

# Wagga Wagga byelection shows the power of rural voters to unseat majors

The Guardian 10 September 2018  
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*NSW premier Gladys Berejikian tries to engage voters on Saturday. Photograph: Tom Rabe/AAP*

More country electorates can become marginal – but only where incumbents are complacent and independents are organised.

Wagga has turned on the New South Wales Liberal party. On Saturday the [Berejikian government lost a large chunk – nearly 30% – of formerly conservative voters](#). You might be wondering what the hell just happened.

The Wagga byelection had the conditions for a political storm for an incumbent government. If we are looking for lessons on whether it will be replicated at the next state and federal elections, hold your horses. Favourable conditions are still necessary.

The seat in southern NSW takes in the major town of Wagga Wagga, The Rock, Tumut and Lockhart, as well as the surrounding villages.

The byelection was called because the seat's Liberal MP, Daryl Maguire, was caught [discussing potential developer “dividends”](#) over a multimillion-dollar property deal with Chinese developers and Canterbury city council.

Factor number one: the corruption scandal underlined voter sentiment about politicians, some of whom are perceived to be in it for themselves.

Despite the evidence before the state's Independent Commission Against Corruption, Maguire refused to resign for some time, dragging the scandal out and reinforcing factor number two: some politicians are shameless.

The state premier, [Gladys Berejiklian](#), announced a short, sharp campaign, which would normally make it difficult for minor parties and independents. But Wagga already had a previous independent candidate, Joe McGirr.

In 2011 McGirr, a doctor previously with the area health service and familiar with many local communities, attracted 30% of the primary vote, leading to factor number three: local recognition. McGirr ran that previous campaign around a slogan of "Dr Joe for your fair go" – and that stayed with people.

When the byelection was announced, the [Liberal party](#) took ownership of the seat just because it had been Liberal for more than 60 years.

This caused division in the Coalition; the National party was put out by the Liberals taking the seat, and this division was [mirrored by the Liberal leadership spill at a federal level](#). Factor number four underlined the political backbiting of the last decade. It was not everything and it was not nothing, as Julia Gillard would say.

["Country voters are alive to their power to make a seat marginal"](#)

McGirr said part of the reason he had decided to run was that the Liberal party was not allowing a more open contest – not even with the [National party](#). His point was that the decision did not allow voters to register their disaffection.

Factor number five: many voters felt the Liberal party was acting as if it owned the seat, leaving them feeling they were being taken for granted.

Four days before the election, the deputy premier, John Barilaro, [seemed to suggest](#) that McGirr might be pretending to be a National.

On the contrary, McGirr's strength in the electorate at that time was that he was not a Nat or a Lib in the incumbent Berejiklian government. He was a safe choice in the sense that he united culturally conservative but disaffected voters from the Liberals, the Nationals and Labor.

Even [Coalition](#) supporters concede that the Liberal party ran a centralised campaign out of head office. McGirr, however, ran on local issues, leveraging his medical background on health funding and medical outreach services, community safety and policing numbers, education opportunities that lead to not just university but trades, drug rehabilitation services, growing populations in smaller centres and transport hubs to link industry with major centres.

The Baird-Berejiklian government's decision to amalgamate local councils remains a running sore in many small towns. For example, a core group from Tumbarumba, a

town which isn't even in the Wagga electorate, are still so angry that they bussed in to help McGirr campaign.

The contrast between a more nimble local campaign and a centralised campaign is evident. The Liberals were marked down for faux pas such as not inviting important local players to funding announcements. Carpet-bomb campaigning by out-of-town volunteers and a roster of ministers and shadows possibly highlighted McGirr's local team. His volunteers knew locals and could engage them as they entered booths.

All of this counts in country seats and adds factor number six, a well-organised local campaign in a rural and regional seat by a higher-profile candidate is noticed, as the competition is usually limited.

The results of the byelection [may not be clear](#) for days and Labor's Dan Hayes could still win depending on the preference flows. If he does, he will be the first Labor MP in the seat since Eddie Graham lost in 1957 – a boost to Luke Foley's opposition in the lead-up to the March 2019 state election.

With all the factors on the ground and the usual byelection swing against incumbents, there is still a note of caution over commentary that would see every regional seat becoming marginal.

What it proves is that country voters are alive to their power to make a seat marginal. But independents or Labor candidates can't just put their hands up. They need recognition, strong cohesive local support, resources to run a campaign and hard work.

It will remain difficult to unseat major parties in country seats where MPs work hard but, when the right mix of factors are there, rural voters can toss out major-party MPs.



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