

Liberal Party begins blame game after Wagga Wagga 2018 by-election loss

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PHOTO: Premier Gladys Berejiklian (L) hand-picked Liberal candidate Julia Ham (R). (ABC News)

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The crushing swing against the Liberal Party in the Wagga Wagga by-election will send a shiver down the spines of federal and state Coalition politicians who are on the brink of their own electoral tests.

The Liberals suffered a 29 per cent hit against their primary vote, which is the third biggest swing against them in a by-election in New South Wales history, and a far bigger collapse in the party's primary vote than the recent Longman by-election in Queensland.

The result is being seen by many as the first litmus test of voter sentiment since the federal leadership coup, with NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian already blaming the chaos in Canberra for turning voters off the party.

But it's also sparking a blame game over who should take responsibility for the loss.

"Gladys can send a big thank you note to Tony Abbott for delivering this result," one senior Liberal minister said.

Internal Liberal Party polling suggests voters deserted the party in droves after Malcolm Turnbull was dumped from the prime ministership and the party's woes were compounded by the corruption allegations surrounding the outgoing MP Daryl Maguire.

"We had an MP booted out of Parliament and we had the federal Liberal Party ripping itself apart, what do you expect is going to happen?" the Minister said.

Senior Nationals angered at being left out

The 2018 Wagga Wagga by-election results



Live coverage and results of the 2018 Wagga Wagga by-election by the ABC's election analyst Antony Green

But there was also anger directed at Premier Berejiklian, who put herself front and centre of the campaign and hand-picked candidate Julia Ham.

Senior Nationals were also unhappy that Ms Berejiklian had pushed not to run a three-cornered contest in the seat.

"She puts factionalism in front of Coalition success," one said.

"We should have had a three-cornered contest, and the protest vote would have come to the Nats."

Nationals sources also said the Liberal Party had made a tactical error by throwing money at the campaign and had not learnt the lessons of the Orange by-election.

'Country people back people, they don't back parties'

"Gladys had a terrible campaign, 80 percent of the corflutes [posters] were Gladys. We don't do that in the bush, you have to showcase the candidate," a Nationals source said.

"That's why an independent can win a regional seat — country people back people, they don't back parties."

The post-mortem over the result is already inflaming tensions within the Coalition, and the Premier will be under pressure to accept her share of responsibility for the loss.

Many state MPs now fear they will be next to bear the brunt of voter anger over the federal leadership change when they go to the polls in March, ahead of a likely federal election.

One backbencher even expressed hope that the Coalition would lose the federal by-election in Malcolm Turnbull's seat of Wentworth, so that Scott Morrison might be forced to call an election earlier than planned.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-09-09/liberals-point-fingers-over-wagga-by-election-loss/10218886>