

Newspoll: Malcolm Turnbull's approval into negative territory, still trusted over Bill Shorten

Phillip Hudson, The Australian, March 21, 2016

Malcolm Turnbull's approval rating as PM has fallen into negative territory for the first time but voters still overwhelmingly consider him better than Bill Shorten to manage the economy. Picture: Kym Smith

Malcolm Turnbull's approval rating as Prime Minister has fallen into negative territory for the first time but voters still rank him overwhelmingly as the best leader to manage the economy and deliver tax reform, and expect him to win this year's election.

The latest Newspoll, taken exclusively for The Australian, also shows the Coalition has nudged ahead in two-party-preferred terms to lead by 51 per cent to Labor's 49 per cent due to a slip in support for the opposition.

Despite a messy start to the year, with a reshuffle forced by the resignation of ministers and the government's mangled messages on tax reform, the poll also shows 55 per cent of voters think the Coalition will be returned at the election while only 25 per cent believe Labor can win.

As Mr Turnbull weighs up whether to have a double-dissolution election on July 2 or wait longer for a regular election, Newspoll shows he is considered best to manage the economy by 54 per cent of voters compared with 20 per cent who favour Bill Shorten, while 45 per cent say the Prime Minister is the more capable of handling tax reform compared with 25 per cent who say it is the Labor leader.

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However, the poll of 2049 voters, taken from Thursday to Sunday, shows satisfaction with Mr Turnbull's performance has continued its downwards trajectory, falling to 39 per cent.

As he has faced criticism for dithering on some issues or failing to meet high expectations after he rolled Tony Abbott six months ago, satisfaction with Mr Turnbull is down five points in the past fortnight, and is now down 14 points this year and down 21 points since peaking at a six-year high for a prime minister of 60 per cent in mid-November. At the same time, dissatisfaction with the Prime Minister has risen three points to 44 per cent to be double what it was in November.

It leaves Mr Turnbull's net satisfaction rating — measuring the difference between those who are satisfied and those who are dissatisfied with his performance — at minus five points. It is the first time he has fallen into negative territory as Prime Minister and it is a significant deterioration from the plus-38 point mark four months ago.

But Mr Turnbull remains by far the preferred prime minister, on 52 per cent, although this support is down three points in the past fortnight and is his lowest measure since replacing Mr Abbott. Mr Shorten's rating as better PM is unchanged at 21 per cent. Mr Shorten's satisfaction rating fell two points to 28 per cent, although his dissatisfaction fell three points to 52 per cent to see his net satisfaction rating improve from minus 25 points to minus 24 points.

Environment Minister Greg Hunt said the government was "actually very calm and very focused" despite the Prime Minister's drop in approval rating, as he pointed to a few recent policy announcements such as the Defence white paper, an innovation statement and last week's Senate voting reform win.

“Overall, we’re building a road map for Australia as opposed to the alternative of higher electricity prices, the deficit being blown and Bill Shorten running a protection racket for building industry thugs,” Mr Hunt told Sky News. “So there’s a very clear choice. Our task is to do the work and lay out the choice, and I think Australians will see that.

“Yes we’ve been fortunate to have in our last two major polls I think 53 and 51 (in two-party preferred terms but) we treat it as if every election we’re coming from behind because the public never wants complacency so we have to be focused on their lives, their jobs, their futures.” Mr Hunt also said voters understood Mr Turnbull “gets the economy” after the overwhelming majority of those people polled by Newspoll rated the PM as the best leader to manage the country’s finances.

Newspoll showed the Coalition’s primary vote was unchanged for the third consecutive survey, at 43 per cent, which is still higher than it was for most of the two years Mr Abbott was in power but lower than the 45.6 per cent at the last election.

Labor eased one point to 34 per cent and in the past six months its primary vote has been between 33 and 35 per cent. The Greens, who faced a relentless attack from Labor over their support for Senate reforms, were also unchanged, at 12 per cent. Support for other parties rose from 10 to 11 per cent.

Based on preference flows from the last election, the Coalition has edged ahead in two-party terms by 51 per cent to Labor’s 49 per cent. The past two Newspolls had the parties deadlocked at 50-50 after the government began the year ahead 53 per cent to 47 per cent.

Asked which political party they expect will win the election, 55 per cent of voters nominated the government to be returned while 25 per cent think Labor will win and 20 per cent were uncommitted.

Among Coalition voters, 82 per cent expect the government to win and just 7 per cent think it will be Labor. But among Labor supporters only 44 per cent think the party can return to power after one term in opposition, with 38 per cent believing the Coalition will win and 18 per cent undecided.

The poll also found 54 per cent think Mr Turnbull is most capable of handling the economy, down four points since four weeks ago, despite stronger than expected economic growth and a fall in the unemployment rate to 5.8 per cent. The lost support has not transferred to Mr Shorten, who fell two points to 20 per cent.

While Labor has released tax policies to change negative gearing and capital gains, and the government abandoned plans to increase the GST as doubts grow about its ability to deliver income tax cuts that it flagged could be large, 45 per cent of voters favour Mr Turnbull to handle tax reform, down three points. Just 25 per cent think Mr

Shorten is the most capable to manage tax reform, down one point.