The 2019 federal election
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Key issue
The Coalition was returned to government with 77 seats out of 151, in a surprise victory after polls had predicted a Labor win. The Coalition won 51.57 per cent of the national two-party preferred vote, an increase of 1.21 per cent on the 2016 election. The election saw record levels of early voting, and a slight decline in postal voting since 2016.

The 2019 federal election saw the Coalition win 77 seats in the 151 seat House of Representatives (one seat, Macquarie, may be close enough to trigger a recount), a net increase of two seats compared to the 2016 result. The two-party preferred result of 51.57 per cent was an increase of 1.21 per cent on the past election.

A majority in the House of Representatives is 76 votes, so with 77 seats the Coalition Government will have a majority of one vote once it has appointed a Speaker.

The election restored the Coalition to a majority in the Parliament after the loss of Wentworth in a by-election in October 2018 and the resignation, in November 2018, of Julia Banks, who chose to sit as an independent (and who was not re-elected). The result constituted a slight improvement on the Coalition’s result in 2016, and a substantial improvement on their position at the end of the 45th Parliament.

The results reported in this paper are current as of 7 June 2019.

Key dates
The 2019 federal election was announced on Thursday 11 April 2019 for Saturday 18 May. The election campaign period was interrupted by both the Easter long weekend and Anzac day. The timing of the election also required the Federal Budget to be brought forward to 2 April.

- Issue of the writs: Thursday 11 April 2019
- Close of the rolls: Thursday 18 April 2019
- Close of nominations: Tuesday 23 April 2019
- Declaration of nominations: Wednesday 24 April 2019
- Early voting commenced: Monday 29 April 2019
- Election advertising blackout commenced: Wednesday 15 May 2019
- Polling day: Saturday 18 May 2019
- Last day for the return of the writs: Friday 28 June 2019

Elected House of Representatives candidates and Territory senators will assume their seats when the new Parliament commences following return of the writs, whereas elected state Senate candidates will take up their seats as of 1 July 2019 for a six-year term.

Redistributions
The 45th Parliament saw electoral redistributions in most of the jurisdictions—Queensland, Victoria, ACT, South Australia, Northern Territory and Tasmania. These led to boundary changes and a number of House of Representatives seat changes:

- Batman (Vic.) renamed Cooper
- Melbourne Ports (Vic.) renamed Macnamara
McMillan (Vic.) renamed Monash
Murray (Vic.) renamed Nicholls
Wakefield (SA) renamed Spence
Denison (Tas.) renamed Clark
Fraser (Vic.) created as a new seat
Bean (ACT) created as a new seat and
Port Adelaide (SA) abolished.

As a result of SA losing a seat, and Victoria and the ACT both gaining one each, the 2019 federal election was the first to be held with 151 seats in the House.

Coalition leadership changes in the 45th Parliament

Scott Morrison led the Coalition to the election, having taken over from Malcolm Turnbull as Liberal leader and Prime Minister in August 2018, less than nine months before the election. Mr Morrison is the third Liberal Prime Minister since Tony Abbott won the 2013 federal election.

The election was also the first as leader for Nationals leader Michael McCormack, who had taken over as leader from Barnaby Joyce in February 2018.

Clive Palmer takes the AEC to court

In April 2019 businessman and candidate Clive Palmer took the AEC to the High Court, arguing that the AEC’s practice of choosing two candidates for the indicative preference count in each division might reduce the incentive for voters, in parts of the country where the polls were still open, to vote for minor parties or independents. He sought orders from the High Court to prevent the public disclosure of the final two candidates in any electorate until all of the polls had closed across Australia.

The High Court unanimously dismissed the case on 7 May 2019; at the time of publication reasons for the decision had not been released.

Electoral participation

The AEC reported that 16,424,248 people were enrolled for the election. This constituted an enrolment rate of 96.8 per cent, which the AEC reported to be the most complete roll ever.

At the time of publication the turnout rate for the election was 91.87 per cent, but this should increase as the final postal and declaration votes are counted. The turnout rate for the 2016 federal election was 91.01 per cent, the lowest rate since the introduction of compulsory voting.

Of the 458 candidates who nominated for the Senate, 38 per cent were women (compared to 36 per cent in 2016). Of the 1,056 candidates who nominated for the House of Representatives, 32 per cent were women (compared to 31 per cent in 2016).

Candidate troubles

The election saw an unprecedented number of candidates who either resigned or were disendorsed by parties. Ten candidates who resigned or were disendorsed after the close of nominations remained on the ballot paper, with their original party listed.

- Gurpal Singh (Scullin, Vic.), Liberal
- Luke Creasey (Melbourne, Vic.), Labor
- Peter Killin (Wills, Vic.), Liberal
- Jeremy Hearn (Isaacs, Vic.), Liberal
- Jessica Whelan (Lyons, Tas.), Liberal
- Steve Dickson (Qld Senate), One Nation
- Wayne Kurnorth (NT Senate), Labor
- Jay Dessi (Lalor, Vic.), Greens
- Tony Pecora (Melbourne, Vic.), United Australia and
- David Paull (Parkes, NSW), Greens.
At the time of publication none of these candidates looked likely to be elected.

Following legislative changes introduced shortly before the election, all candidates were required to complete a qualification checklist relating to their eligibility under section 44 of the Australian Constitution as part of the nomination process.

**Early voting**

In 2018 the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (JSCEM), in its inquiry into the 2016 federal election, recommended that pre-poll voting be restricted to no more than two weeks before election day. While the Government has not yet responded to that report, it did pass legislation requiring that pre-poll voting not commence until five days after the declaration of nominations, up from four days previously. Due to the timing of the issue of the writ for the 2019 election, however, this meant that the pre-poll period went for one day longer than in either 2013 or 2016—for a total of three weeks.

Early voting once again proved popular with 4.8 million people pre-poll voting, compared to around 3.0 million in 2016—an increase of some 60 per cent. On the basis of postal vote application data published by the AEC, it appears that postal voting may have decreased slightly in popularity, with around 1.51 million postal vote applications in 2019 compared to 1.56 million in 2016.

**Seats changing hands and new Members**

Ten House of Representatives seats changed party as a result of the election. The most notable of these was former Prime Minister Tony Abbott losing his seat of Warringah (NSW) to independent Zali Steggall. The Liberal Party won back Wentworth (NSW) from Independent Kerryn Phelps, who had won the seat in October 2018 at a by-election. The Liberals also won Lindsay (NSW), Braddon (Tas.) and Bass (Tas.) from Labor. In Queensland, the LNP won Longman and Herbert from Labor. The only material seat gain for Labor was Gilmore (NSW), which it won from the Liberal Party. Labor also won Corangamite (Vic.) and Dunkley (Vic.)—seats which were held by the Liberal Party, but which were notionally Labor following the 2017–18 redistribution.

A number of additional seats changed member but not party following a number of sitting members not re-contesting, including high-profile frontbenchers such as Julie Bishop and Christopher Pyne from the Liberals and Wayne Swan, Jenny Macklin and Kate Ellis from Labor. A less-typical example was the Independent for the division of Indi (Vic.) Cathy McGowan, who stood down and was replaced by her chosen successor, Helen Haines. In total there are 18 new members of the House of Representatives.

**The Senate election**

The Senate election in 2019 was the first half-Senate election to be conducted under the new Senate voting system introduced prior to the 2016 election. This did not, however, lead to any changes in how voters completed their ballot.

At the time of publication the Senate count had not been completed; however on the basis of published first preference results, it appears that Coalition received a slight swing in its favour, as did the Greens, with the ALP suffering a slight negative swing. Pauline Hanson’s One Nation also received a small swing towards it, and Clive Palmer’s United Australia Party appears to have only crossed the four percent threshold needed to have its nomination deposit returned in the NT.
Given the relatively small size of the votes for minor parties, it is quite possible that the size of the Senate crossbench for minor parties other than the Greens will be reduced in the 46th Parliament.

Polling failure

The most striking feature of what was, essentially, a status quo result for the Government was how unexpected it was. Polls for Australian federal elections have historically been remarkably accurate when it comes to forecasting the two-party preferred result. In 2016 all of the final polls from the major polling companies were within one percentage point of the final result, with Newspoll and Essential both within 0.1 percentage point of the final result.

In 2019, however, the final Newspoll, published the day before the election, had Labor leading on 51.5 per cent of the two party preferred result, which was 3.07 percentage points higher than the final result. The actual Coalition primary vote of 41.44 was 3.44 percentage points higher than the final Newspoll (38 per cent), and Labor’s actual primary vote of 33.34 was 3.66 percentage points lower than the final Newspoll (37 per cent).

Exactly what went wrong with the polls is not yet clear. The stability of the polls in the lead-up to the election (three Newspolls during the election period returned identical results) had led some commentators to suspect ‘herding’ (where pollsters, intentionally or otherwise, adjust the calculations behind the poll to return more consistent results).

The involvement of polling results in recent party leadership instability (culminating in Malcolm Turnbull citing 30 negative Newspoll results when announcing his 2015 challenge to Tony Abbott for the Liberal Party leadership) indicates how important the polls are to modern electoral politics in Australia. The consequences of a possible decline in confidence in the polls are difficult to predict.

The polling failure of 2019 and its causes and consequences are likely to be of intense interest to the Parliament.

Labor leadership

Following the second election loss under his leadership, Bill Shorten resigned as Labor leader following the election. Anthony Albanese, who contested the 2013 leadership ballot, was the sole nominee and was declared leader, with Richard Marles deputy.

The next election

The timing of an election is dependent on a number of constitutional and legislative requirements. If the next federal election is a ‘standard’ House of Representatives and half-Senate election, it will have to be held by May 2022.

Further reading

D Muller, ‘What’s different about the 2019 federal election’, FlagPost, Parliamentary Library blog, 24 April 2019.

D Muller, ‘Online political communication—does this post need to be authorised?’ FlagPost, Parliamentary Library blog, 23 April 2019.