

The State of Labor

A Strategic Overview of Labor's Electoral Position and Internal Politics

Introduction

The Australian Labor Party is now in as dominant a position in Australian federal politics as they have been for a long time, having won a second term in a landslide.

Yet the party's strength is built on an uncertain base, with a primary vote of less than 35%. While the party will be defending newly-gained seats from the Coalition, they are also in close contests against Greens and independent candidates in numerous seats that were once safe for the ALP.

This brief explores Labor's position in federal and state politics, how their low primary vote effects their position, prospects for the next federal Labor leader and the position of the Labor factions.

The Federal Domination of Labor

The 2025 Australian federal election was Labor's best election result in over 80 years. Labor's best ever result was in 1943, in the midst of the Second World War, following a mid-term change of government and facing off against a fractured and depleted United Australia Party. The UAP was replaced by the Liberal Party of Australia in 1944, and we have not seen such a strong result for the ALP again since.

Labor's two-party-preferred vote of 55.25% was the highest vote share for the party since 1943, and was the third-highest two-party-preferred vote for either side since the War, with the Coalition only doing better in 1966 and 1975.

Labor won 94 out of 150 seats, which is by far Labor's best result since 1943, and has only been surpassed by the Coalition on a handful of occasions.

Labor achieved this result based on one of the lowest primary votes for a winning major party, winning just 34.6%. The majoritarian electoral system allowed Labor to win a large majority in the House of Representatives thanks to preference flows from voters for minor parties and independents, but this low primary vote is evidence in Labor's performance in the Senate. Labor now holds just 29 out of 76 Senate seats, requiring ten others to pass legislation.

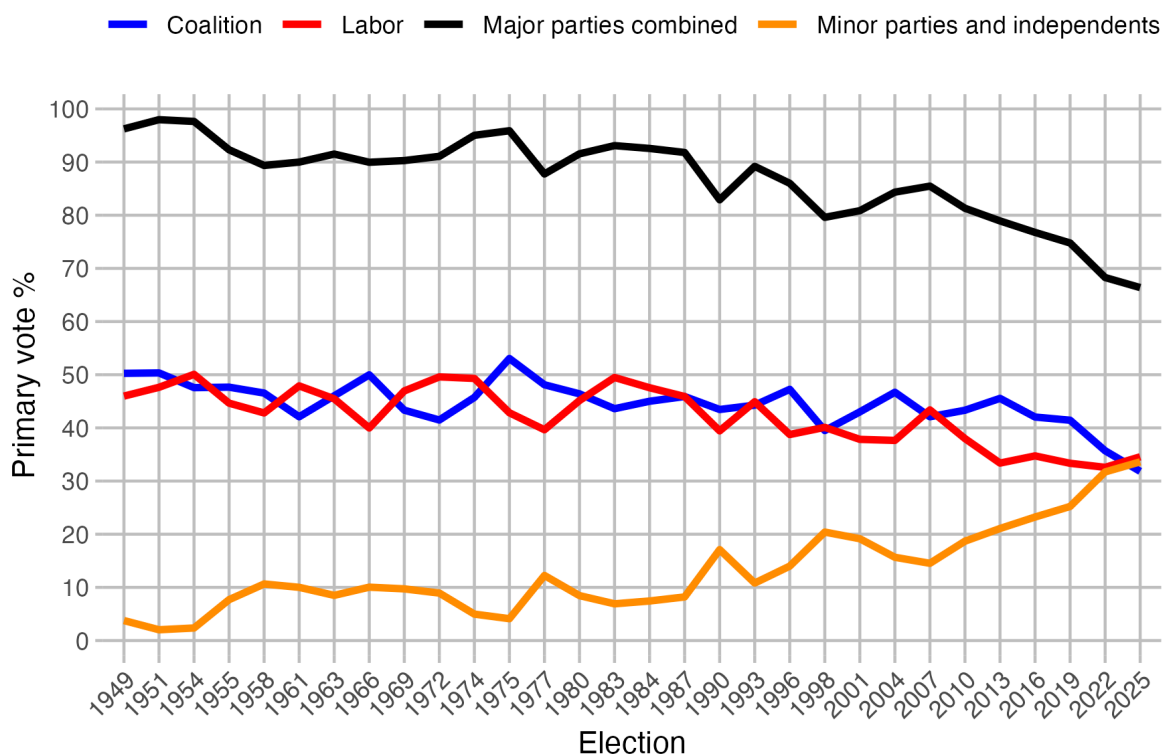
Despite the low primary vote, the Labor government is now in a dominant position in federal politics, with the Coalition requiring an enormous increase in their seats and votes to be able to win the next election. Thus it seems likely that Labor will be in power for at least two terms. But this doesn't mean that Labor's position is insurmountable.

Electoral Analysis

Governing From Under 35%

The Australian Labor Party polled 34.6% of the primary vote in the House of Representatives at the 2025 federal election. This was a slight improvement on the primary vote of 32.6% polled in 2022, which was the lowest Labor primary vote since the 1930s. The Labor primary vote has hovered around 32-35% at the last five federal elections, since the collapse in Labor support in 2013.

What changed from 2013 until Labor won government in 2022 was that the Liberal/National Coalition vote has also collapsed, with more preferences available for Labor candidates from minor parties and independents (or even from Liberal candidates in certain contests).



Primary vote for Labor, the Liberal/National Coalition, all major parties and all minor parties and independents at House of Representatives elections since 1949.

While the electoral system has allowed Labor to win a landslide majority off a very low vote, the consequences can be seen more clearly in the Senate.

Labor now holds 29 seats out of 76 in the Senate, requiring ten others to vote with the Government to pass legislation. Labor's position was boosted by very strong centre-left results which produced 4-2 splits in Victoria and South Australia at the 2025 election, and the defection of former Greens senator Dorinda Cox. Yet the party still holds just over one third of Senate seats despite the best Labor two-party-preferred result since 1943.

This has created a situation in the Senate where Labor can only pass legislation with the support of the Greens or the Coalition. While the Greens and Labor could agree on many issues, the parties still often have different positions, and have incentives to not necessarily work together, or at least to ensure that they are seen to be “winning” any negotiation. This has led to a dynamic where the Labor government has instead tried to work with the Coalition, but the parties are also a long way apart.

While there are a number of other crossbenchers who could help pass legislation, the low level of Labor support has meant that those crossbenchers are not in a position to help pass legislation.

The low Labor primary vote has also manifested in an increasing number of seats once considered safe for Labor where they are competing with the Greens or independents. A drop in the Labor primary vote in Brisbane, Griffith, Macnamara or Richmond could see those seats fall to the Greens.

There are nine seats that were Labor vs Greens in 2025 (including Griffith, mentioned above). The Greens are only a small two-candidate-preferred swing away from winning Melbourne and Wills. A change in Liberal preferencing strategy could also open up a number of other seats as potential Greens gains.

The ALP has begun to face competition from independents - something that until recently was mostly limited to Coalition seats. Labor had come second to independents in Clark (Andrew Wilkie) and Fowler (Dai Le) in 2022. But in 2025, independents came close to winning in Bean and Fremantle, and also put on notable performances in Franklin, Watson, Blaxland and Calwell.

Labor’s relationship with the Greens has been quite tense but also one that the parties cannot ignore.

Labor’s two-party-preferred vote relies on about 20% of the total electorate voting for someone else but preferencing Labor above the Coalition. About half of that group are Greens voters. While many Greens voters would likely still preference Labor regardless of the party’s recommendations, they are still a substantial group with an interest in the parties working together.

The parties also have a relationship when it comes to Parliament, with the Greens playing a crucial role in the balance of power in the Senate. While partisan politics often gives the parties an incentive to disagree, many of their voters would also like to see the parties cooperate.

Labor’s relationship with the Greens and independents is also crucial for any future hung parliament. With almost a quarter of seats having a minor party or an independent in the final preference count, and quite a large crossbench, a swing back to the right could see Labor in a position to only maintain power in an alliance with crossbenchers.

While Labor has been able to stitch together a large majority on their current vote, they face numerous challenges that may make it hard to hold on to their position.

Prospects in the States

There is a long history in Australian politics of parties in opposition at a federal level winning elections at a state level, such that a party taking federal power usually holds power in most state governments, only to begin losing state governments in coming years.

Party of state governments since 1990

Which major party led each state and territory government at the beginning of each year since 1990, and how does this trend fit with changes of federal government?

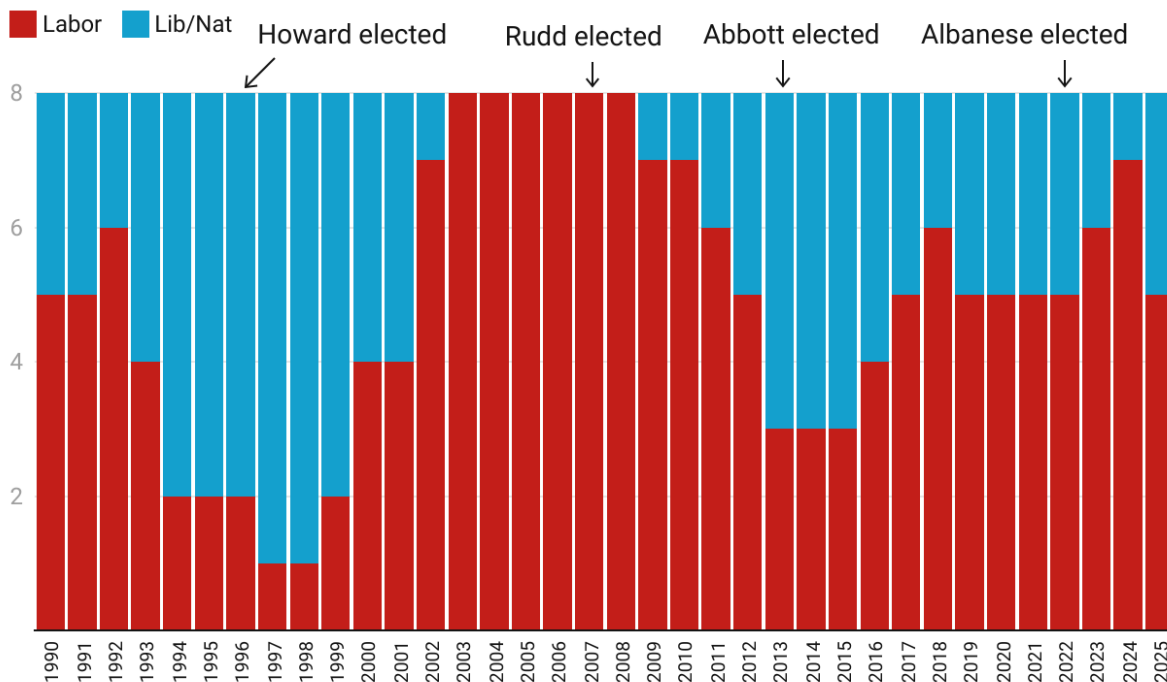


Chart: Ben Raue • Created with Datawrapper

When Albanese led Labor back to power in 2022, the Liberals and Nationals only remained in government in South Australia, New South Wales and Tasmania. Labor victories in New South Wales and South Australia led to a peak of Labor holding power in all but one jurisdiction by the end of 2023, but conservative parties began to take back power in 2024, winning power in Queensland and the Northern Territory.

While there is now a possibility that Labor could return to power in Tasmania after eleven years out of office, any return to competitiveness by the Liberals and Nationals may be seen first in state politics.

The Victorian Labor government has been shaky in recent polling, after holding power for eleven years. The first-term NSW Labor government may also be vulnerable. It is likely that WA Labor will gradually lose support, but is still in a very strong position, while SA Labor looks set for a landslide victory in March 2026.

Political Analysis

Factional Balance

The Labor organisational and parliamentary wings are mostly divided into Left and Right factions. The Labor factions emerged in the 1980s, and by the early 2000s the Right was the dominant faction in the ALP at a federal level. In recent years, the relative strength of the Right has weakened to the point where the faction no longer holds a majority on the federal executive or in the Cabinet.

The Left has gained control of the state organisations and a majority in the state parliamentary caucuses in the large states of Queensland and Victoria in the last decade. The Left gained control of the Queensland state conference prior to the 2015 election, thus giving them the ability to dominate preselections when the party rebounded from a devastating defeat at the 2012 election.

A federal intervention in the Victorian ALP followed the revelation of allegations against senior Labor powerbroker Adem Somayurek, which resulted in his sacking from the Victorian state cabinet and his resignation from the ALP in the face of a likely expulsion. The removal of stacked members and the defection of Right MPs to the Left resulted in the Left gaining a majority in what has been one of Labor's strongest states.

New South Wales and South Australia are now the only two states where the Right has strong control, while the Left is stronger in Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia and Tasmania.

This shift in the internal power balance has taken time to flow through to the numbers in the federal caucus, but Labor's gains in Queensland and Tasmania strengthened the relative position of the Left in the federal caucus.

The Cabinet reshuffle following the 2025 election saw the Labor Left gain two additional Cabinet seats at the expense of the Right, giving them a 12-11 majority at the peak of the Labor federal government.

The Next Labor Leader

Anthony Albanese is now in a strong position after leading his party to its biggest victory in over eighty years. Yet Albanese is now over sixty and has been a member of parliament for 29 years.

Over the next two terms, speculation will turn to the prospects of other Labor contenders for the leadership. While Tanya Plibersek was a serious contender when Albanese won the job, it is likely that her window for the leadership will have closed by the time Albanese moves on. The treasurer, Jim Chalmers, is an obvious contender, but other figures like Tony Burke would be worth watching.



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