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The Australian Labor Party

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In 2022, the ALP achieved something it had only previously secured four times in the previous seven decades: it won office from opposition. The 2022 result is a landmark event for Labor as Anthony Albanese matched what had only been achieved in 1972, 1983 and 2007. The 2022 result was striking for a range of reasons—notably, the rise of the Teal Independents, as documented throughout this collection—but the triumphant Labor result also obscures an underlying electoral fragility for the party and broader changes in Australia’s party system.

In this chapter, we outline the distinctive factors that underpinned Labor’s 2022 electoral performance and focus on the key transitions from the disappointing 2019 result under Bill Shorten. The chapter has three main sections. First, we outline Anthony Albanese’s four-stage strategy, built on a process of review, vision-making, policy clearing/setting and the ‘short’ campaign. Second, we explore Labor’s relations with its key stakeholders—notably, the business sector and the unions. Finally, we briefly situate Labor’s win in the wider context of the electoral fortunes of the centre-left.

Overall, we offer three key arguments. First, we argue that describing Albanese’s agenda as ‘small target’ misunderstands his policy agenda and pitch. Rather, we argue that the descriptor ‘thin labourism’ better captures the policy and ideological contours of Albanese’s Labor. Second, we argue that Labor’s ‘pro-business’ strategy reflects an effort to forge a consensual approach between capital and labour, but while it harks back to the Hawke neo-corporatist agenda, it is also distinctive. Third, we argue that, in part,

Albanese's win echoes that of other successful centre-left parties which have captured a distinctive post-Covid environment with something of a 'back to basics' agenda.

Labor's win in context

The electoral analysis of Labor's 2022 win is documented elsewhere in this volume (Chapters 16 and 17), but here we draw attention to three key developments. First, the structural support for Labor remains in decline, as evidenced by its declining primary vote—down to a record low of 32.6 per cent in 2022 (see Figure 9.1). This is part of the ongoing decline of the major parties' vote share—a trend common across many comparable democracies. Despite the win, Labor recorded an overall 0.8 percentage point swing against it. Second, in common with previous elections, Labor's vote share differed across the States and Territories, with Labor only increasing its primary vote in Western Australia, Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory. This is explored further in the section below on Labor's 'short campaign'. Third, there were seat-specific and localised issues for the party—notably, the miscalculation of running Kristina Keneally in the nominally safe seat of Fowler (Nguyen 2022). While Labor strategists may take comfort from the overall result and the implosion of the Liberals, the wider picture for Labor is one of a certain brittleness, fuelled by longer-standing electoral trends such as the rise of the minor parties and Independents, the decline of lifetime Labor voters and the rise of swing voters in a more pluralised party system (Cameron and McAllister 2019).

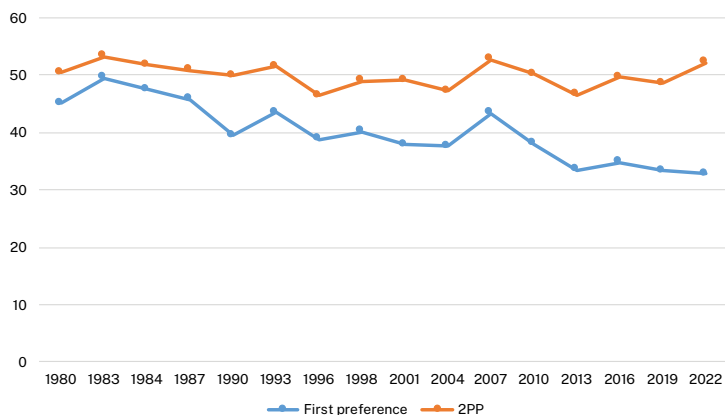


Figure 9.1 Labor's first-preference and two-party-preferred counts, 1980–2022

Source: Constructed by the authors from Australian Electoral Commission data.

Albanese's four-stage strategy

Albanese first contested the internal Labor Party leadership election against Bill Shorten in 2013. The voting system used combined the votes of party members and the federal caucus in equal proportion. Albanese won the rank-and-file vote but Shorten won heavily among MPs. After the 2019 loss, Albanese stood for the leadership again and was initially expected to face off against Chris Bowen, but Bowen withdrew. Albanese (from the party's Left faction) then assumed the leadership unopposed, with Richard Marles (from the party's Right faction) selected as deputy leader. Albanese faced a difficult period as Opposition leader that was marked by the global Covid-19 pandemic and Labor—in common with many other opposition parties—struggled to catch media attention. As one senior Labor figure reported to one of the authors, the ALP communicated with Keir Starmer's British Labour team, with both parties expressing the difficulty of achieving cut-through during the height of the pandemic. While Australia has a relatively positive story to tell in terms of its response to the pandemic—albeit largely helped by the luck of its remoteness and island status—Albanese was able to leverage a degree of valence politics against Morrison's Coalition Government. For much of the period, Albanese's Labor attacked the government's record on the slow purchasing of vaccines, the delayed vaccine rollout and the delays in setting up suitable quarantine facilities.

It is hard to overstate just how scarred the ALP leadership team was after the devastating 2019 federal election loss, and many of its renewal and policy choices stem from this defeat. Albanese adopted a four-stage strategy to win the 2022 election (Middleton 2022).

Stage one: Review

First, the party conducted a review of its 2019 campaign performance, which led to an important critical report (Emerson and Weatherill 2019). The post-election review offers a candid and strikingly honest take on the devastating 2019 loss, noting a 'cluttered' policy agenda, the unpopularity of the leader and, critically, internal institutional failures over the running of the campaign. A key element was Labor's spending agenda:

Labor's tax policies did not cost the Party the election. But the size and complexity of Labor's spending announcements, totalling more than \$100 billion, drove its tax policies and exposed Labor to

a Coalition attack that fuelled anxieties among insecure, low-income couples in outer-urban and regional Australia that Labor would crash the economy and risk their jobs. (Emerson and Weatherill 2019: 7)

Stage two: Vision

In the second stage of the campaign strategy, Albanese set out his 'vision' in a series of key speeches to a range of audiences. The collated speeches can be accessed on Albanese's website (Albanese 2020). These speeches arguably lack an overall coherence, but they champion a range of progressive, social-democratic and crucially labourist themes. They generally did not catch much media attention, but they were a key part of resetting Labor's agenda. In one of the early speeches, Albanese gave a brief overview of some of the core themes:

The Labor Party is going to advance a progressive and practical agenda consistent with our values. Our policy agenda will be bold and clear. And by the time the next election comes about, Labor is going to be back as the party of growth, the party of aspiration, the party of social justice, the party of nation building, the party of the natural environment, the party of science and the party of the future. (Albanese 2020: 11)

It is striking that throughout the speeches, Albanese refers to Labor's core values but then does not go on to define them in much detail or give them sustained attention. For example, he references a core value of social mobility, but makes no references to it in later speeches nor any links to the emerging policy agenda around it. Figure 9.2 illustrates the frequency of the key words and themes from his vision speeches.

From the vision speeches, we can distil the Albanese approach around the following core themes and issues:

- economic growth
- fairness
- jobs and wages
- security
- nation-building and infrastructure
- aspiration.

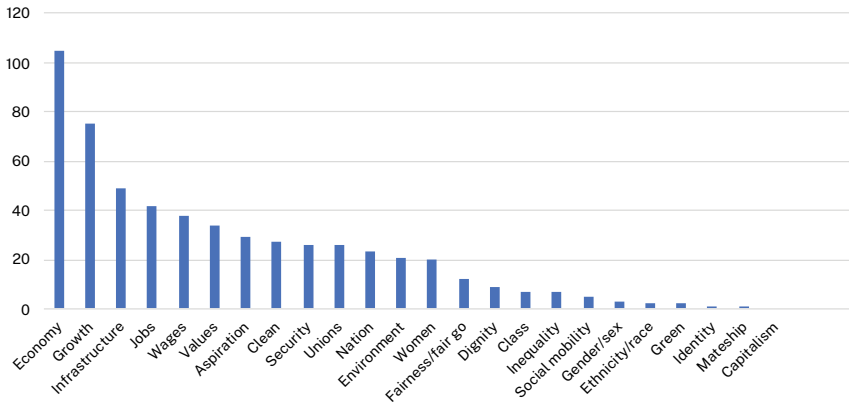


Figure 9.2 Keywords in selected speeches by Anthony Albanese, 2019–2020

Note: The figure reports keyword searches from a corpus of 11 key vision speeches, totalling 84 pages and 40,599 words.

Source: Compiled from Albanese (2020).

Albanese sets out a distinctively labourist approach in these speeches, giving centrality to the concepts of work, wages and conditions. Indeed, during the ‘short’ campaign, the rise in global interest rates, which included a mid-campaign rate rise by the Reserve Bank of Australia, drew further attention to the ongoing issue of wage stagnation in Australia.

Stage three: Policy clearing and policy renewal

Following the vision statements, the strategy shifted to the policy agenda. A key event was the Special Platform Conference held in March 2021 (ALP 2021a). This was critical because it was here that the factional trade-off over policy played out, with many of the key decisions made before the conference and by the key factional players (Remeikis 2021). Most importantly, Labor under Albanese abandoned several of Shorten’s signature policies, including numerous tax concessions (see Table 9.1). There was a noticeable shift away from the technocratic tools for redistribution that characterised the Shorten period. A critical, yet largely overlooked, element of Labor’s agenda was how it accepted and operated within the tax changes set out by the Coalition—arguably the most important was Labor’s agreement to pass the highly regressive, so-called stage three tax cuts—the centrepiece of which was the removal of an entire income tax band (the 37 per cent band for those on incomes of \$87,000 to \$180,000 per annum) (ACOSS 2019).

Table 9.1 Albanese's policy agenda

Policy reversals/changes	Policy proposals
Reversal of policies on negative gearing and capital gains tax	Structural focus on improving capacity and productivity within the economy
Reversal of policy on 'franking' credits	Infrastructure investment in renewable energy; focus on local manufacturing (\$1 billion National Reconstruction Fund); transport spending
Sign up to Coalition's stage three tax cuts – in effect, to remove the 37 per cent income tax band	Legislation on job security, wage theft and gender pay gap
Sign up to Coalition's Low to Median Income Tax Offset; fuel excise duty cut for six months	Push for universal childcare; expert panels on pay awards for care workers; reduce costs of medicines on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme
	'Help to Buy' federal housing scheme (shared-equity scheme)
	Expansion of fee-free TAFE and university places

Source: Compiled by the authors.

The other significant policy development (and dilemma) for the ALP was the issue of climate change—a key issue for the whole election. In December 2021, Albanese revealed that the party would commit to a new target to reduce emissions by 43 per cent from 2005 levels by 2030, having already signed up to the Paris Agreement's overall strategy of net-zero emissions by 2050 (ALP 2021b; Morgan 2021; RepuTex 2021). Under its 'Powering Australia' plan, the ALP linked its climate strategy with its green jobs agenda and, in particular, its claim that the plan would create more than 600,000 jobs, many of which would be in the regions.

Politically, this position had two main impacts. First, it largely neutralised the issue—long a sore spot in the ongoing climate wars—for the ALP and placed further pressure on the Coalition's much weaker position. What also helped the ALP was the reversal of the stance of the Business Council of Australia (BCA) on Labor's climate policy. At the 2019 election, the BCA called Labor's then 45 per cent target 'economy wrecking'. Yet, with changing political and economic circumstances, the BCA undertook its own modelling and reversed its policy by pushing for a stronger, 46–50 per cent target by 2030 (Clarke 2021). While the BCA's position in 2019 arguably damaged Labor, its 2021 policy reversal added pressure on the Coalition. Second, for Labor, this was a classic compromise position, pulling Australia closer to allies like Japan (which has a 46 per cent by 2030 target), which was

stronger than the Morrison Government's position but fell well short of the Greens' plans (see Chapter 12) and the broader scientific and stakeholder views that the target should be more ambitious.

Overall, Labor's new economic and tax policy agenda was shaped and constrained by the terms set by the Coalition and, as a result, sought to reduce its overall policy offerings, operate within strong fiscal constraints and strategically outflank the Coalition, especially on climate change.

Stage four: The short campaign

Labor needed to win at least seven seats to win a majority in the lower house, yet there were, in theory, several routes to office. At the time of the election, there were 15 Liberal seats held with margins of less than 5 per cent, and the ALP picked up six of these. What saw the ALP over the line was the perhaps unexpected win in Bennelong (NSW) and Labor's emphatic performance in Western Australia, which saw it win Hasluck, Pearce and Tangney, in addition to Swan. What was notable was the ALP's weak performance in Tasmania, which included two of the five most marginal Liberal-held seats.

Labor's short campaign, in our view, revolved around two main themes: a focus on the shortcomings of Scott Morrison's leadership and its own narrow, 'back-to-basics' labourist agenda. As Labor's campaign director Paul Erickson (2022) argued after the election, this approach was driven in part by Labor's qualitative fieldwork, which was showing a sense of 'change fatigue' among the electorate.

Labor focused on the centrality of leadership as a key campaign strategy, scrutinising the weaknesses of Morrison as a leader. A string of policy and leadership blunders by Morrison's government between 2019 and 2022—notably, around bushfires, the vaccine rollout and floods in Queensland and New South Wales—led some commentators to speculate that the campaign was Albanese's to lose (Grattan 2022; Keane 2022). The anti-Morrison strategy was fraught with risk, not least as opinion polling showed that while support for the ALP was relatively strong, Albanese's popularity as preferred prime minister was significantly weaker.

Labor's vision was 'for a better future' and focused on manufacturing, wage growth, gender pay parity and housing (Albanese 2022e). The early weeks of the campaign were tainted by a series of gaffes by Albanese, however, these did not appear to greatly affect Labor's overall short campaign performance.

In fact, it allowed key figures including Jason Clare and Katy Gallagher to promote Labor's agenda (Kenny 2022). However, while Albanese's gaffes did not sink the short campaign, an untested counterfactual is to ask whether a different leader might have improved Labor's overall result.

Despite the era-defining character of Labor's result, its performance in the lower house was mixed. The party secured an outright majority government and was clearly ahead in the two-party-preferred vote. Yet, Labor's countrywide performance was uneven and it made very little headway in Queensland and Tasmania.

A clear contributing factor to Labor's success in the federal election was the party's electoral dominance in Western Australia. The decision to have the ALP's campaign launch in Perth for the first time since the 1940s seemed to acknowledge the importance of the State from the very beginning of the six-week campaign. Labor now holds a majority of Western Australia's federal seats for the first time since 1990 (Phillimore 2022). More specifically, Labor's decision to use a separate advertising agency for its digital campaigning in the west, compared with the overall national strategy, created a successful grassroots-style campaign. It proved to be a long electoral night for ALP's 'true believers', as the overall swing to Labor did not look strong until the much later results from Western Australia rolled in.

Even accounting for 'change fatigue', Labor arguably underperformed electorally. While Labor's primary vote increased by a modest 0.8 per cent in Queensland, it failed to gain any lower house representation and, strikingly, lost the seat of Griffith (which it had held with a 2.9 per cent margin) to the Greens. After the election, only five of the 30 Queensland lower house seats belong to Labor. This has prompted Labor, post-election, to better understand the Queensland result, and Albanese and the new Cabinet travelled to Gladstone to unpick the lack of electoral traction (Milner 2022). The loss of Terri Butler in Griffith and Kristina Keneally in Fowler (NSW) injured the party, forcing Albanese to reshuffle his ministry after losing two key Cabinet members.

The Queensland result will be a disappointment to Labor, given that the State had been an electoral priority. Four months before the election, Albanese visited 20 towns throughout Queensland in 10 days and reassured the press and voters that Labor had learnt the lessons from its 2019 electoral defeat (Albanese 2022a). As early as January 2021, Albanese announced that Labor was targeting the seats of Leichhardt, Herbert, Flynn, Capricornia,

Longman, Petrie, Forde and Brisbane (Massola 2021). In relation to digital campaigning, the Queensland Labor Party spent \$258,350 on political advertising on its Facebook and Instagram profiles between 21 March and 20 May 2022. The only Labor Party pages that spent more than Queensland on advertising were the national and Victorian Labor pages (Arya 2022: 7). Labor has a long history of Statewide electoral success in Queensland and looking to the 2025 election it may need to revisit its policy agenda, appeal and style of campaigning within that State (Crowley 2022).

New South Wales also produced mixed results for the ALP. Strikingly, it lost the ‘safe’ seat of Fowler in south-western Sydney, which it had held since 1984. The ‘parachuting’ in of Keneally as the Labor candidate for Fowler in late 2021 caused considerable controversy and criticism of the party machinery. The decision to run Keneally over Vietnamese-Australian lawyer Tu Le even led to some sitting federal Labor MPs like Anne Aly from Western Australia publicly condemning the decision as ‘a huge failure for Labor on diversity’ (Aly 2021).

While Labor may be delighted with the overall result, there is a fragility to its electoral base. In 2022, the focus of Labor’s campaign was to position Albanese as a ‘safe change’ with a parliamentary party focused on ‘renewal, not revolution’ (Albanese 2022d).

‘Thin’ labourism under Albanese

If Labor either willingly accepted or felt forced to comply with the Coalition’s regressive tax regime, its response was to build an agenda that pointed in a distinctly labourist direction. We use ‘labourism’ as a descriptor to refer to the tradition of a pragmatic social democracy that focuses narrowly on improving the pay and conditions of working people and seeking labour market activation strategies. Despite Albanese’s own faith in progressive values, the agenda was steeped more in economic than in social forms of equality.

Albanese’s thin labourism sought to address several systemic weaknesses within the Australian economy. A primary focus was the issue of wage stagnation—a policy setting deliberately marginalised by the Coalition. Labor’s approach to deal with these structural economic weaknesses was to target its policy at specific groups and key vulnerable sectors. First, there was a raft of infrastructure spending, fuelled by the \$10 billion National

Reconstruction Fund, which represented a potential second wave of stimulus spending in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The infrastructure focus also tied into two other key elements in Labor's agenda. The infrastructure spending underpinned Labor's response to climate change through renewable energy technology. As Albanese also outlined in his campaign launch speech, the other element was a more nativist appeal to increase domestic manufacturing capabilities.

Second, Labor targeted key sectors and demographic groups, especially women, with a focus on affordable (and near-universal) childcare. As Albanese argued throughout the campaign, the focus on childcare was not a welfare strategy but a key plank of the ALP's economic renewal plan (Curtis 2020). This was also linked to key workers in other 'care' sectors. The third plank was a traditional centre-left focus on training and education with key pledges around expanding fee-free places in the TAFE/vocational sector. Taken together, these strategies were arguably more internally consistent, or mutually supporting, than perhaps the more redistributive agenda under Shorten's leadership.

We argue that it is better to describe this approach as 'thin labourism' than 'small target'. Small target implies both ideological convergence with the Coalition and a less expansive spending program. This does not adequately describe Labor's approach; it was not 'Coalition-lite', despite clear policy agreements on issues such as offshore detention. But why 'thin' labourism? Here, Freeden's concept of ideological morphology is instructive. Freeden (1996) identifies ideologies as revolving around a set of core, adjacent and peripheral values and ideas. In his 1996 treatment of socialism, Freeden identifies a range of key values that dovetail with Heywood's (2021) account. Without systematically mapping these out against Albanese's agenda, we can see that the key values traditionally associated with the social-democratic tradition are downplayed, marginalised or organised. Notably, we note the downgrading of class politics, the critique of capitalism and collective forms of action. Some of these are, of course, implicit in Albanese's agenda, but it is a thin labourist approach in that the core of the agenda is a revalorising of the central concept of work—not, for example, the concepts of equality or welfare. The term 'thin' is used here not necessarily as a normative critique, although of course it can be used that way, but rather as a conceptual approach to better understand the pragmatic dimension of Albanese's Labor. Supporters of Labor's agenda might prefer a term such as 'strategic labourism' or 'new labourism'.

We can also see how Albanese brings in other ideological strains and values—nativism and environmentalism, for example—to buttress this ‘work-first’ agenda. It is striking, too, how in the Australian context the Labor Party is unable or unwilling to have a public discussion about its welfare policies. There has been a longstanding neoliberal assault on the Australian welfare system, which has historically had a much more targeted (rather than universal) character. Since John Howard’s Coalition Government in the 1990s, a range of key benefits have not been significantly increased or had positive legislated increases (Whiteford and Redmond 2018). For example, as part of its 2018 ‘Raise the Rate’ campaign, the Australian Council of Social Service noted that the Newstart (now JobSeeker) allowance had not increased above the consumer price index since 1994 (ACOSS 2018: 2).

If we use Keman’s (2017) typology of welfare clusters (social-democratic, universal welfare and social safety), we could argue that Australia has shifted from an atypical ‘social-democratic’ cluster to a much more minimalist ‘safety net’ approach. Neither Shorten’s technocratic social democracy nor Albanese’s thin labourist approach has sought to radically refurbish the fundamentals of Australia’s welfare state. The thin labourist approach is instructive in not just what it seeks to valorise, but also what it ignores, downplays and marginalises. And what of its electoral success? Party strategists might argue that Albanese’s thin labourist approach was electorally more successful than Shorten’s, but there was not necessarily a ringing endorsement of Labor at the 2022 polls (Soutphommasane 2022).

A new consensual politics? Labor’s relationships with key stakeholders

Albanese sought to position his leadership of the ALP in a Bob Hawke ‘consensus’ style of approach (Murphy 2022). In a speech leading up to the election campaign, Albanese called for a rediscovery of Hawke’s ‘spirit of consensus that ... used to bring together governments, trade unions, businesses and civil society around their shared aims of growth and job creation’ (Albanese 2022f). This consensus refers to not just the trade union movement and the business sector, but also Commonwealth and State governments, given they ultimately share the same interests: a stronger economy, increased productivity and ‘more good jobs’ (Albanese 2022b). The new consensus revolved around three key issues within industrial relations policy: wages, insecure work and gender inequality.

Throughout the short campaign, and in his vision speeches, Albanese highlighted his commitment to facilitating mechanisms for the collaboration of the trade union movement and the business sector. Labor's Powering Australia Plan, for example, was touted as having the support of the BCA, the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Australian Industry Group, the National Farmers' Federation and the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) (Albanese 2022f). This was linked to Labor's promise to hold an employment summit with the trade unions and business to tackle problems relating to wage growth and economic productivity (Albanese 2022b: 34). This approach appears to be supported by some bodies within the business sector, like the BCA (2022), who welcomed Labor's election victory as 'a chance to seize the opportunity and end the deadlock on workplace relations, restore the Hawke–Keating enterprise bargaining system to lift productivity and let Australians earn more'. The summit also seemed to placate the needs of the business sector—specifically, the need for solutions to skills shortages (Bonyhady 2022).

Albanese's shift towards a 'safe' centrist path for Labor, whereby not appearing anti-business while not exclusively talking about the trade unions, aided the party in communicating values of fairness and security (Manwaring et al. 2022). At the same time, through the assistance of the trade union movement, Labor was able to launch a campaign on job security and wages, while presenting a more consensual solution than that of the Coalition.

There was a clear contrast between the approach of former leader Shorten and that of Albanese in working with business. Company directors were reportedly supportive of Albanese and other key shadow Cabinet figures like Jim Chalmers and Richard Marles and their 'pro-business' rhetoric compared with Shorten's more 'pragmatic' approach to the private sector that sought to target the 'big end of town' in pursuit of tackling economic inequality (Boyd 2022: 40; Manwaring 2020: 282).

Despite this friendlier approach to the private sector, Labor and the trade union movement presented similar messaging, with both seeking to target Australia's rising costs of living, wage stagnation and insecure work. The ACTU and State-based trade union councils such as Unions NSW and the Victorian Trades Hall Council ran two separate campaigns in the 2022 federal election. The first was based on industrial relations reform—specifically, wages and job security. The ACTU focused its social media campaigns on childcare, costs of living, wage growth, job security, an integrity commission and a raise in minimum award wages of 5.5 per cent.



Plate 9.1 Victorian Trades Hall Council corflute attacking Scott Morrison

Source: Emily Foley.

The second—which received the most coverage during the short campaign—was an attack campaign to persuade voters against voting for Morrison’s Coalition Government (Haselmayer 2019) (see Plate 9.1). Other unions campaigned on policy areas to strengthen attacks on the Coalition. The Australian Education Union, for example, focused on increased funding for public schools while the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation supported Labor’s plan to fix the crisis in the aged care sector.

While not overtly supporting the ALP, Australian Unions and the ACTU maintained a strong anti-Coalition message leading up to and after the election. The capacity for third-party interest groups like the unions to push negative or attack styles of campaigns was beneficial to Labor, which was able to focus on the positive promotion of jobs and growth. In this area, Labor and the trade union movement promoted similar messaging in their pursuit of industrial relations reform, secure jobs and wage growth. Labor’s and the unions’ ‘parallel’ campaigning (rather than mutually reinforcing campaigning as in the 2007 anti-WorkChoices campaign) arguably reflects something of an ongoing distancing between the party and the wider union movement, driven by the declining union density in many sectors. This distancing and pragmatism place the union movement and the party on different footings than in the past.

The ALP in comparative context

Finally, we situate the performance of the ALP in a wider comparative context. Much recent scholarship of the centre-left has catalogued the declining electoral fortunes of the longstanding family of centre-left social-democratic and labour parties. Since a highpoint in the mid 1990s, many centre-left parties have taken a third-way turn and, since the 2000s, electoral fortunes have suffered—although this also reflects a more general decline for all major parties in comparable countries. After the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2008–09, there was speculation that the left might recover its fortunes, but in many cases, this failed to materialise. The ALP, for example, was barely electorally rewarded for its generally well-received stimulus response to the GFC. However, more recently, there has been some limited revival of the centre-left (see Table 9.2). With some caveats, we can make some observations about the overall performance of the centre-left.

Table 9.2 Centre-left party performance in 12 selected countries

Country	Centre-left party	Recent electoral performance	Vote share most recent election (%)
United Kingdom	British Labour	Out of office: Lost 2010, 2015, 2017 and 2019 elections.	32.1 (2019)
Netherlands	Partij van de Arbeid (PvdA; Labour Party)	Out of office: Sixth placed in 2021. In coalition 2012–17 (24.8% in 2012; 5.7% in 2017).	5.7 (2021)
France	Parti socialiste (PS)	Out of office: Won the presidential election in 2012, but lost in 2017 and 2022. Now part of the New Ecological and Social People's Union (left alliance).	1.7 (2022 presidential election)
Austria	Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs (SPÖ; Social Democratic Party of Austria)	Out of office: SPÖ and Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) in grand coalition, 2008–17.	21.2 (2019)
Belgium	Parti socialiste (PS; Francophone) Flemish Socialist Party (SPA)	In office (part of 'Vivaldi' four seasons, seven-party coalition): Instability in party system; six governments from 2019 to 2020. Right coalition (four parties from 2014 to 2019). Centre-left led six-party coalition from 2011 after 2010 election.	PS, 9.46; SPA, 6.71 (2019)
Germany	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD; Social Democratic Party of Germany)	In office ('traffic-light' coalition from 2021): Junior partner in grand coalition with Christian Democratic Union of Germany, 2013–21; in opposition, 2009–13.	25.7 (2021)
Spain	Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE; Spanish Socialist Workers' Party)	In office since 2018 (current coalition with Podemos): First-placed party in April 2019 election; lost in 2016 to People's Party but ousted them in 2018.	28 (November 2019)
Portugal	Partido Socialista (PS)	In office (majority): In coalition with left block, communists and Greens since 2015.	41.4 (2022)
Sweden	Sveriges Socialdemokratiska Arbetareparti (SAP; Swedish Social Democratic Party)	Out of office, losing 2022 general election. Was in office as minority government (2014–22).	28.3 (2018)

Country	Centre-left party	Recent electoral performance	Vote share most recent election (%)
Norway	Arbeiderpartiet (AP; Labour Party)	In office (minority government since 2021): Centre-right government with wins in 2013 and 2017 elections.	26.3 (2021)
Aotearoa New Zealand	New Zealand Labour Party	In office (majority): Won 2021 as majority, after 2017 win in coalition with New Zealand First. Previously in opposition nine years.	48.7 (2021)
Australia	ALP	In office (majority): Had not won a majority of seats since 2007, lost 2013, 2016 and 2019 elections.	32.6 (2022)

Source: Compiled by the authors.

First, some centre-left parties have not recovered from their downturn in fortunes after the GFC. The cases of the French Parti socialiste (PS), the Dutch Partij van de Arbeid (PvdA; Labour Party) and of course the end of the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) in Greece are instructive. Either party system changes or exogenous political shocks have fundamentally destabilised the centre-left. In a country like Belgium with two centre-left parties, they remain part of an incredibly fractured political system and have relatively strong footholds in some regions.

Elsewhere, the parties have recovered. For example, there was a resurgence across Scandinavia, with a number of centre-left governments taking office in Norway and elsewhere. There are leading examples of relatively strong centre-left performers—notably, the Partido Socialista (PS) in Portugal (and their remarkable success as a ‘contraption’ coalition) and the Jacinda Ardern-led Labour Government in Aotearoa New Zealand. In this respect, the ALP’s return to office reflects this wider, limited return of the centre-left.

It is worth making a few observations about the state of the left more generally. First, many of the left’s parties are recording historically low vote shares, even when they win office (for example, the Swedish Social Democratic Party). Generally, many European countries have coalition governments and the ALP’s win also reflects the general shift away from mainstream parties. The centre-left is holding on to 20–30 per cent of the electorate and government formation dynamics reflect whether they can achieve power.

We can also make some comparative judgements about the reorientations of the centre-left, especially since the third-way era. In many respects, the parties have moved ‘left’ and, in Europe in particular, have placed a stronger emphasis on rebuilding their welfare states. This arguably stands in contrast with the cases of Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia (Manwaring 2021). In several comparable cases, we can also see how the centre-left is appealing to certain values to underpin its agenda. Common themes such as ‘dignity’ and ‘security’ are part of the electoral pitch of the centre-left in the United Kingdom, Aotearoa New Zealand and Germany. Moreover, as with Albanese’s labourism, we can also see a strong shift to the parties adopting significant decarbonisation and climate change strategies in their economic plans, while consistently seeking to remain ‘pragmatic’ and ‘fiscally responsible’.

A snapshot comparison with Olaf Scholz’s win in Germany gives a strong insight into how the parties are winning back the electorate, especially after long periods of centre-right rule. Scholz’s Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD; Social Democratic Party) was losing in the polls but managed to win with 25.7 per cent of the vote after Angela Merkel left the political stage. Scholz’s leadership agenda had a valence/competence theme: ‘Which person do we want to run the country?’ (Chazan 2021). Crucially, like Albanese, the SPD concentrated its policy agenda on core issues close to the party’s heart. Chazan (2021) notes that Scholz ‘ran an uncluttered campaign based on simple promises: a higher minimum wage, stable pensions, more affordable housing and a carbon-neutral economy’.

This appears to be a common thread among a few of the more successful centre-left parties—coalescing their appeal on a core number of ‘back to basics’ claims: improved wages, addressing cost-of-living and housing issues and so forth. The electoral situation for the centre-left is brittle and uncertain but a thin or ‘new’ labourism has helped the parties address, in part, their ideological positions from the third-way heyday.

Conclusion

In 2022, the ALP managed to exorcise some of the ghosts of the harrowing 2019 result, recalibrating its agenda around a thin labourism—making clear and steady appeals to the electorate on issues of competence but also making pitches based on incremental economic gains, along with a concerted effort to address climate change—long neglected by the Coalition. Their successful

win does, however, rest on an electoral brittleness and there are wider future dilemmas such as the distancing from the unions. Yet, the ALP remains a striking case of how the centre-left has sought to recalibrate its identity and policy agenda.

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