13

THE AUSTRALIAN LABOR PARTY

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The Australian Labor Party was widely predicted to win the 2019 federal election, and against these expectations it fell short. This chapter offers an outline of some of the decisive factors in Labor's campaign that shaped its unexpected loss. Immediately following the election defeat, there was a plethora of commentary that sought to offer explanations for Labor's poor electoral performance. Post election, Labor's own review confirmed many of the common explanations for the defeat (ALP 2019). This chapter seeks to distil this wider commentary and make some evaluative judgements about the range of factors posited for the poor result. As the editors argue in the opening chapter of this volume, the result can be seen as 'overdetermined', with a plethora of possible factors to account for the result.

The chapter is organised in the following way. First, the analytical approach of the chapter is briefly outlined—a comparative 'hybrid' approach. Second, Labor's result is located in the wider debates about the crisis of European social democracy. Third, the chapter gives a brief description of the key features of Labor's campaign. Fourth—and the core of the chapter—the key factors that shaped Labor's campaign performance are outlined.

Ideas, institutions and individuals

In the study of labour and social-democratic politics, a range of analytical approaches is available (see Randall 2003). The hybrid approach adopted here follows the work of British political scientist Tim Bale (for example, Bale 2010). The chapter examines the performance of Labor through three key themes: individuals, ideas and institutions. In brief, the theme of 'individuals' examines issues of agency, the role of key actors and, crucially, a focus on leadership factors. The theme of ideas explores the impact of the role of ideology and related policy issues in explaining Labor's defeat. The institutional theme explores the wider structural factors that contributed to Labor's defeat, and this includes Labor's campaign, but also wider factors such as the turbulence in the Australian party system. Overall, these three themes are interconnected and interdependent. Agents and actors offer ideas and policies, which are shaped by the institutional and structural context.

The crisis of social democracy

Before focusing on Labor's campaign, it is useful to contextualise Labor's defeat in the wider crisis of social democracy (Bailey et al. 2016; Keating and McCrone 2013; Manwaring and Kennedy 2018). While the Australian 2019 election result was a surprise, against the backdrop of the wider decline of the electoral fortunes of the family of social-democratic and labour parties, it is probably less surprising. Much like its European counterparts, Labor's structural vote, if gauged by its first preferences, appears to be in decline (see Figure 13.1). In 1983, Labor won nearly 50 per cent of the primary vote; in 2019, it was down to 33 per cent. Labor has not won an election outright since Kevin Rudd's 2007 win. It is notable that Labor's past three election results are among the lowest first-preference tallies it has received since the 1980s. The ALP's 2010 national review outlined and acknowledged many of the features of the structural decline of the party, especially declining union density, declining party membership and a decline in supporters' identification with the party (Manwaring 2011).
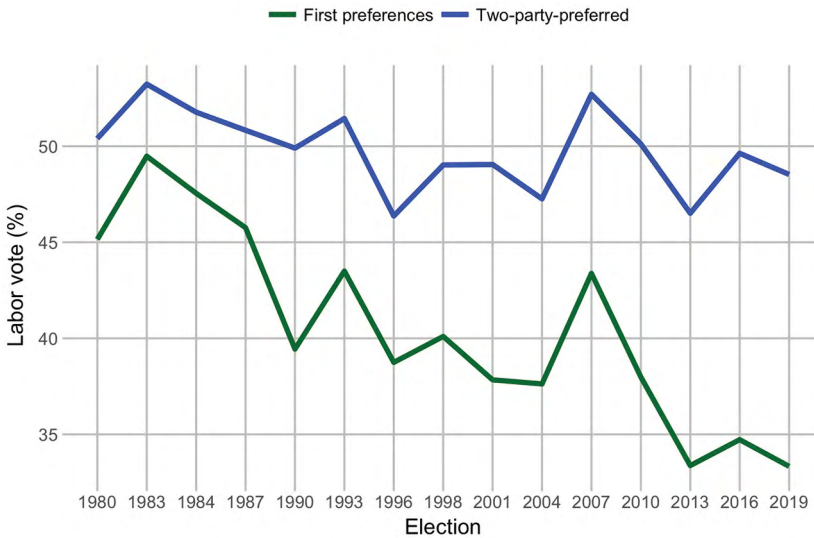
Figure 13.1 ALP first preferences, 1980–2019

Source: Compiled by author.

A comparative perspective only reaffirms this ongoing structural problem. In Figure 13.2, Labor's vote share is compared with a range of key sister centre-left parties, and this suggests a much wider issue for Labor than just the specific problems that shaped its 2019 performance. Ultimately, the centre-left parties face a wider structural change in the family of party systems and an erosion of their support base. They are struggling to win elections. In 2019, the main traditional centre-left parties were out of office in a range of countries, including the United Kingdom, France, Germany and Italy. While there are clear outliers and positive cases (Portugal, Denmark and New Zealand, for example), there remain ongoing debates about how the centre-left might revitalise its mission (Keating and McCrone 2013). The result of the 2019 Australian election, with Labor's electoral woes, can offer insights into the wider debates about the crisis of social democracy.

Carol Johnson, in her insightful chapter on ideology in this volume, argues that Labor pursued a relatively traditional social-democratic strategy. While agreeing with this judgement, I would emphasise that Australian Labor in 2019 offered a 'technocratic' form of social democracy. By technocratic, following Rundle (2019), we can suggest that Labor's agenda, while egalitarian, was focused more on specific policy fixes, mechanisms and instruments than on offering a coherent vision of a more

egalitarian Australia.[1] Labor's technocratic approach seemed to distance itself from the everyday concerns of the wider public. Despite the breadth of Labor's policy agenda—and like many of its European sister parties— it is facing similar structural problems in galvanising its support base.
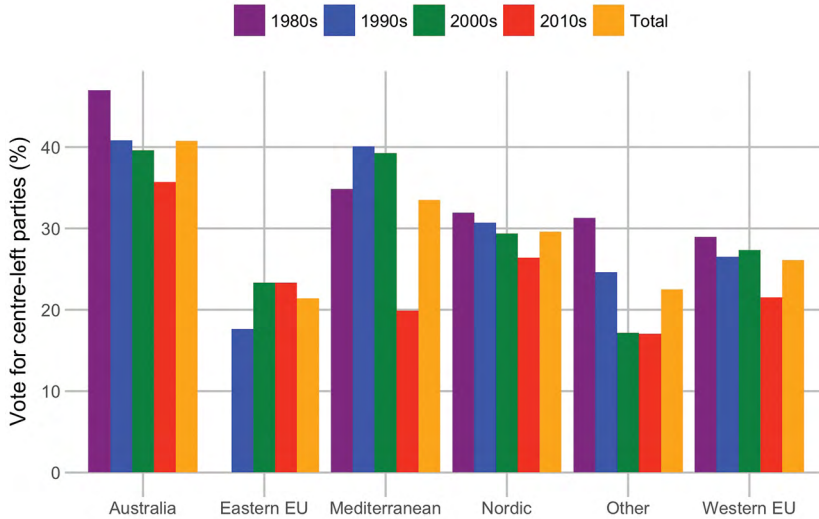

Figure 13.2 Centre-left parties' share of the vote

Source: Manifesto Project Dataset (version 2019b): doi.org/10.25522/manifesto.mpds.2019b.

Labor's campaign

Labor's campaign had four key features: it was the result of a long-term strategy, it was policy rich, it reflected positional differences and it strongly emphasised distributional outcomes.

Labor's campaign was a two-election campaign and, ultimately, its roots, key messages and policy approaches were entrenched from the 2013 election loss and Bill Shorten's time as leader. At the 2016 election, Labor's campaign strategy was policy-rich and made a virtue of a relatively strong

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1   In this chapter, the term 'technocratic' social democracy is used to broadly describe Labor's agenda. It is technocratic in two main senses. First, following Rundle (2019), Labor's primary concern was focused on specific policy fixes (for example, the franking credit tax concessions) to fill a diffuse, ill-defined 'vision' of social democracy. In contrast, a more coherent form of social democracy has, arguably, a clearer definition of its core mission, and its policy approaches stem from this. Second, it was technocratic in that Labor was either unwilling or unable to redeploy more 'traditional' policy instruments (such as a more expansive welfare state) and, as a result, it had to rely on and find more specific indirect tax policy instruments.

front bench. As Stephen Mills outlines in his chapter in this volume, Labor offered a 'challenger' campaign in 2019 and again sought to make a virtue of the strong, unified front bench. Labor's policy focus was a deliberate attempt to remove attention from Shorten's leadership limitations and public unpopularity. In 2016, Labor set out its '100 popular policies'. The foundations for the 2019 campaign were laid from 2013. Given the better than expected results at the 2016 election, this was seen as a solid strategy.

Labor offered a 'big target' strategy, in that it sought to win office by giving salience to key policy issues that showed clear positional space between itself and the Coalition. Moreover, as detailed in Figure 13.3, Labor set out many more policies (69 listed) than the Coalition (42).[2] Across the range of 22 issues covered in Figure 13.3, it is striking that in only three areas (business, small to medium enterprises and defence) did the Coalition have 'more' prominent policies than Labor. Labor's was an ambitious, wide-ranging policy agenda, which, judging by the election result, was perceived as too ambitious, unworkable or reckless.
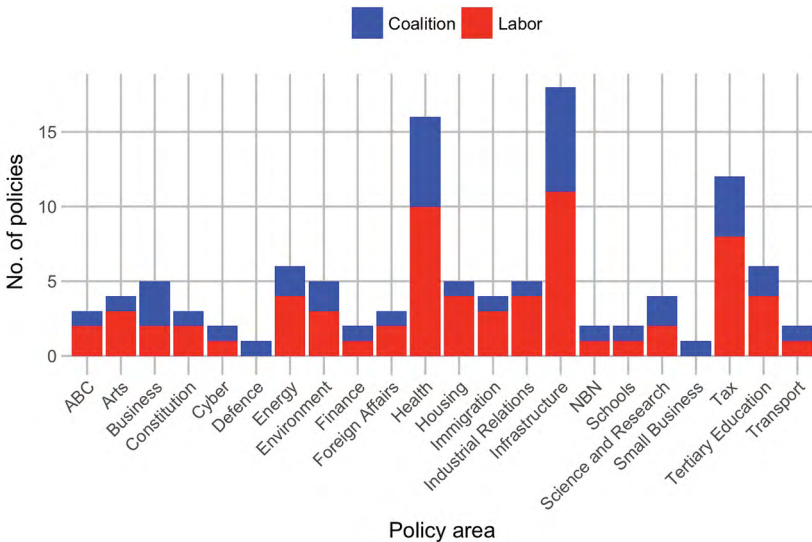

Figure 13.3 Key policy offerings of major parties, 2019 federal election
Source: Donegan and Jeyaratnam (2019).

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2   Data taken from *The Conversation*'s overview of key policy issues for each of the two main parties (Donegan and Jeyaratnam 2019). Note this is not a comprehensive overview of all the major parties' policies, but it does give a useful proxy indicator of the number of headline policy issues presented by each party.

Labor's key campaign slogan was its message of a 'Fair go for Australia'. As a slogan, it lacked flair or innovation, but it did largely reflect the distributional impact of Labor's agenda. In trying to understand the impact of election campaign effects, we can distinguish between the impact of valency and positional types of election issues (Brady and Johnston 2006: 8). Valency issues reflect shared ends but parties offering different routes to the same ends. Positional issues are those for which parties offer quite different policy choices for voters. There is some evidence that, unlike countries such as the United Kingdom (Brexit aside), in Australian election campaigns valency issues have not been a striking feature (see McAllister et al. 2015). Labor's 2016 and 2019 campaigns strongly reflect a campaign shaped by a strong focus on policy *positional* differences.

While Labor has often campaigned on the theme of equality or fairness, what was markedly different in its 2019 'fair go' campaign was a much stronger focus on tackling economic inequality by targeting high-income earners and big business—the 'big end of town'. Yet, rather than seek to reduce economic and social inequality through 'traditional' social-democratic 'tax and spend' approaches (such as a more expansive welfare state), it used more 'technocratic' measures, especially through hitherto rather little-known tax concessions. There were three main themes to Labor's tax policy campaign, centring on income tax, housing and tax concessions:

- Tax relief for low and middle-income earners (Labor pledged to match the Coalition's tax relief rebate of $1,080 for those earning less than $48,000 and offered tax relief worth up to $350 for low-income workers earning up to $37,000).
- Abolition of negative gearing for investors buying existing houses from January 2020 and halving of capital gains tax discount for investment properties.
- Ending of cash rebates for excess franking credits, preventing self-funded retirees receiving tax refunds (creating an estimated revenue of $10.7 billion over four years).

Labor's strategy was clear. First, the tax cuts for low to medium-income earners were to neutralise criticism that Labor was anti–tax cuts, and to highlight the Coalition's far more regressive, and long-term, staged tax plan. Second, the focus on tax concessions framed them as an outdated 'gift' for high-income earners and the revenue created would enable Labor

to underwrite its ambitious spending plans. This technocratic approach meant that Labor could avoid having to reform more traditional taxation mechanisms such as income tax or social insurance increases or reheating the debates about the GST. Third, the appeal to reform housing tax concessions was part of a bid to tackle housing affordability and access issues. Labor sought to temper anxiety about its ambitious tax reforms by promising a larger surplus than that promised by the Coalition (Chan 2019).

The second part of Labor's campaign was a series of ambitious spending pledges, which included:

- $2.3 billion Medicare cancer plan and $2.4 billion dental-care plan for older people
- additional $3.3 billion to public schools over three years
- commitment to introduce a 'living wage', pegged to the national minimum wage
- new $5 billion fund to modernise electricity transmission infrastructure
- reverse penalty rate cuts for retail and hospitality workers
- pay increase for childcare workers.

Overall, Labor's campaign was pitched around core themes of significant tax changes to increase government revenue, linked to a clear redistributive agenda, across a range of areas.

To some extent, this was an uneventful campaign for Labor, in that there were relatively few gaffes, unexpected events or specific missteps that proved decisive. As Brady and Johnston (2006) note, election campaigns are not limited to the usual short four–five-week campaign prior to the election date (see also Chapter 2, this volume). Labor's campaign in 2019 needs to be understood as part of a two-election strategy, with the core of its policy agenda built into the foundations of the run-up to the 2016 campaign. Labor hoped it could reassure voters about its ambitious, policy-rich agenda by releasing many of the key flagship proposals early. A key event in Labor's 2019 campaign was the 2018 ALP national conference. Here, as explored below, a number of key damaging policy issues, especially immigration, were 'neutralised' in a bid to demonstrate electoral capacity (Norman and Belot 2018).

The short campaign reflected key tensions in Labor's strategy. On the one hand, it wanted to appeal with an ambitious, wideranging policy agenda, yet on the other, it was forced to be defensive and temper its ambition by downplaying any potential negative economic impacts. The overall claim made here about Labor's campaign is that, arguably, very few *specific* events had decisive electoral effects on the results; rather, a wider range of factors might better explain the election result and, crucially, Labor's loss.

Individuals

In this section, we consider the key factor of agency and, specifically, the role of leadership factors that proved decisive in the election loss. A prevailing narrative both throughout and after the election result was that Labor's campaign was held back by having Shorten as leader (Cameron and McAllister 2019; Murphy 2019; Powell 2019). The Liberal campaign was negative and its 'Bill we can't afford' slogan neatly captured specific anxieties about Labor and Shorten's ability to govern or secure wider electoral support. Yet, polling data and AES data on leadership might suggest that, while this was a factor, it was only one of a number. First, despite claims about Morrison's more 'presidential' campaign, the impact of personalisation and individual leadership on electoral outcomes seems mixed. Intriguingly, despite the high churn of Australians prime ministers over recent years, since 2004, AES data suggest there has been a steady decline in voters citing the party leader as a key consideration in their voting decision (Cameron and McAllister 2016: 24). At the 2004 election, 'party leader' was cited by 19 per cent of those polled, but by only 9 per cent at the 2016 election. Yet, there is no doubt that Shorten was never able to cut through and achieve much in the way of widespread popularity and it is noteworthy that he was more unpopular than Tony Abbott in 2013 (Cameron and McAllister 2019). Labor's effort to counter this was by presenting a strong front bench, although, as Stephen Mills notes (in Chapter 23, this volume), this had at best a limited impact.

Late in the campaign, in what was clearly crass overreach, Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* launched a scathing attack on Shorten for what it claimed was his misrepresentation of his background and his upbringing by his mother. An emotional Shorten hit back at the media and, among the political commentariat, this appeared to help soften his image and 'humanise' him. However, this incident arguably had no impact on improving his public

image, as Shorten was consistently deemed an unpopular leader in the polls (Martin 2019). In terms of public persona, Shorten certainly fell well short of veteran party leader and legend Bob Hawke, who passed away at the end of the campaign, but also striking is the difference with Jacinda Ardern in New Zealand, where leadership effects clearly played a part in turning around the electoral fortunes of New Zealand Labour.

We can note other individuals and actors involved in shaping Labor's campaign, although their overall impact was seemingly negligible. One key moment in the campaign was at Labor's official launch, which saw together for the first time Hawke, Paul Keating and, critically, Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard. It was a specific effort to show party unity and to contrast with the more recent leadership instability that characterised Morrison's rise to power. In sum, we can note that Shorten's lack of appeal may have helped fuel misgivings among some about a potential Labor government. Yet, in and of itself, it offers just a partial explanation.

Ideas

Labor's loss is arguably rooted in the tensions, dilemmas and limitations posed by its ideational and policy agenda. A useful framework with which to understand the dilemmas and trade-offs in political and policy ideas is provided by Jenny Stewart's (2009) work on policy values. Stewart distinguishes between different types of values, two of the main types of which are 'outcome' and 'design' values (Stewart 2009: 27–28). Outcome values reflect the desired end point and design values reflect the institutional choices made to implement these values. Stewart's key insight is that values often entail 'shadow' values that are sometimes 'sacrificed' (in her example, 'greenness' can come at the expense of economic growth) (Stewart 2009: 27). For the purposes of this chapter, the central point is that it was not just the breadth of Labor's ideological and policy agenda, but also the inherent value conflicts and trade-offs, that ultimately hampered its electoral performance. Here we can identify four key policy and ideational trade-offs in Labor's agenda:

1. vision versus policy specificity
2. outputs versus outcomes (tax versus spend)
3. environmental issues versus economic growth
4. inequality versus efficiency.

As outlined above, Labor offered one of the most policy-rich agendas in its recent electoral history. It offered a broad canvas, with key flagship issues in areas including environmental and climate policy, health, energy and tax policy. One upshot was that Labor was unable to sufficiently control the discussion of its policy agenda—an insight shared by a number of contributors to this volume and indeed by the ALP in its post-election review (ALP 2019). Initially, Shorten's focus was on the election as a 'referendum on wages', but during the short campaign it quickly moved on to other issues—for example, threatening that it would be the 'climate change election' (Aly 2019; Robinson 2019). The 'fair go' proved an inadequate organising theme to give coherence to the new agenda. As political scientist Stuart Ball (2005) notes, to win government, an Opposition needs a 'new agenda'; and, while Labor clearly had this, it proved insufficiently coherent. In sum, diversity came at the expense of focus.

One criticism levelled at Labor was that it lacked an overarching, credible narrative or 'vision' (Rundle 2019). Labor was forced to spend a significant part of the campaign explaining its policy agenda, rather than outlining its future aspirations for the country. Perhaps a telling moment in the campaign that captured Labor's dilemma was during the second televised leaders' debate when Morrison was happy to concede time to Shorten with the quip, 'Bill has more taxes to explain'. Touché. One insightful comparison has been made with Ed Miliband's ill-fated election campaign in 2015 in the United Kingdom (Chiu 2019). Miliband was often hamstrung by launching numerous policies and then losing valuable political capital by having to explain them (Bale 2015). Labor had some similar struggles. On announcing the pay increase for childcare workers—a seemingly popular policy—Labor was forced to explain why this sector was singled out for special treatment. Tellingly, the Liberals were not penalised for having no such plans. Likewise, in one clear moment of electoral jitters, Labor quickly decided to adopt the Coalition's housing policy to offer a guarantee for first-time homebuyers. In brief, Labor's focus on policy detail, with numerous policy and spending offerings, came at the cost of explaining its core mission.

A second, ultimately damaging, policy trade-off that Labor did not manage to resolve was the balance between policy outputs and outcomes. The difficulty here is to have clear linkages between the mechanisms and instruments that will be employed in government and the tangible public goods that will be delivered as a result. The net effect was that Labor had

to devote disproportionate time to explaining its tax policy (outputs) at the expense of describing the potential benefits of the changes (outcomes). In a revealing interview after the election result, Labor Deputy Leader Tanya Plibersek acknowledged this as a factor, especially with what she saw as a credible infrastructure plan for Queensland (ABC 2019). The upshot is that Labor appeared to suffer electorally from having a weak link between its key policy mechanisms (especially the fears raised about its tax agenda) and the speed, tangibility and credibility of the eventual outcomes.

This fed into a further policy trade-off between the environment/climate policy and economic growth. It seemed a shrewd tactical move by Labor to coopt the Coalition's National Energy Guarantee (NEG), buttressed with a strong commitment to a renewable energy target of 50 per cent by 2030. Adopting the NEG was a way to neutralise previous damaging debates about introducing a carbon pricing mechanism. Yet, Labor lacked credibility here, in part because of its ambivalence over the Adani coalmine, which became something of a lightning rod for wider uncertainty about Labor's ability to balance environmental and economic concerns (Aly 2019).

Finally, we can note a policy dilemma that proved damaging to Labor's campaign: the trade-off between equality and efficiency. This was compounded by Labor not explaining its flagship policies clearly enough. For example, Labor's tax policy was targeted at the 'top end of town'. The eventual election result suggested that—most strikingly in Queensland— it was unclear who was meant by the 'top end of town'. Here, Labor was seemingly prioritising reducing economic inequality rather than stimulating economic and employment growth (and market efficiency). This focus on tackling (in)equality over efficiency was most keenly felt by relatively well-paid workers in the resources sector who feared job insecurity from both the end of the mining boom and the debates about the future of energy in the country. Likewise, Labor's 'franking' credits policy was convincingly relabelled a 'retiree' tax, in part because it was not fully clear which groups might be adversely affected. It was another policy that required further explanation. The more fundamental problem with the franking credits policy was that Labor was perceived to be targeting the most affluent groups at the expense of offering a nuanced policy agenda that enabled broader economic growth and market efficiency. It is worth contrasting the ALP's approach to tackling inequality with that of New Labour in the United Kingdom. New Labour targeted its rhetoric and

policy at uplifting the most economically vulnerable groups rather than having direct confrontation with the wealthiest groups. In contrast, the ALP explicitly targeted a suite of policies at 'the top end of town', which gave license to the scare campaign that it would introduce a 'death tax'.

Overall, we might make some tentative evaluations of Labor's policy and ideological agenda. Following Brady and Johnston (2006: 8), we can differentiate between two key areas of effective campaigning: *persuasion* and *priming*. In terms of persuasion, Labor was damaged by the scare campaign about its tax plans. It is striking that not only the Liberals, but also the UAP, the Centre Alliance and others explicitly targeted Labor on its supposed 'retiree tax'. The election result suggests Labor could not satisfactorily resolve a number of the policy trade-offs outlined above. As a result, Labor was not persuasive enough on its policy agenda. Second, Brady and Johnston (2006: 8) note the role of priming, in which 'campaigns can shape public opinion by making certain issues salient to voters'. Labor had problems with *priming* the public on its policy agenda. The breadth of its agenda meant it proved difficult to sufficiently hold key swing voters on its core campaign issues—for example, wage stagnation.

It is worth noting that, while Labor lost, against expectations, it lost only narrowly. The close and unexpected result can obscure the significant amount of work Labor undertook to build its ideational and policy agenda. Critically, at its 2018 national conference, it had neutralised the issue of immigration—much to the chagrin of refugee advocacy groups. This might not have had any negative impact for Labor, but it certainly gave them no positive uplift. Similarly, the vexed issue of increasing the Newstart allowance was 'parked' by Labor by its promise of a review. It was striking, too, that seemingly controversial social policies, such as the progressive and well overdue policy announcement about access to abortion services, did not have any significant public backlash. Interestingly, this issue reflects Labor's ongoing shift to expand its concept of equality (Johnson, Chapter 5, this volume).

In sum, Labor's ability to persuade and prime on its ideological commitments and policy was curtailed, due in part to some of the difficult policy trade-offs interwoven in its agenda. Labor did not lose the battle of ideas, not least because the Coalition offered so few in reply; rather it was punished due to some of the policy tensions inherent in its offerings. However, none of these was fully apparent until the polling booths closed.

Institutions

Institutional factors encompass both the role of key *institutions* in shaping electoral outcomes and what is more accurately described as *structural* factors, such as the changing shape of Australia's party system. Institutional and structural factors clearly had an impact on Labor's performance.

The Labor machine seemingly ran a campaign beset by various difficulties (Williams 2019). Immediately after the election, a number of anonymous Labor sources pointed out that Noah Carroll, who led Labor's campaign, had made some strategic mistakes. A key finding from Labor's own post-election review was the party's failure to establish a formal campaign committee (ALP 2019: 9). Moreover, the decision to base the campaign headquarters in Western Sydney proved a mistake (Uhlmann 2019). Labor's internal polling also, apparently, was far from accurate (indeed, much like the national polls), which may have created inaccurate feedback loops for campaign headquarters. Labor's polling may have underestimated Shorten's unpopularity. While Labor raised funds and mobilised volunteers and the like, its strategic message failed to cut through in the right marginal seats. Again, much of this may have been apparent only after the poor result for Labor.

A second institutional factor that some critics pointed to was the role of Chris Bowen as shadow treasurer. Much was made of his quip that 'people can always choose to not vote for us' in his defence of the franking credits policy. However, according to some anonymous Labor sources, it was his institutional role as treasurer that may have proved damaging. Arguably, a key role as (shadow) treasurer is to have the thankless task of saying 'no' to shadow Cabinet colleagues in their ambitious spending claims. In part, the argument is that Bowen was insufficiently resilient in reining in Labor's spending pledges. This, of course, remains speculative, and the impact is hard to measure.

We might also note other institutional factors, perhaps including the lacklustre campaign run by the ACTU (see Chapter 20, this volume; also Karp 2019). At certain elections, union campaigns have helped Labor—notably, the WorkChoices campaign of 2007, but also at the State level, with union mobilisation assisting Daniel Andrews in Victoria, for example. The ACTU's 'Change the rules' campaign, while worthy in aiming at systemic change, was seen as misconceived and, crucially, lacking public cut-through. Labor may not have been hindered by the campaign,

but it seemed to have no positive impact on the result. We might also add here that the impact of factional stability within the party, with the ALP clearly learning the lessons of the Rudd–Gillard years, was neutral, rather than positive.

Finally, we can note other institutional factors—not least the issue of campaign spending. Labor's campaign can only be seen in the wider context of the campaigns of other parties, and especially their different funding levels. Critically, Clive Palmer's UAP spent significantly more than Labor, with an estimated $55 million outspending of Labor's $13–15 million (Koslowski 2019). The negative UAP advertisements had little direct electoral benefit to Palmer's party, but they helped bolster the Liberals in an effective scare campaign. These institutional factors link with Shorten's post-election critique of the 'vested interests' that Labor faces. Indeed, Labor has always faced systemic pressures within a capitalist market economy (for example, Johnson 2019).

Finally, we can point to wider structural changes, especially in Australia's party system, having a clear impact—less as an explanatory factor to describe Labor's loss in 2019, and more in placing tougher structural constraints on Labor's ability to manoeuvre. Two related factors play out here. First, as noted elsewhere, Australia's party system is shifting and, again, we see record numbers of voters turning away from the major parties. The rise of the minor parties and the role of Independents are significant for the major parties, but this also means that elections are now far more seat-by-seat in focus, and Labor cannot rely on the same residual support. If we link this to the wider issue of the crisis of social democracy, this raises key issues for Labor and its future relations with the Greens, and the extent to which it must countenance future regular coalition-building (see Holloway et al. 2018). Labor appears to be in structural decline and this is linked to declining union density and declining party membership.

Conclusion

Against expectation, polling and wider predictions, Labor lost the 2019 election. A plethora of articles in the immediate aftermath, many insightful, provides clues as to what proved decisive in Labor's loss. The approach outlined here emphasises the range of institutional, ideational and individual factors that shaped the loss. The combination of an unpopular leader, an effective scare campaign targeting the policy tensions in Labor's

ambitious agenda, linked to some wider institutional problems, meant that, while the overall result was close, Labor fell far short of its hopes. The Australian Labor Party is, then, another case of the ongoing travails of the centre-left, although compared with its Dutch, German, French or even UK counterparts, it has a firmer base on which to rebuild.

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