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Flying high, falling low

Despite the polls predicting a narrow win, Australia's Labor Party lost the general election – because it didn't convince working class voters, says Adrian Pabst

Read this interview in German.

Although almost every survey in the last two years had predicted a victory, the Labor Party has lost the elections in Australia. Even conservative Prime Minister Scott Morrison has called his re-election a "miracle". How did this happen?

On the one hand, Morrison managed to win the election campaign by presenting Labor's policy of higher taxes and spending as irresponsible, while highlighting his own leadership qualities. Bill Shorten, Labor's chairman, was mostly on the defensive and spent more time explaining his complicated electoral program than getting undecided voters excited about his vision.

On the other hand, Labor has failed to take account of both the economic interests and values of working people. An exclusively progressive vision of equality, multiculturalism and redistribution is not enough to convince the more conservative voters too. Among them are many working class people who used to be core voters and who Labor could not win back.

The party was completely unaware that core states like Victoria and New South Wales lacked support and that voter sentiment in other states, especially Queensland, had changed in favour of Morrison.

Like so many social democratic parties, Labor seems to be struggling to lose its core voters from the working class - while scoring with the educated middle class. What can be done about this?

As in other Western countries, Labor has transformed itself into a predominantly progressive, socially and economically liberal party. This may have been a successful strategy in the 1990s, but at a time of growing insecurity, many citizens are longing for more stability, especially workers affected by globalisation. Social democracy should

therefore focus on more economic justice and social cohesion.

That means not only more redistribution through higher taxes and expenditure, but also the promotion of small and medium-sized enterprises, as well as much more support for families and the limitation of economic immigration, especially in view of the pressure on wages. At the same time, social democrats must once again uphold certain conservative values such as family, work, home and patriotism, which are important for the workforce.

This is the crucial challenge that all social democratic parties must face, otherwise they will continue to lose the approval of an important part of their core voters.

Which issues dominated the election campaign and how did Labor deal with them?

The main issues in the campaign were the economy and climate change. Labor relied on the idea that a majority of Australians would prefer higher taxes to finance additional public sector spending in housing, childcare, education and more clean energy sources.

However, with promises of higher taxes and spending Labor provided Morrison with a target that he fully exploited – especially in the northern state of Queensland, where many conservative voters are more concerned about jobs than climate protection. Because of that, Morrison has clearly supported the construction of a new coal mine there by an Indian company called Adani, while Labor has not spoken out in favour or against.

All in all, Labor has failed to effectively address undecided voters and convince them of its positions, especially in economic policy, which was predominantly geared to the middle class and took too little account of workers' interests. This also applies to other issues such as immigration, national identity and patriotism.

What role did climate change play in the election? Couldn't Labor have scored better here?

Regarding climate change, Labor has pursued very ambitious goals, such as reducing all greenhouse gas emissions by 45 per cent by 2030 and CO2 neutral emissions by 2050. In addition, Labor has also promised many new incentives for solar energy and electric cars. Certainly this has contributed to the re-election of Labor MPs in cities like Melbourne, where the Greens are a driving force.

But Labor also realised that climate protection only helps in the party's election campaign where it’s primarily seen as a moral issue – in cities, among progressive middle class voters and among young

voters. This is not the case in other constituencies. Where climate change is a predominantly economic issue, Labor is mistrusted – in many suburbs, in rural areas and with more conservative voters who are also often core voters from the working class.

So climate protection is a double-edged sword – a good weapon against the Greens, but a danger in the fight against the conservative-liberal party.

Did immigration play a big role as in previous elections? How did Labor position itself?

The topic of immigration was much less present this time than in the past. Before the start of the election campaign, the conservative-liberal party advocated reducing the immigration rate from 190,000 per year to 160,000. Labor opposed this and implicitly promised that the right of asylum would be much more humane. But the right-wing press, as well as the government's ultra-hard stance, has led Labor to be cautious on this issue.

Labor, however, failed to score on integration and patriotism by promising more support for language learning and other measures to improve naturalisation. At the same time, Labor could have emphasised the importance of immigrants' civic duties. The same applies in general to issues of identity and social cohesion. These are important social and cultural issues on which Labor still lacks credibility.

How did Labor try to mobilise voters?

Since the last parliamentary elections in 2016, Labor has had a very effective ground operation, an extensive presence in the 151 constituencies, enabling the party to mobilise its target voters.

This year, the party has relied on a total of around 25,000 volunteers who have visited over 800,000 households and made almost 1,000,000 calls. In addition, there is the party' social media campaign and its candidates.

But all this was not enough to convince the undecided voters of Labor's election program. So now, the party is faced with fundamental questions of content – economic interests and cultural values of the working class –, but also of candidate selection, from the party leadership to the candidates in the constituencies.

What is the next step for the Labor – and Australia?

First of all, the Labor Party will have to recover from the shock of a

bitter defeat that was neither expected by the party nor predicted by election experts. Until election day, Labor had expected a clear, albeit narrow, election victory.

As far as the political consequences are concerned, Labor urgently needs to find convincing answers to three questions. First, how can Labor be an alternative to Morrison, who emerges from the election much stronger and less vulnerable? Second, how can Labor win back many of the lost core voters without putting off new voters?

Thirdly, who among their MPs is best suited as a party and opposition leader to win the elections in three years? The main candidates are Tanya Plibersek, who has been vice-chairwoman of the party, and Anthony Albanese. Both politicians, as well as the shadow finance minister Chris Bowen, are considered to be very progressive. Therefore some doubt whether they will be able to convince the working class. Without their votes, the Labor Party will hardly be able to win the 2022 parliamentary elections.

This interview was conducted by Daniel Kopp.



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