

Liberals poised for heavy defeat in state by-election in Wagga Wagga

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NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian visiting Wagga Wagga ahead of the by-election. Picture: Brad Newman.

The Berejiklian government is set for a shellacking in Saturday's Wagga Wagga by-election, with late Liberal polling showing its primary vote has fallen to just 24 per cent — level pegging with Labor, with independent Joe McGirr on 22 per cent.

The three-cornered contest should mean a comfortable win for either Dr McGirr or even Labor, given no non-government candidate is recommending preferencing Liberal candidate Julia Ham. The Liberal vote in the seat was at 27-28 per cent in party polling last week.

The government is expected to argue the federal leadership spill contributed heavily to the expected loss, with polling prior to Malcolm Turnbull stepping aside having the Liberal primary vote in the seat at 35 per cent. However, this was before Dr McGirr announced he was running.

Earlier polling also showed a 54-46 two-party-preferred vote to the Liberals.

Premier Gladys Berejiklian visited the seat six times during the campaign, with internal polling showing the reason why — her net favourability in the seat was plus five compared with Labor leader Luke Foley's rating of minus 22.

The polling reflects an anti-politician feel amid the Canberra chaos but also the resignation of former member Daryl Maguire over corruption allegations.

It also shows that a strategy by the Liberals of promising more than \$100 million for the seat during the campaign has not bought votes.

The polling also shows a net favourability of five for the suggestion that NSW was heading in the right direction.

The swing required for the government to lose the seat is 13 per cent and Ms Berejiklian told *The Australian* in Wagga Wagga last month a win would be "miraculous".

The shock polling comes as *The Australian* can reveal that Ms Ham posted a message on Facebook backing independent Cathy McGowan against Liberal Sophie Mirabella after her federal election win in the Victorian seat of Indi in 2013. Ms Ham has defended the post, saying she was related to Ms McGowan. Her Facebook message read: "An approachable politician ... just what Australia needs."

Ms Ham, who joined the Liberal Party only last year and was therefore a controversial preselection choice, said: "Cathy and I are first cousins, and I congratulated my cousin on her election victory in 2013. There's a close family relationship — my mother provided Cathy with a lot of emotional support and help after her mother died. In fact, we still regularly talk, often discussing various issues faced by rural women and families."

Deputy Premier John Barilaro made a slip at a press conference in Sydney yesterday, virtually awarding the seat to Dr McGirr.

Grilled on theories Dr McGirr, if elected, could start as an independent and wind up running for the Nationals at the state election in March, Mr Barilaro said: "Once he gets elected, he'll sit there with the rest of the independents on the crossbench."

Questioned by journalists, Mr Barilaro changed his comments to "if". He conceded Dr McGirr had "made comments he would have run for the Nats" had the Coalition agreement not stipulated only the Liberals would contest the seat.

But Mr Barilaro denied that there was any co-ordinated attempt by the Nationals to campaign for Dr McGirr.

<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/state-politics/liberals-poised-for-heavy-defeat-in-state-byelection-in-wagga-wagga/news-story/33d32dc583d2bde7892b4f7e15598827>