

# Don't write off first-time candidates, writes ex-MP who stole the show

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Barry Collier

Voters in the NSW election on Saturday can expect to see many new faces on campaign posters and many new names on their ballot papers. While some of these first-time candidates have a strong local profile, most will have none beyond their Facebook page, at least to begin with.

The political analysts and armchair critics often give these first-timers absolutely no chance of winning their chosen seat from the sitting MP. Some first-time political aspirants, who believe they can win despite a seemingly insurmountable margin, are even told flatly by their party that they are suffering from candidate's disease.



*Barry Collier after his surprise election win in Miranda in 1999, when he deposed the deputy Liberal leader Ron Philips. CREDIT: STEVEN SIEWERT*

These first-timers won't have buckets of money thrown at their seats by their parties. They have no choice but to run on a limited budget—relying on quiz nights and raffles, family, friends, personal savings and even borrowing to finance their campaigns.

Yet, from time to time, and despite the long odds, these candidates do the “impossible” and win a seat in state Parliament. As electoral history shows, David can beat Goliath with the most basic campaign.

The 1999 State election for the southern Sydney seat of Miranda is case in point. Ron Phillips, the deputy Liberal leader who'd held the seat for 15 years, was defeated by an unknown, first-time Labor candidate running a grass-roots campaign on a shoestring budget, with the help of local supporters and hand-painted signs. That first-timer was me. I took the seat with a swing of 7.6 per cent.

The "surprise" loss of the safe, blue-ribbon Liberal seat to a fresh face was widely regarded as "the biggest shock" of election night.

Overdevelopment in Miranda was as big an issue 20 years ago as it is today. Electricity privatisation ran a close second back in 1999. And with today's power prices being a major talking point, both issues will provide fertile ground for committed first-time candidates running a local grassroots campaign.

Key issues aside, the first-timer might also be the recipient of just enough good luck to get across the line on Saturday. Be it capturing the donkey vote with the top spot on the ballot paper, a positive preference flow, a local scandal, the incumbent unexpectedly pulling the pin or discontent with the feds, the planets may well and truly align for that previously unknown, first-time candidate without political baggage.

Then there have been two weeks of pre-polling giving the cash-strapped, first-timer much earlier contact with 30 to 40 per cent of the voters when it really counts.

And don't discount the large number of people in their 20s and 30s voting in a NSW general election for the first time, having enrolled to have their say in the marriage plebiscite. Their votes may well swamp the (declining numbers of) rusted-on voters, and favour our fortunate first-timer.

On Saturday, we can expect to see some big swings, perhaps approaching those recorded in by-elections in seats like Miranda, Wagga and Orange, courtesy of first-time candidates.

The seemingly impossible can, and does, happen in election campaigns. So don't write all those first-time candidates off.

*Barry Collier was the Labor MP for Miranda from 1999 to 2011 and 2013 to 2015. He is the author of his self-published memoir, *Collier for Miranda: The 1999 Labor Campaign*.*

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