

Australians express concern about economy as they go to the polls

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Anthony Albanese (left) and Scott Morrison (right) both adjust their hair as they appear on the 'great debate' on TV in the run-up to the election

Sydney, May 21 (RHC)-- Australians head to the polls on Saturday to decide whether to give Scott Morrison's Liberal-National coalition a fifth consecutive term in office or opt for change and back Anthony

Albanese's Labor party.

From climate change to the economy, there is a sense of uncertainty about the future. Blessed by natural resources, Australia has enjoyed more than 20 years of steady economic growth, buoyed by the mining boom and demand from China, despite an increasingly tense relationship with the world's fastest-growing economy.

But now, Australians are feeling the pinch – the cost of living is rising and property prices spiralling out of reach – and experts say that will be what matters most at the ballot box.

“Australians are almost uniformly worried about economic management,” said political scientist Jill Shepherd from the Australian National University (ANU). “Jobs and growth are at the forefront of voters' minds.”

Labor is proposing methods to make housing more affordable – a key concern in Australia – as well as matching wage growth to the rising cost of groceries to tackle the global inflation crisis.

“The Liberal party doesn't want to talk about that as much because they've been responsible for the last four years in the rise in cost-of-living,” she told Al Jazeera. Morrison's Liberals are the dominant party in the conservative coalition. Morrison's supporters have instead sought to focus attention on his government's handling of the coronavirus pandemic.

Australia was one of the first countries to close its borders and, for much of 2020 and 2021, pursued a successful zero-covid strategy – keeping the virus out with strict quarantines and ensuring the economy was largely unscathed.

However, even there, the situation is not all that positive for Morrison's government. After Sydney failed to contain an outbreak of the Delta variant last June, the policy was abandoned and Australia is now reporting among the highest number of new cases globally each day.

“People want this to be over and aren't registering the significant number of deaths. There's a Boeing 737 crash every seven to eight days,” said Dr Norman Swan, a prominent medical journalist.

Still, Swan says the pandemic is unlikely to affect the outcome of the election: “Since neither party has made it an issue there's nothing to make you change your vote.”

Morrison has also made some missteps while in office. Dubbed ‘Scotty from Marketing’ by a local news satire publication, critics claim he is more concerned with image and photo opportunities than policy.

He has been condemned over his response to this year's floods – with angry Lismore residents dumping their flood-damaged belongings at his door – and also over his handling of the devastating bushfires two years ago when he went on holiday to Hawaii.

As southeastern Australia burned and people were forced to take shelter on beaches, a photo of him doing the shaka at Waikiki Beach caused an outcry.

Albanese has been a member of parliament for more than a quarter of a century, but despite being around a long time, most voters know little about him. The Australian Financial Review, for example, reported that in a series of focus groups voters labelled him ‘dull’ and ‘uninspiring.’

At the start of his campaign, he failed to recall the unemployment rate and, a few days ago, told journalists Australia's borders were closed – despite them opening some six months ago.

Perceptions of the two leaders might matter more given the lack of difference between the major parties' policy platforms, at least on the economy.

Morrison's party is proposing a scheme to allow young people early access to their superannuation funds to buy property and get a foot on the property ladder. It is a policy that is likely to be popular among those under 40, who have been ridiculed for supposedly prioritising brunches of smashed avocado over real estate, but economists warn it is likely to drive house prices even higher.

"I think what the Liberal Party is hoping here is that young voters will be so excited by the prospect of buying their first house that they won't mind that price rise," she said.

Another issue that has been at the forefront of voters' minds is climate change. Australia is particularly vulnerable to its effects, with a long history of droughts, bushfires, and floods.

Despite this, the mining industry makes up a significant portion of the country's economy, and Morrison's government has been heavily criticised internationally for inaction on climate change.

Albanese has said he wants to change this, getting Australia out of the "naughty corner" at United Nations climate change conferences. "Climate change is looking at being one of the most significant factors in polling at this Saturday's election," said sustainability investor Katerina Kimmorley.

The desire to see determined action on climate has prompted voters to look towards independent candidates and away from the major parties. "These independents are strong advocates on climate change. They may end up holding the balance of power in parliament and then could end up having a significant impact on climate policy," Kimmorley said.

The two parties also diverge in their policies on Indigenous peoples. For 50 years, Aboriginal groups have occupied the lawn outside Canberra's Parliament House, demanding land rights and recognition as the nation's first people in the constitution.

Now, Albanese has said he wants the constitution amended to recognise that Australia's history did not begin in 1788 when the British arrived. A senior member of the Liberal Party, however, Treasurer Josh Frydenberg, has said there is a long way to go before constitutional recognition. Frydenberg is currently polling behind his independent challenger in his once-safe Liberal seat.

Labor has also promised to overhaul childcare to make it more affordable and enable more women to get back to work. "One of the most effective ways we can boost participation is by getting rid of the complicated mess of payments that put hurdles in the path of parents wanting to return to work," Albanese told an audience at the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry earlier this month.

While Labor is up currently in the polls, its margin is narrowing. "For the most part, both parties are holding together, just trying to scrape over the line to election day," said ANU's Shepherd. "We'll see after the election which party is dealing with bloodshed and recriminations."

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