

HOW THE PEOPLE

Voters have been abandoning the major parties in droves due to a fracturing of trust and a desperate lack of leadership



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In the two months since the Bondi Beach massacre on December 14, and in the weeks since the special sitting of parliament last month and the implosion of the Coalition parties, public support for Labor, the Liberals and the Nationals – as well as for Anthony Albanese and Sussan Ley – has plummeted.

The Prime Minister, the Opposition Leader and Nationals leader David Littleproud have all slumped in the polls, while One Nation leader Pauline Hanson has taken her party to historic heights.

The latest Newspoll survey shows the depth of this withdrawal from mainstream politics, with the combined primary vote for the major parties at just 53 per cent – the lowest level in Newspoll history – and 47 per cent supporting One Nation, the Greens and other independents and minor parties.

For the first time, in protest against the major parties, primary support for One Nation now just outranks the Coalition – 22 per cent to 21 per cent.

There is a core of disdain for weak leadership in these numbers, and Hanson benefits from the perception of being a strong leader with a clear, consistent message – essentially about immigration – that answers anxiety voters feel without having to actually do anything about it.

Albanese's leadership on the failed Indigenous voice to parliament referendum, since the Hamas terror attack on Israel in October 2023, and certainly since his inconsistent response on a royal commission and antisemitism since the 2025 Bondi massacre have turned voters away despite his massive majority in parliament.

The confused, contradictory and at times childish antics of Ley and Littleproud about splitting the Coalition, reunifying the Coalition and the complete focus on "minutiae", as former prime minister John Howard described it this week, are founded on weak leadership.

Albanese's massive election victory in 2025 exposed the pitiful support for the Coalition but the parliamentary result, built on preferential voting, masked Labor's own poor primary vote as support for the major parties continues to decline.

More importantly for Australian voters and the established political parties, the 2025 election confirmed longer-term trends of growing dissatisfaction with the electoral process, increasing cyni-



Sussan Ley, in parliament on Thursday, has not been able to restore confidence in the Liberal Party

MARTIN OLMAN/NEWSWIRE

Chalmers facing a 'Keating moment' on spending cuts

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"Chalmers won't go down the Keating path. There won't be a big cut in spending but a focus on raising the tax take," Oliver says.

After more than tripling the federal deficit to \$36.8bn, the Treasurer, and his state government counterparts, say they are trying to rein in spending, but in the meantime economists are holding them accountable for higher inflation and rising interest rates.

Oliver thinks Chalmers should not only follow Keating with cuts to spending, but that he should copy Labor's longest-serving treasurer by shifting to more means-testing instead of

universal style welfare. In the 1970s you could get welfare easily and go surfing or go to Nimbin – but then in 1986 the government shifted to means testing," Oliver says.

Corinna Economic Advisory's Saul Eslake is especially concerned about the government's lack of means testing.

"This is the dilemma: we are moving away from means testing to a more universal European style welfare system. But what neither side of politics says is that you can't have a European-style welfare state with a US style tax system."

Research from the independent E61 Institute covering government spending from 2000 to 2024, shows universal-style in-kind payments have increased from 1.4 per cent to 3.7 per cent of GDP, while means-tested

income support cash payments such as JobSeeker and Family Tax Benefit have dropped from 7.8 per cent of GDP to 5.3 per cent.

As Labor considers more widespread spending measures through Anthony Albanese's legacy project of childcare for all, alongside the NDIS and Medicare, the shift to universality over cash benefits is only expected to grow.

Eslake says for Chalmers to pay for this shift towards European style welfare, GST and income taxes would have to go higher.

But if Chalmers chooses new or higher overall taxes rather than spending cuts, he could be doing a great disservice to the economy.

Some of the best economic research on this comes from Harvard professor Alberto Alesina, and Milan University's

Carlo Favero and Francesco Giavazzi.

In their comprehensive study of more than 3500 policy changes across 16 countries, they found that reductions in entitlement programs and other government transfers were less harmful to economic growth than tax increases, because spending cuts are likely to reduce the burden on taxes into the future.

"Such (spending) cuts were accompanied by mild and short-lived economic downturns probably because taxpayers perceive them as permanent and so expected that the taxes needed to fund the programs would be lower in the future," their research said.

They quantify the impact. An expenditure cut worth 1 per cent of GDP implied a loss of about half a percentage point relative to the average GDP growth of

the country, whereas a tax hike plan amounting to 1 per cent of GDP was followed by a 2 per cent decline in GDP.

EY chief economist Cherelle Murphy reminds people that Chalmers' decisions on spending cuts are harder to make now relative to history.

"The commonwealth has the most complex national security and defence backdrop since World War II to manage," Ms Murphy cautions.

"At the moment, Australia's governments are also facilitating services for the oldest population Australia has ever had, and they are also introducing policies to coax along energy efficiency."

But Ms Murphy also says government spending should be more disciplined given they now have access to better technology than at any time in history.

"Smarter, rather than more,

ism towards politicians, rising disengagement with voting, and declining trust in government – with only one in three believing governments will do the right thing.

The political infighting over antisemitism laws, the splitting of the Coalition and a record low in support for the major parties has reaffirmed this disengagement, as Coalition voters particularly tell Liberal and Nationals MPs they are switching to One Nation.

Former Nationals leader and deputy prime minister John Anderson, who has warned of the rise of One Nation, complained to *Enquirer* that later polling showing One Nation support at 26 per cent had been dismissed on the ABC as "populists". But "you cannot dis-

miss one in four Australians simply as populists, this is a serious trend," Anderson said.

It is true that while these are historically high levels, they are part of a longer term trend, not just a short-term switch in the polls for One Nation. This trend is deadly for the Coalition parties, which are receiving fewer and fewer preferences from One Nation, and there is the potential to turn four-or-five-way electoral contests – between Labor, the Liberals, the Greens, the Nationals and One Nation without a coalition agreement – into an unpredictable lottery.

Victorian Liberal MP for Goldstein Tim Wilson, the only Liberal at the 2025 election to win back a seat from the Climate 200 teal in-

dependents, believes the current climate requires a new "approach" to politics and leadership.

In an address to the Young Liberal Convention in Melbourne, Wilson said: "Families are anxious that their household budgets will be eaten by inflation and interest rates. And the next generation do not believe the Australian promise will deliver for them."

Then he warned that: "When a system doesn't work for people, their logical solution is to change the system. And when they don't trust the institutions to do so, they'll change those in the institutions to do it for them."

"We see this most glaringly in the United States and the United Kingdom, but we are not immune."

"There is only one way through this moment: leadership."

"Leadership is not occupying a chair, or (being) telegenic for election posters. Leadership is uniting people around vision."

"We are failing Australia and Australians, and they will have every right to judge us harshly. They already have," he said.

The disillusion with party politics is building disengagement and an even more concerning erosion of faith in democratic institutions.

The respected and comprehensive ANU Australian Electoral Study conducted after the May 2025 election found that during the 2010s there were steep declines across a range of indicators capturing voter attitudes towards democ-

racy in Australia, including political trust and satisfaction with democracy – although the 2025 results show that levels of trust have improved from the record low observed in 2019. Despite modest improvements, it is still only one in three Australians who believe people in government can be trusted to do the right thing.

Other indicators highlight more recent concerns. For example, there have been declines in the proportion of respondents who report that they would still vote if it were voluntary, reaching a record low in 2025.

The 2025 Australian Election Study incorporated a range of questions to explore citizen attitudes towards proposals to reform

tionalists, Liberals and independents. That scenario was not a hypothetical, but a real possibility.

describes a government stitched together out of necessity from disparate parts. It will be a coalition of the willing, with the Greens and the Nationals supporting the Labor government.

One Nation's future success will hinge on the preference allocation of the Liberal and National

tremendously remote – possibility: a One Nation minority government supported by the Greens and the Nationals.

intense regional frustration with government. Those frustrations will be fuelled by the One Nation