

# NSW by-elections 2017: Nationals bloodletting begins over by-election disaster

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- [By-election polling turns feral](#)

THE Nationals were last night set to hold the seat of Murray despite devastating swings against the party across its former heartland in western NSW.

Not even an eleventh-hour visit by Premier Gladys Berejiklian staved off a backlash in the seat of Murray, centred on Griffith, as voters put the party on notice with huge swings to the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party.

Despite also claiming the neighbouring seat of Cootamundra, both victories will be bittersweet, with margins slashed from more than 20 per cent to as low as two per cent.

In declaring florist Stephanie Cook the new member for Cootamundra, Nationals leader John Barilaro admitted the loss in Orange to the Shooters last year had thrown the party's future into doubt.

“It has been a long and hard-earned campaign,” he said.



*The "Save Tumbarumba" group out in full force at Young Town Hall supporting Shooters Fishers and Farmers Party Cootamundra by-election candidate Matthew Stadtmiller.*

“For many of us, Orange was a bit of a kick in the guts, and for many of us, we started questioning our worth as a party and members were questioning: Is there a future for the National Party.

“Well, today I can say for the seat of Cootamundra, we have a new Nationals member,” Mr Barilaro said.

In a sign the Nationals were expecting the worst, the party threw everything at the campaigns, running negative television ad campaigns and bussing volunteers from Canberra and Sydney.

Even before the counting finished the blame game began over how two of the party’s safest seats could become have ever become so vulnerable, with internal debate to be dominated by the NSW Nationals’ party office decision to bring guns into the debate by using a letter to voters from former Prime Minister John Howard, warning against any loosening of gun laws.

“People are already questioning the strategy of using a letter by John Howard warning how the Shooters will weaken gun laws,” said a senior Nationals source.

“You don’t tell country people you are going to take away their guns.”

Anti-council merger sentiment was strong in Cootamundra, with a 44 per cent swing against the party at the Gundagai High School polling booth.

Concerns over police mergers dominated both seats, while anger over the delivery of health services at Leeton Hospital feeding into the Murray backlash.

Labor had been hoping its preferences would deliver the Nationals the fatal blow in Murray.



*Shooters Fishers and Farmers Party supporters make their point.*



*NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian leaves Griffith after a two-hour visit. Picture: Nathan Edwards*



*Melinda Pavey and Sussan Ley help out at the polling station in Griffith. Picture: Nathan Edwards*

Former Cootamundra MP Katrina Hodgkinson chose not to hang around for the feared bloodbath, instead taking a trip to Paris while former Murray MP Adrian Piccoli made a brief appearance to cast his vote.



*Barilaro staffer accused of handing out unauthorised election material*

In western Sydney, Labor candidate for Blacktown, Stephen Bali, was all but assured the seat with the party expected to boost its margin.

The result is set to buoy the Shooters Party, which is already working on its 2019 state election campaign to add more Nationals seats to its growing stable.

<http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/nsw/nsw-byelections-2017-nationals-bloodletting-begins-over-byelection-disaster/news-story/13f1668f6ad7063fc36750f1df3ea393>