



Western Sydney votes



**CENTRE FOR
WESTERN SYDNEY**

Western Sydney and the
2022 federal election

16 MAY 2022

Andrew Phong
Western Sydney University



Image: Sally Tsoutas

ISSUES PAPER

16 May 2022

WESTERN SYDNEY VOTES

Produced by regional think tank, the Centre for Western Sydney, this issues paper examines western Sydney voting behaviours ahead of the 2022 Australian federal election.

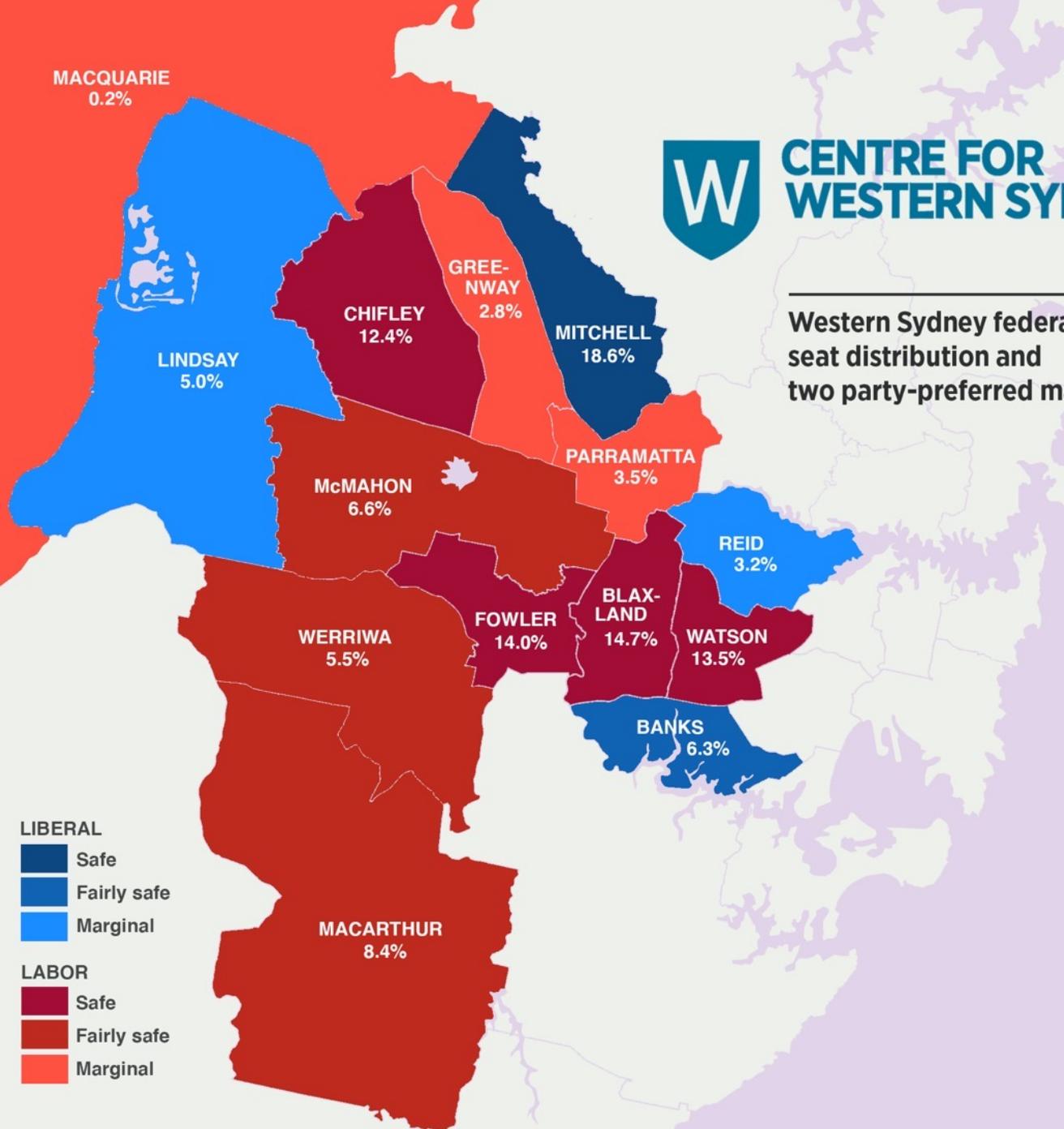
Key points:

- ① **Five of western Sydney's 14 federal electorates are marginal.**
- ① **The region's -3.5 per cent swing against Labor in 2019 was nearly three times the national average (-1.2 per cent).**
- ① **Average two party-preferred support for Labor in Sydney's west dropped from a high of 60 per cent in 2007 to 53 per cent in 2019.**
- ① **Contrastingly, support for Labor in the 'Rest of Sydney' (i.e. Greater Sydney, excluding Western Sydney) has risen by 6 per cent since the 2016 election.**
- ① **Western Sydney's lower levels of education attainment, and higher rates of multilingualism, cultural diversity and religious faith are among its most distinct differences from the Rest of Sydney.**



CENTRE FOR WESTERN SYDNEY

Western Sydney federal seat distribution and two party-preferred margins



LIBERAL
 Safe
 Fairly safe
 Marginal

LABOR
 Safe
 Fairly safe
 Marginal

Candidates and margins ahead of the 2022 election

MACQUARIE	
TEMPLEMAN, Susan	RICHARDS, Sarah
GREENWAY	
ROWLAND, Michelle	PATHI, Pradeep
REID	
SITOU, Sally	MARTIN, Fiona
PARRAMATTA	
CHARLTON, Andrew	KOVACIC, Maria
LINDSAY	
ROSS, Trevor	McINTOSH, Melissa
WERRIWA	
STANLEY, Anne	KAYAL, Sam
BANKS	
SOON, Zhi	COLEMAN, David
McMAHON	
BOWEN, Chris	SINGHA, Vivek
MACARTHUR	
FREELANDER, Mike	PADUAL, Binod
CHIFLEY	
HUSIC, Ed	SINGH, Jugandeeep
WATSON	
BURKE, Tony	ATKER, Sazeda
FOWLER	
KENEALLY, Kristina	NGUYEN, Courtney
BLAXLAND	
	CLARE, Jason GUNEY, Oz
MITCHELL	
SELVARAJ, Immanuel	HAWKE, Alex



Image: Sally Tsoutas

WESTERN SYDNEY VOTES ANYTHING BUT PREDICATBLE

Professor Andy Marks

DIRECTOR, CENTRE FOR WESTERN SYDNEY

16 May 2022

THE QUIET AUSTRALIANS are restless. Ahead of the 21 May 2022 federal election, western Sydney is stirring. The region where, at the last election, just one seat (Lindsay) changed hands looks to be reclaiming its electoral battleground status. If recent history is a guide, western Sydney voters could substantially influence wider results, even tilt the outcome. How that vote unfolds, however, is anything but predictable.

SEATS IN PLAY

Five of western Sydney's 14 federal seats are marginal: Greenway, Parramatta and Reid in the region's centre, and Lindsay and Macquarie in the outer west. The latter, retained by Labor in 2019 by just 371 votes, is Australia's most marginal electorate. To differing degrees, party strategists would view each of these seats as in play this time around.

“Western Sydney voters could substantially influence wider results.”

According to the sweep of most two party-preferred polling, the Liberal-held seat of Reid (3.2 per cent) will return to Labor, and narrow buffers for Labor in other marginals would be bolstered. Of course swings are never uniform, and nowhere is that more evident than in western Sydney.



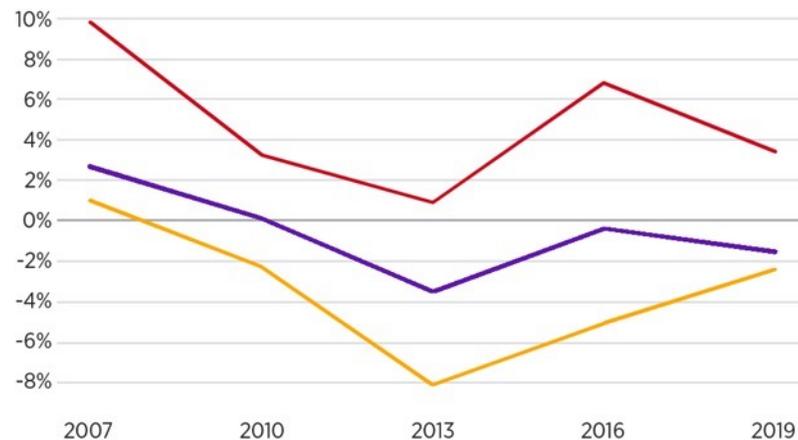
Image: Sally Tsoutas

Labor's two-party preferred vote in Western Sydney compared

2019 federal election result



Change over time



Source: 'Western Sydney Votes', Centre for Western Sydney, April 2022



WESTERN SYDNEY VOTES AT ODDS WITH NATIONAL TRENDS

ANALYSIS OF FEDERAL ELECTION VOTING in Sydney's west conducted by Western Sydney University based think tank, the Centre for Western Sydney, reveals a volatility at odds with national trends.

At the 2019 election, the swing against Labor (-3.5 per cent) in western Sydney was almost three times the national average (-1.2 per cent). Of all the region's electorates, the drift from Labor was at its worst in some of its safest seats.

“The swing against Labor was almost three times the national average.”

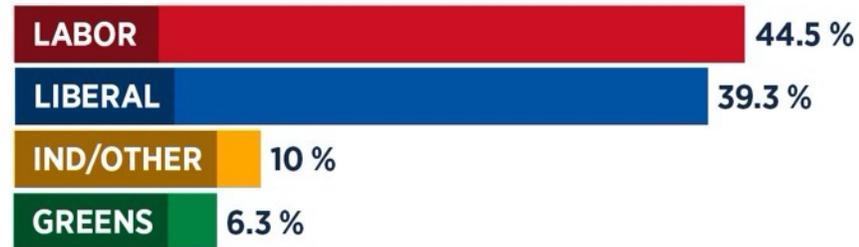
Ed Husic's seat of Chifley dropped -6.8 per cent, Chris Bowen lost -5.5 per cent, and Jason Clare dipped -4.8 per cent in Blaxland. Only Mike Freeland, in Macarthur, gained support (.1 per cent).

In examining the reasons for Labor's 2019 defeat, the party's own review pointed to “the size and complexity of Labor's spending announcements” and an “unpopular leader” as the main challenges. “Working people experiencing economic dislocation”, the review added, “will lose faith in Labor if they do not believe the Party is responding to their needs.”

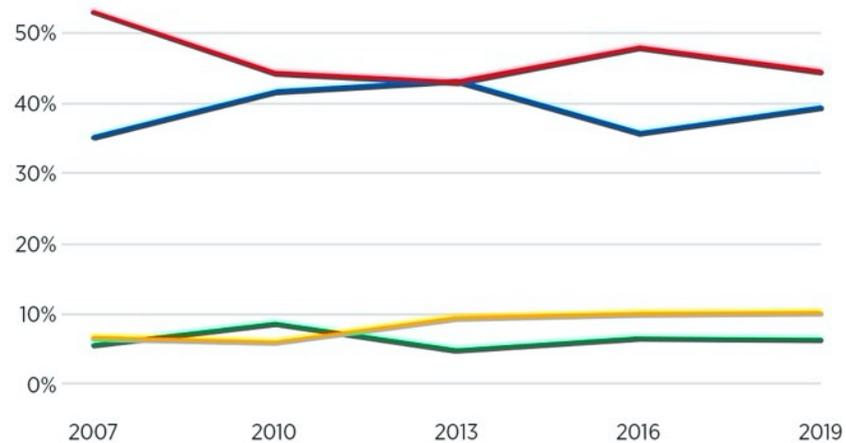
These rationales may apply at the national level, but the amplified scale and intensity of the swing against Labor in western Sydney prompted a more focussed examination.

Federal primary vote in Western Sydney compared

2019 federal election result



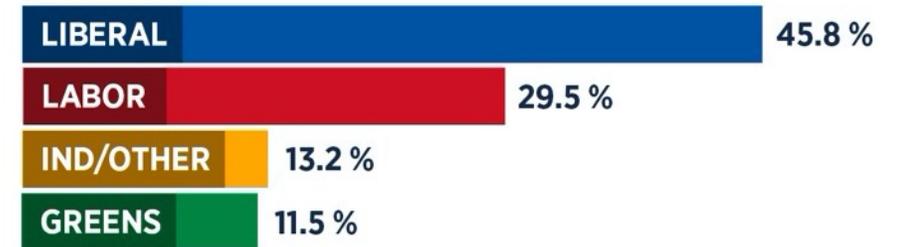
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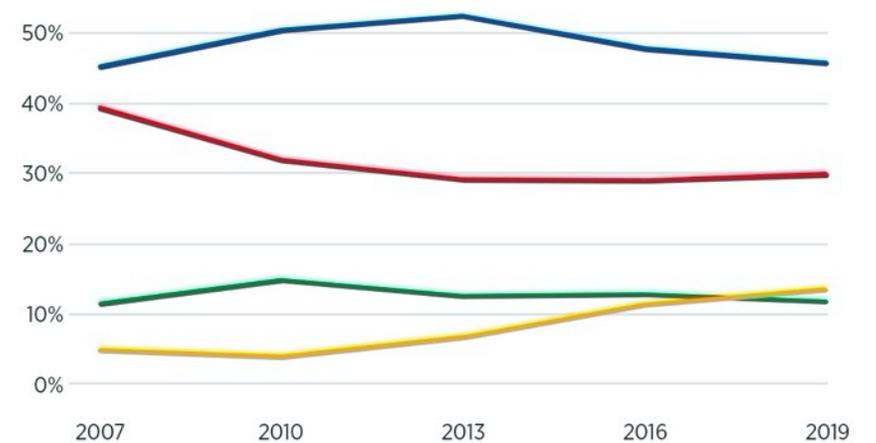
Source: 'Western Sydney Votes', Centre for Western Sydney, April 2022

Federal primary vote in the Rest of Sydney* compared

2019 federal election result



Change over time



* the 'Rest of Sydney' constitutes Greater Sydney electorates excluding Western Sydney



Image: Sally Tsoutas

WESTERN SYDNEY VOTES A FAITH-VOTE NEXUS?

AFTER THE 2019 DEFEAT, Chris Bowen observed, “People of faith no longer feel that progressive politics cares about them.” Around 81 per cent of residents in his seat, McMahon, identify as having religious faith. That’s higher than any electorate in Sydney, and well above the national figure.

Drawing a faith-vote nexus is fraught. While around 57 per cent of eligible western Sydney respondents answered “no” in the 2017 same-sex marriage survey – highest in Blaxland (73.9 per cent) – there were pockets of strong support. For example, in the outer western Sydney electorate of Macquarie, the “yes” response exceeded the national average.

“The ‘no’ campaign targeted conservative immigrant cultures.”

Post survey commentary in the *Sydney Morning Herald* observed, “the ‘no’ campaign targeted conservative immigrant cultures”, adding that “the ‘no’ vote forms a ring around the whiter, wealthier, irreligious inner-Sydney suburbs, and almost all of them are Labor-held.”

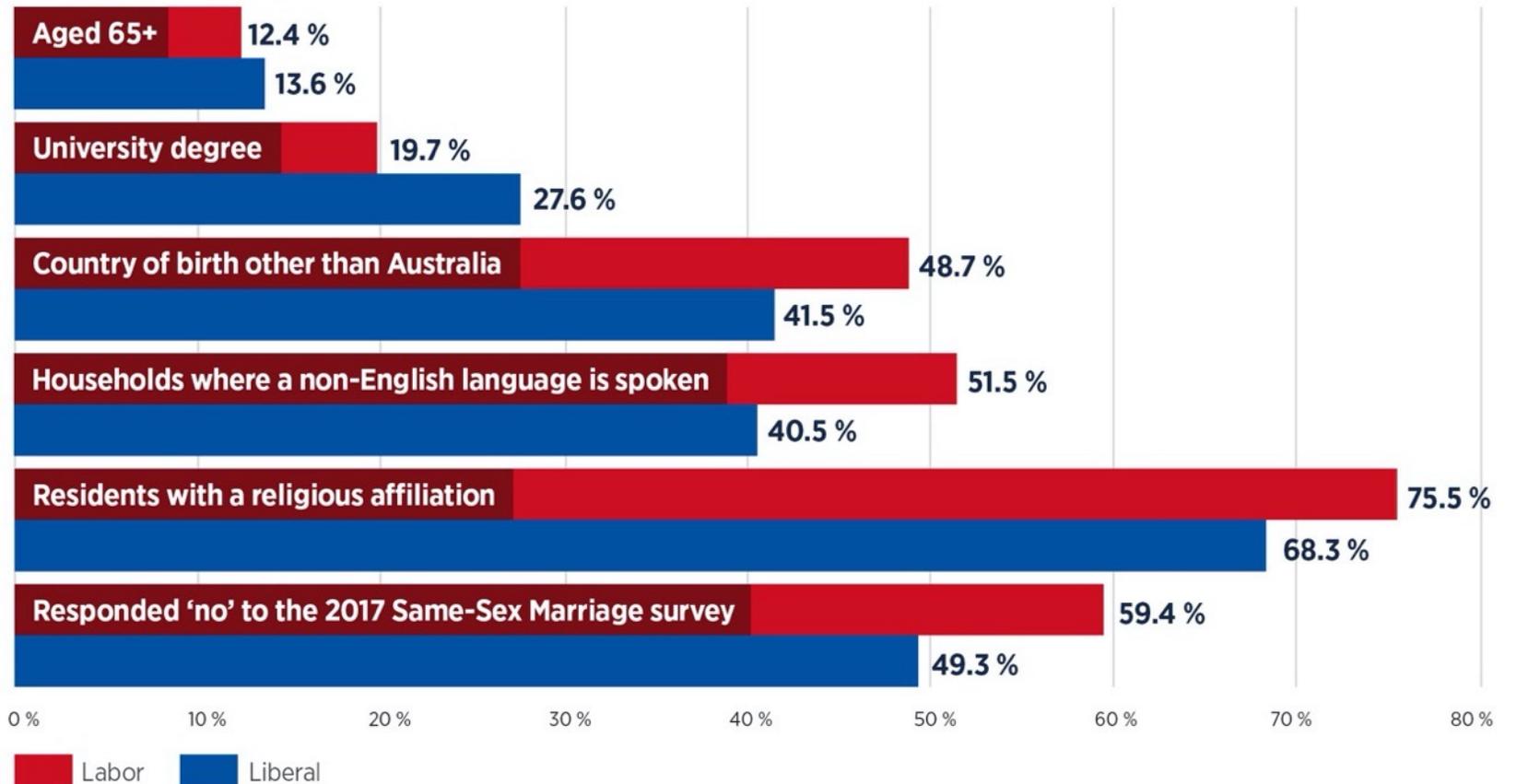
This “conservative” rationale would appear to support the shift of the long-held Labor seat of Reid (which voted ‘yes’ to SSM) to the Liberals in 2013. That trend is, however, contradicted by the strong ‘no’ vote in the recently attained (2013) Liberal seat of Banks. While faith is clearly a factor, it is hardly cut and dry when it comes to explaining the recent volatility of the western Sydney vote. Other forces are at work.



Image: Sally Tsoutas

Characteristics of Labor and Liberal held federal electorates in Western Sydney

Notable differences compared



Source: 2016 Census by CEDs, Australian Bureau of Statistics, in: 'Western Sydney Votes', Centre for Western Sydney, April 2022



Image: Sally Tsoutas

WESTERN SYDNEY VOTES **REAL-LIFE CONSEQUENCES**

FAITH AND CONSERVATISM ASIDE, western Sydney's most pressing issues remain its lags in education attainment, income, digital access and health outcomes. The worst lockdown impacted areas mapped those longstanding gulfs. Ask Bankstown, Blacktown or Fairfield residents what they wrestled with during lockdowns. Few would reply, 'religious freedoms'.

Characteristic of Labor, pandemic challenges have sparked a reconnection with its base. Case in point, Husic's railing against the "great failure" of the vaccine rollout program. "Sixty per cent of the deaths during the lockdown were in western and south-western Sydney", he told the House late last year. "When I asked the Prime Minister if he would send in the ADF to help set up and run vaccination clinics in Mount Drutt, he turned his back on us."

"Railing against the 'great failure' of the vaccine rollout program."

Likewise, during the worst of lockdown, Bowen told how Fairfield residents were "doing the right thing... coming out in big numbers to get tested and vaccinated" only to confront "unclear" and "rapidly changing rules".

In Sydney's southwest, Clare turned to familiar Labor terrain, relaying the toll of rising costs on his constituents. "When the rent goes up but wages don't", he said, "there are real-life consequences."



Image: Sally Tsoutas

WESTERN SYDNEY VOTES **A STREET-BY- STREET CONTEST**

LABOR'S APPROACH AHEAD OF THIS ELECTION differs from the dense policy manifesto it took to the region in 2019. The party now seems intent on a street-by-street contest with the Coalition for western Sydney rather than a grand national reform agenda.

For Coalition MPs in Sydney's west, the script during this parliamentary term has also been local but the scope tighter. The Liberal member for Lindsay, Melissa McIntosh has endorsed "the work the Morrison government has been doing to improve the lives of women", highlighting increased women's safety measures in her electorate.

In Banks, David Coleman has been acknowledging community groups persisting under difficult circumstances. His colleague Dr Fiona Martin in Reid has done the same, while rejecting her party's proposed Sex Discrimination Act amendments, reportedly provoking some branch level fractures.

"Local issues are again a staple for both parties ."

In western Sydney's safest Liberal seat, Immigration Minister Alex Hawke eventually overcame candidate selection impasses in several NSW seats, Parramatta included, enabling 'captain's picks'.

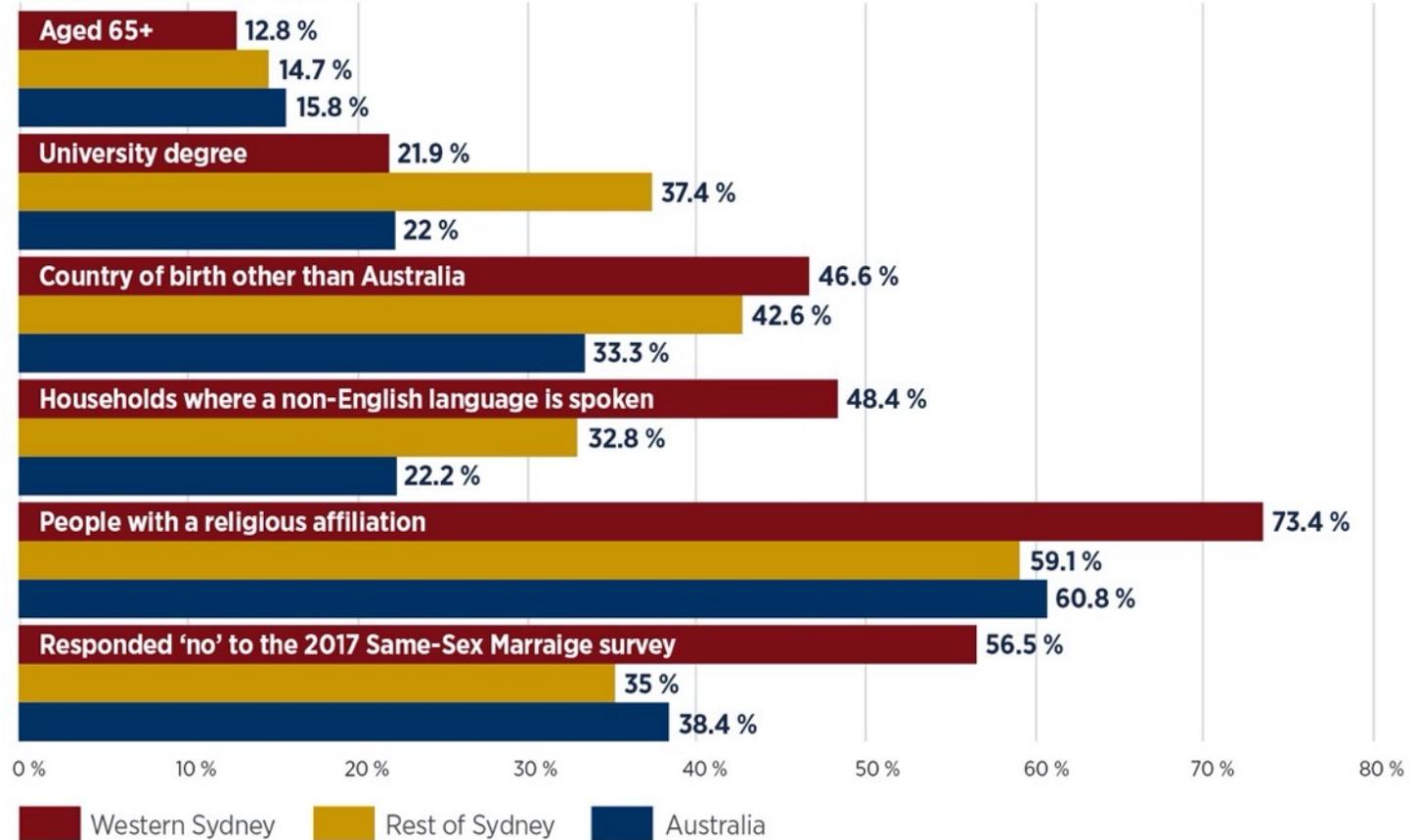
With western Sydney locked-down significantly during this term of government, local issues are again a staple for both parties seeking to capture the region's support.



Image: Sally Tsoutas

Characteristics of Western Sydney, the Rest of Sydney and Australia

Notable differences compared



Source: 2016 Census by CEDs, Australian Bureau of Statistics, in: 'Western Sydney Votes', Centre for Western Sydney, April 2022



Image: Sally Tsoutas

WESTERN SYDNEY VOTES **NARROW-CASTING AND SINGLE AGENDAS**

FOR LABOR, FOCUSING ON LOCAL ISSUES is a return to terrain it vacated last campaign. After all, one of former Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam's first political victories in his south-western Sydney seat of Werriwa was bringing indoor plumbing to large swathes of the region.

For the Coalition – wrestling with geopolitical conflict, volatile inflation and record debt – keeping it local won't be easy. But the 'kitchen table' is where Sydney's west will likely be won this time.

“The temptation to narrow-cast messages... appears too hard to resist.”

Despite western Sydney's self-evident and overarching socioeconomic preoccupations, the temptation for the major parties to narrow-cast messages to western Sydney on the basis of single-issue agendas appears too hard to resist.

During the current campaign, the Coalition's engagement with transgender participation in sport regularly features in the Prime Minister's western Sydney press encounters yet not elsewhere across the rest of Sydney, nationally or curiously, in the seat where it was raised, Warringah.

This is an intriguing strategy. Western Sydney's dynamic voting record suggests its voters are far from disengaged politically. They appear to have an acute consciousness of inequity across Greater Sydney, and an awareness of when they are being targeted politically in contrast to other regions.



Image: Sally Tsoutas

WESTERN SYDNEY VOTES POLITICAL TRACTION AND GRADUAL SHIFTS

WESTERN SYDNEY IS NOT POLITICALLY HOMOGENOUS. Campaign pitches that ignore the region's pronounced diversity, and seek to draw out divisions can just as easily disaffect voters seeking to connect with more balanced and informed messaging.

For Labor, matters of a faith or social-conservative dimension, are issues on which the party is reluctant to engage. Western Sydney's demographic shifts have seen (as Reid and Banks exemplify) a gradual transition of formerly safe Labor seats to the Liberals. The transition of seats the other way – for instance, Macarthur, has been comparatively erratic.

“Demographic shifts have transitioned formerly safe Labor seats, Liberal.”

Broadly, the loss of sections of Labor's eastern western-Sydney edge reflects gradual improvements in income levels, education and employment, rather than a sudden surge in conservative values.

To take one of those improvements as an indicator, average levels of university degree attainment across Banks and Reid (31.7 per cent) are closer to those of non-western Sydney areas of Greater Sydney than, for example, degree attainment rates in proximate Labor seats like Fowler (12.7 per cent), McMahon (14.5) or Werriwa (15.2).

On this logic, policies that support greater access to education may produce more substantial and long-term political traction for the Coalition, ahead of a socially-conservative agenda.

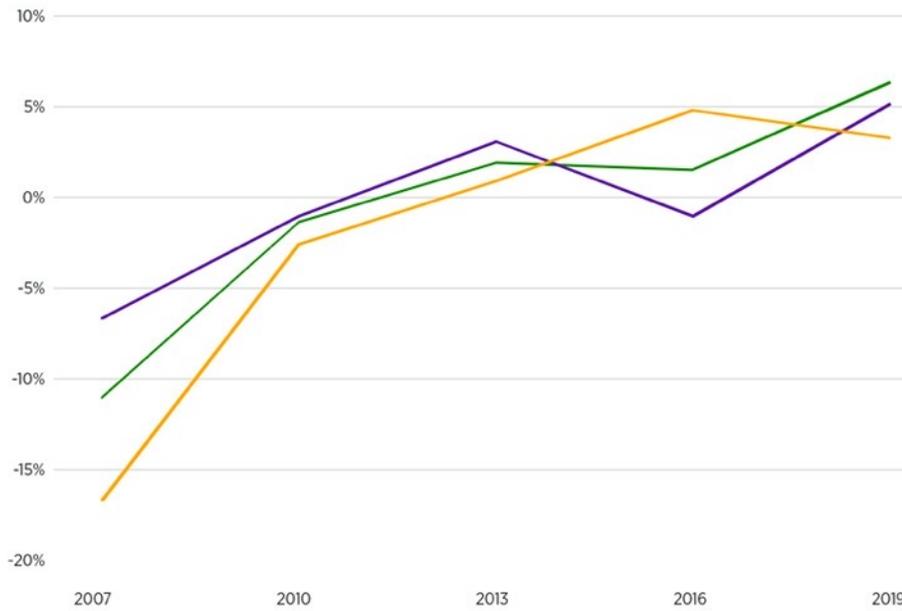


Western Sydney Liberal held electorates in transition

2019 federal election result



Change over time



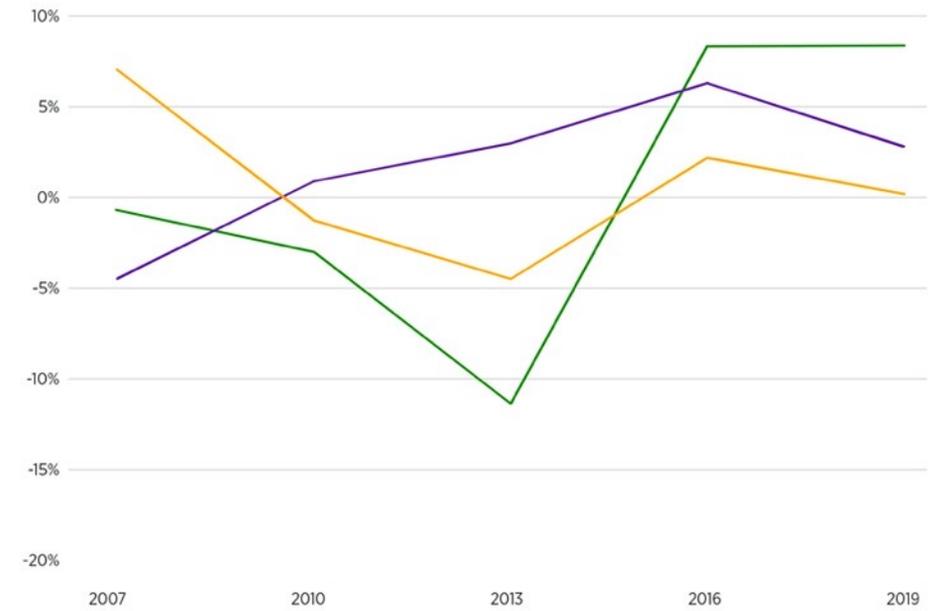
Source: 'Western Sydney Votes', Centre for Western Sydney, April 2022

Western Sydney Labor held electorates in transition

2019 federal election result



Change over time





WESTERN SYDNEY VOTES **ASPIRATIONS, IDENTITY AND DRIFT**

ARRESTING THE DRIFT OF LABOR SUPPORT in sections of western Sydney may require the party finds a way to contend with a challenging proposition. The realisation of many of the social aspirations Labor supports – for instance, in education, job security and economic participation – may, over time, give rise to greater identification with Coalition economic agendas.

This election presents additional, western Sydney distinct challenges, for both parties.

“Labor’s choice of outside candidates is not without risk.”

Labor’s choice of candidates, Andrew Charlton (Parramatta) and Krisitina Keneally (Fowler), from outside of western Sydney is not without risk. While both figures bring experience and profile, their capacity to identify with local communities and articulate local issues will be tested.

Parramatta’s narrow margin (3.5 per cent) presents an opportunity for Liberal candidate Maria Kovacic, who also lives outside the electorate but within the region. However, protracted Liberal pre-selection conflict has limited the candidate’s time to build momentum.

In Fowler, the decision to overlook prospective candidate, Tu Le, in favour of Keneally has stirred a challenge. Former Liberal, now independent candidate, Dai Le’s contest of the seat complicates Labor support in a seat on a margin (14 per cent) that would ordinarily place it beyond doubt.



Image: Sally Tsoutas

WESTERN SYDNEY VOTES RESHAPING TRADITIONAL POLITICS

WESTERN SYDNEY'S QUIET AUSTRALIANS ARE RESTLESS, and its unlikely either of the major parties major will be able to claim the region as its own for some time. Howard's battlers and Labor heartland no longer, western Sydney voters are expressing a diversity in opinion at the ballot box to an extent that defies prediction and conventional political logic.

The party that succeeds in the 2022 poll, will undoubtedly owe a debt to western Sydney. The real test, however, will be which party is able to hold the region, and build lasting support. Doing so will require a reshaping of traditional political dialogue and policy development.

“Howard's battlers and Labor heartland no longer.”

For the Coalition, transparency and accountability will be critical. The failure to prioritise vaccines and related Commonwealth support to communities severely impacted by COVID-19 will not be forgotten. Nor can breaches of trust like the Leppington land transaction, or the imbalances of the commuter carparks program and similar schemes be easily glossed over.

Equally, Labor will need to prove why outside expertise trumps community connections in its candidate selection. If successful at the election, the party will need to assure western Sydney residents that it is the party best placed to contend with cost-of-living pressures in a region where they will likely be keenly felt.

WESTERN SYDNEY VOTES

About the author

PROFESSOR ANDY MARKS was appointed Director of the Centre for Western Sydney in late 2019. He is also the CEO of the NUW Alliance and Pro Vice-Chancellor, Strategy, Government and Alliances at Western Sydney University. He leads major strategic initiatives with government, industry, and the community.

Andy has a PhD and first-class honours in political science and literature. He writes regular columns for the Sydney Morning Herald and the Daily Telegraph. He is also an occasional panellist on ABC Sydney's 'political forum' and a regular on The Drum.

Andy is also Chair of the Western Sydney Community Forum and a Non-Executive Director with Wentworth Healthcare Ltd. He is the founder of the CatalystWest interactive policy forum, and co-founder of the Launch Pad start-up incubator.

Prior to his current role, Andy was senior researcher with the St Vincent de Paul Society and the Smith Family, a Council member at the University of New England, and an ARIA nominated professional musician and composer.



@DrAndyMarks

cws@westernsydney.edu.au

www.westernsydney.edu.au/cws

About the Centre

THE CENTRE FOR WESTERN SYDNEY is a regional think tank based at Western Sydney University. The Centre is about putting the voices of the region first. That objective is pursued via conversations, collaborative research, and advocacy for, and with, the western Sydney region.



**CENTRE FOR
WESTERN SYDNEY**