

Polling puts Victorian Labor on track to win state election



Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews in Canberra yesterday. Picture: Kym Smith exclusive

John Ferguson, Associate Editor, Ewin Hannan, Workplace Editor, 11:00PM
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Victorian Labor would win an election held this weekend but could still be forced into minority government as voters focus on the cost of living, according to private polling by both major parties.

Labor is leading the Coalition with between 51 per cent and 52 per cent of the two-party-preferred vote, but remains vulnerable if out-campaigned by Liberal leader Matthew Guy in the run-up to November 24.

The Coalition's disastrous performance nationally looms as a major threat, with strategists concerned the damage to the Liberal brand will have a negative impact on the opposition's campaign.

The Liberal Party late yesterday had a financial victory when an intervention from former prime minister John Howard helped it resolve its battle with its chief donor, the Cormack Foundation, opening the way for it to receive \$8.5 million for campaigning at this state election and the next two federal campaigns. Under the deal, Mr Guy will receive a much-needed \$2.5m from Cormack from next month for the state campaign.

The Weekend Australian understands that Labor's primary vote dipped at the start of the year but has picked up and is at an election-winning 52 per cent to 48 per cent — the exact result of the 2014 election. Liberal polling has the gap at 51 per cent to 49 per cent and strategists are confident there are enough seats that can swing during the next month to force a change of government.

Both sides of politics privately believe that an election held this weekend would return the Andrews government to office but the ALP is not likely to make gains, aside possibly from the outer southeastern-rural Liberal seat of Bass (4.5 per cent) and South Barwon (2.9 per cent), which includes Geelong. Labor has nine seats on less than 3 per cent, making it highly vulnerable to local swings, but the Coalition must win seven seats for an absolute majority, assuming it gets the support of whoever wins the seat of Morwell, held by conservative independent Russell Northe.

Unions are committing millions of dollars to try to get the ALP re-elected, deploying hundreds of activists across seven marginal seats in a bid to convince voters to back the Labor Party and “put the Liberals last”. For nine months, union activists have been campaigning in four Labor held marginals in Melbourne's sand belt — Frankston, Mordialloc, Carrum and Bentleigh — and the two Liberal marginals of Ripon and Bass as well as Morwell in regional Victoria.

Victorian Trades Hall Council secretary Luke Hilakari said he believed the Andrews government would be re-elected based on the views expressed by thousands of voters when they were “door-knocked” and telephoned by union activists. Unions are running “phone banks” calling thousands of voters in marginal seats. They aim to campaign at every train station in Melbourne. Unions will spend about \$2m and make a significant financial donation to the ALP and individual candidates.

Mr Hilakari said Mr Andrews was getting substantial credit from the electorate for Labor's multi-billion-dollar public works program, with voters comparing him to the “can-do” approach of the Kennett government.

“You can tell when the swing is on,” he said. “With Wentworth, people knew it was on. We knew at the last state election it was on. It ain't on. “We are just not having those conversations that are hard for us at the doors (of households). “No one is saying that Daniel Andrews has been a terrible government. They are running a surplus and are building stuff. They have done enough.

“The Liberals federally have hurt (the Victorian Liberals) big time. Imagine door-knocking as a Liberal right now? Putting on your blue shirt, door-knocking, and saying ‘I’m from the Liberal Party’. The door would be shut.”

On Mr Guy, Mr Hilakari said: “People don’t know him. My focus groups have told me they don’t know him. They cannot name him. He doesn’t have any crowning achievement. He’s a little aggressive. He’s a little short. He doesn’t have presence or the charisma bit, the energy bit. He seems a bit down all the time.” On the Red Shirts affair, which has dogged the Andrews government, Mr Hilakari said: “There is no concern about red shirts at doors. It’s like inside baseball. No one understands it.”

Mr Guy told The Weekend Australian that voters were still focused on crime, congestion, cost of living and population. “Polling is not fact ... it’s research and you’ve got to track it, you’ve got to do it, you’ve got to look at it, and any statewide two-party figure is an assumed figure for a start, it’s not a polled figure, it’s an assumed figure and primary vote is what’s important,” he said.

“I know we can win this election and I’m looking at data every day to say it’s there, it’s winnable and I’m not consumed about people who aren’t from politics telling whether I’m ahead or not because I know we can win it.”

Labor has 46 seats in the 88-seat parliament.

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