

Coalition neck and neck with Labor as Foley overtakes Berejiklian

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The Coalition and Labor are neck and neck exactly six months out from the state election, with Opposition leader Luke Foley edging ahead of Gladys Berejiklian as preferred premier, exclusive new polling shows.

Just weeks after an embarrassing loss for the Liberals in the Wagga Wagga byelection, and as ministers engage in open warfare over a bitter preselection battle, the Coalition's primary vote has plunged to "disastrous levels".



NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian is facing the prospect of minority government, new polling shows. Photo: James Alcock

Senior Liberal strategists now fear the government is certain to lose its majority at the March 23 election.

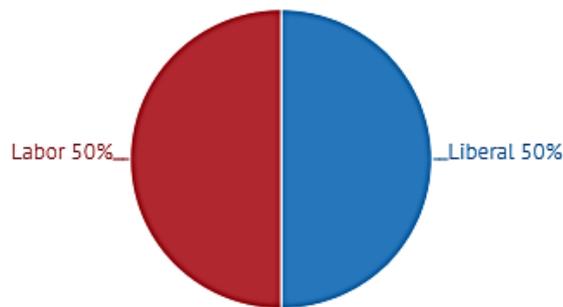
The exclusive ReachTel poll for *The Sun-Herald* of 1627 NSW voters taken on Thursday night shows the Coalition is locked at 50:50 with Labor on a two-party preferred basis using preference flows from the 2015 election.

It also reveals that Mr Foley has pushed past Ms Berejiklian as the more popular leader, with 50.2 per cent of voters polled believing Mr Foley would make a better premier.

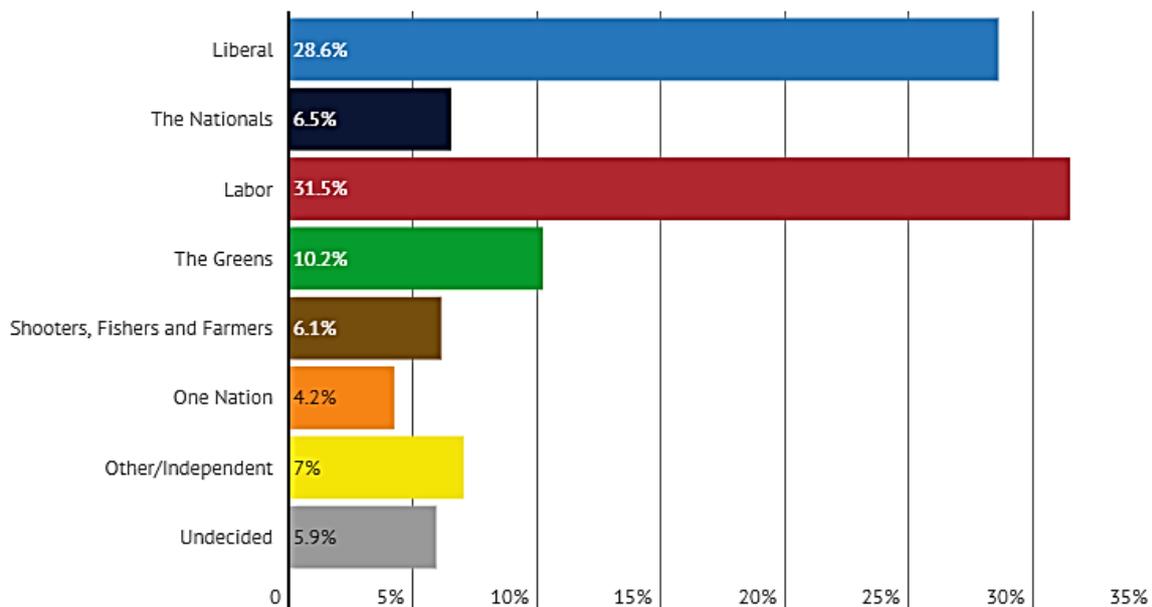
But despite Mr Foley's personal standing, only 41.1 per cent of voters think Labor is ready to govern again.

State of play: Fairfax-ReachTEL poll

Two-party preferred vote



First preference vote, if a state election were to be held today



Source: Fairfax/ReachTEL poll.

ReachTEL conducted a survey of 1627 residents across NSW on September 10, 2018.

The polling also shows the fallout from the bruising leadership spill in Canberra has had an impact in NSW, with 40.4 per cent of voters saying the change in prime minister had altered their view of the state Liberal Party.

The Coalition's primary vote has slumped to 35.1 per cent, down from 41.9 per cent in March. Labor's primary vote has also taken a dip to 31.5 per cent from 32.5 per cent six months ago, the polling shows.

The Greens are at 10.2 per cent and One Nation, which has formally registered to run candidates in March, is on 4.2 per cent, down from 5.1 per cent.

But there has been a big jump in support for independent candidates, up to 7 per cent from 4.9 per cent six months ago.

When the Liberals lost the once-safe seat of Wagga Wagga earlier this month, Ms Berejiklian pointed the finger at her federal colleagues and said their behaviour had damaged the Liberals' chances in the byelection.



Under NSW Opposition leader Luke Foley, Labor is now neck and neck with the Coalition. Photo: AAP / Dean Lewins

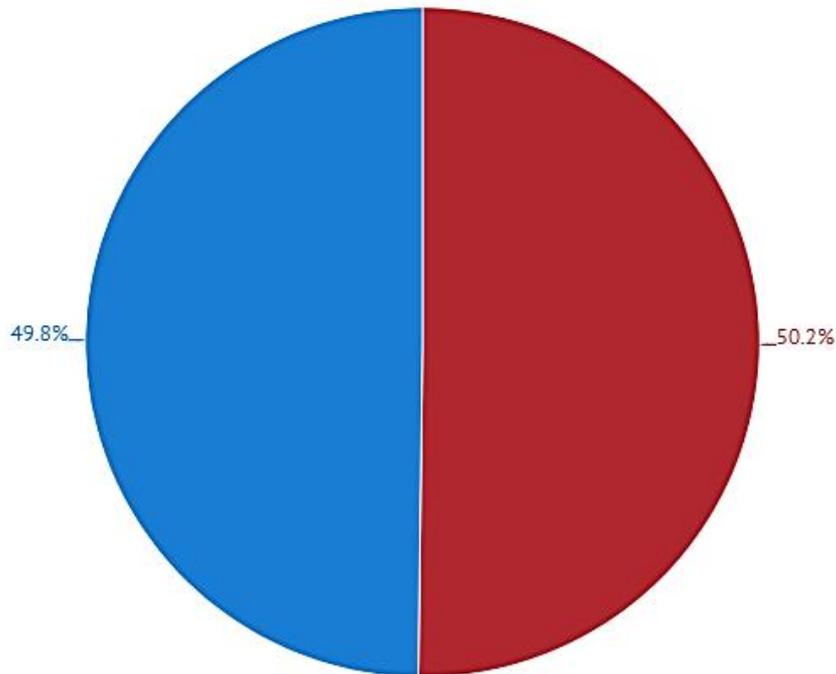
But government sources have said that the "rise of the conservative country independent" could put several Nationals seats in danger. Four of the Coalition's six most marginal seats are held by the Nationals.

A senior Liberal strategist said the Coalition would need a primary vote of at least 40 per cent, but probably closer to 42 per cent, to win outright in March.

"Anything below 38 per cent would be a disastrous result for us and that would see us certainly in minority government," the source said.

But Labor's primary vote has barely shifted, and a senior Labor source said it was too low for them to win.

Preferred Premier



*Source: Fairfax/ReachTEL poll.
ReachTEL conducted a survey of 1627 residents across NSW on September 10, 2018.*

"The old wisdom used to be that you would need your primary on 40 to win but that has changed now," the source said. "That said, 31 per cent is definitely a problem for us."

Another senior Labor source said the party had won with a primary vote in the 30s.

"In 1995, Bob Carr won majority government with less than a majority of the votes because he won western Sydney seats with a wafer majority while the Liberals held their safe seats with a whopping majority," the Labor source said.

The polling comes as the government is faced with a damaging split in its cabinet, with the Treasurer and deputy leader, Dominic Perrottet, challenging fellow minister, Ray Williams, for the same seat.

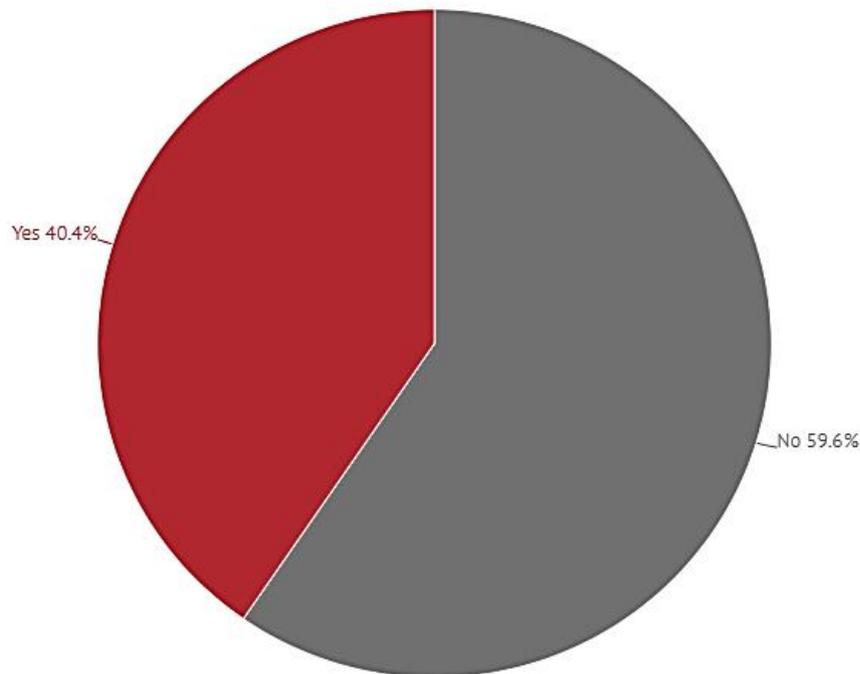
Mr Perrottet has nominated to run in Castle Hill, despite living in the state seat of Epping, arguing that he wants to reduce his daily commute to make life easier on his wife and five young children.

He also wants a safer seat. The government holds Castle Hill with a 29 per cent margin, while Mr Perrottet's current seat of Hawksbury has a 17 per cent margin.

Mr Williams has been so angered by Mr Perrottet's actions that he has said he will move a spill motion for the deputy leadership position when the party meets on Tuesday.

Federal spillage

Does the Coalition's recent federal leadership change alter your view of the state Liberal Party?



Source: Fairfax/ReachTEL poll.

ReachTEL conducted a survey of 1627 residents across NSW on September 10, 2018.

In a desperate attempt to stop Mr Williams, Ms Berejiklian has publicly said Mr Williams' cabinet position would be untenable if he proceeded. But it is understood a backbencher may instead move the motion.

Several government sources have said that Mr Perrottet's actions have outraged many backbenchers, who believe he has inflicted unnecessary damage on the Coalition at a time when it was already struggling.

"There are plenty of furious backbenchers, especially some of those on margins much smaller than Dom's who just can't believe he would do this after everything that is going on," a source said.

Another said: "I think Dom is a great operator but his behaviour has been absolutely appalling."

It is understood that the possibility of an overseas posting was floated with Mr Williams in exchange for him handing over Castle Hill to the Treasurer.

The Opposition has seized on the claims, and has said it would make a complaint to the corruption watchdog, arguing it would be "prima facie corrupt conduct" if an offer of an inducement had been made.

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