moderator's report says.

"There is no doubt she is a serious challenger, and they like having a serious contest to 'shake things up a bit', but soft voters acknowledge that Tony Abbott has stepped up to the challenge.

"For many his longevity as a tireless worker for the community - for example, volunteer firefighting, lifesaving - is a strong counter in electoral currency to his reputation for outmoded views on homosexuals and climate change".

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For some of these soft voters, the unknowns about Steggall are seeing them shift to Abbott. A 23-year-old female student teacher from Frenchs Forest was “unsure about Zali”. A female disability contract worker in her 30s from Brookvale thought it better to “keep with what you know.”

Steggall’s elite sporting background is seen as holding her in good stead, shown in her “determination and drive”. She’s viewed as “learning quickly”, although some campaign stumbles have also been noted.

A 59-year-old man from North Balgowlah observed Steggall had done an “astute swivel”, with “the statement that she’d provide ‘confidence’ to the Coalition [if there was a minority government]. It’s providing confidence so that, as a Liberal person, you can get rid of Tony Abbott but still support the Coalition”.

But Steggall’s pushing of climate change as her primary policy, with the apparent lack of a fully fleshed-out platform, concerns some soft voters, including those open to voting for an independent.

“The only thing I’ve heard from her campaign is the environment - other than that, nothing,” said a civil engineer in his 30s from Queenscliff; a Cromer Heights middle-aged woman at home questioned why Steggall was running now. “If she’s such a local, and so for our electorate, where has she been all this time?”.

Some have also found her wanting even on her central issue. A 33-year-old business development manager from Manly said he “liked her at first” but then thought she was hypocritical when she was “jumping on the electric vehicle bandwagon” while driving a “massive SUV”, which she said she needed to ferry her children.

“The challenge for Steggall at this point in the campaign is that those who have not already decided definitely to vote for her are wavering, and they are not hearing anything more than an ‘I’m not Abbott, I support climate change action’ message,” the research report says.

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“While the prospect of a centrist independent candidate was initially appealing, after more consideration over the past few months, some soft voters who were leaning towards voting for Steggall have changed their mind.”

“I was voting more for an independent whereas now I think I need to put down either a Labor or a Liberal candidate because they will have more sway in actually saying something for our electorate,” said the Allambie Heights woman.

Abbott is seen as experienced, a known quantity, widely recognised for his community service, even if people don't agree with him on some key issues.

He is also regarded by some of these voters to have made positive moves to recognise the electorate's views on same-sex marriage and climate change. “I think he's trying to represent everyone a bit more”, the business development manager said. “I think it shows growth for him.”

But others still see climate as Abbott's Achilles heel. “He continues to struggle to explain his position on climate change. He has an instinct that he doesn't quite believe it. But he can't explain what he's done in the past or what he would do. [...] By flip-flopping about, it is very un-Tony Abbott, a weakness,” said the North Balgowlah man.

Being seen in the media as fighting for his survival is regarded as helpful for Abbott. “That generates talk around his supporters and helps him get re-elected,” said a 41-year-old firefighter from Dee Why.

In February, many of the soft voters were more exercised by Abbott's defying the electorate on same-sex marriage than they were about his climate change position. Now, there is greater attention by some on his climate views. “Some people don't like Tony because of that,” said a retired Australia Post manager from Manly Vale.

“While believing it important, these Warringah voters also see the climate change discussions as somewhat more of a political debate than about practical environmental action,” the research report says.

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“As well, they feel bombarded with the issue to the point of drowning out everything else of importance to them, and they feel like they can’t express their views.”

“Yes, climate change is important, but why is it just hammered into us non-stop?” said a Dee Why woman who works part time in hospitality.

A challenge for Steggall is that her opposition to Labor policies on franking credits and negative gearing that are unpopular with soft voters here hasn’t cut through. The former Australia Post manager, a self-funded retiree who’d been a lifelong Labor voter, said: “I am leaning towards Tony Abbott because I am against the franking credit [changes]”.

As well as the environment (as distinct from “climate change”), local issues for these voters include the northern beaches tunnel (which Abbott has talked about constantly), traffic congestion generally, and housing affordability.

Read more: [Against the odds, Scott Morrison wants to be returned as prime minister. But who the bloody hell is he?](#)

Predictably, given the nature of this electorate, Scott Morrison has an edge over Bill Shorten as more trusted to lead the country, mainly because of the Liberals’ perceived better economic credentials and a sense of personal strength they don’t see in Shorten.

Older voters mention his “track record” in immigration and his personal character. “I feel he’ll manage the budget better” (retired policeman from North Curl Curl). “[I trust his] moral values and he’s not in it for his own ego” (retired female public servant from Manly). A 74-year-old woman from Forestville said: “One of his policies is to slow down immigration and I also believe in that”.

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Younger voters agree Morrison's economic credentials are stronger and some are prepared to put aside their personal desire for a more compassionate PM for the sake of the country's economic interests. "Personally, I'd pick Bill Shorten, but for the nation I'd pick Scott Morrison, mainly for the economy", said the first-time voter, an 18-year-old school leaver from Manly who's working as a labourer during a gap year.

Read more: [After six years as opposition leader, history beckons Bill Shorten. Will the 'drover's dog' have its day?](#)

But mostly in making their election decisions, these voters' eyes are on the candidates in their own backyard.

"There is no doubt that having an accomplished independent challenging a 25-year incumbent has given the electorate something to think about. But questions remain for soft voters around Steggall," the research report concludes.

"They are looking for more than they perceive she is offering (a positive stance on climate change and that she is not Tony Abbott).

"They also perceive that there could a potential backlash against the bitterness and vitriol of the anti-Abbott movement (even if not her doing) which may work against her.

"Warringah soft voters are quietly determined they will make up their own minds, in their own time, and not be bullied into voting a certain way, by either the Abbott or Steggall camps, or anyone else."

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

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beyond their academic appointment.

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