

Australia's ruling coalition elected to surprise third term

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Australia's Prime Minister Scott Morrison with wife Jenny, children Abbey and Lily after winning the 2019 Federal Election, at the Federal Liberal Reception at the Sofitel-Wentworth hotel in Sydney, Australia, May 18, 2019. (Reuters)

Canberra: Australia's ruling conservative coalition won a surprise victory in the country's general election on Saturday, defying opinion polls that had tipped the center-left opposition party to oust it from power and promising an end to the revolving door of national leaders.

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“It is obvious that Labor will not be able to form the next government and so, in the national interest, a short while ago, I called Scott Morrison to congratulate him,” Shorten told distraught Labor supporters.

Australia's Labor Party supporters react as they watch the tally count at the Federal Labor Reception at Hyatt Place Melbourne, Essendon Fields, in Melbourne, Australia, May 18, 2019. (Reuters)

The tight race raised the prospect of the coalition forming a minority government. The conservatives became a rare minority government after they dumped Malcolm Turnbull for Morrison in an internal power struggle last August. The government then lost two seats and its single-seat majority as part of the blood-letting that followed.

Pre-election opinion polls had suggested that the coalition would lose its bid for a third three-year term, and that Morrison would have had one of the shortest tenures as prime minister in the 118-year history of the Australian federation.

Australia's Labor Party leader Bill Shorten on stage with wife Chloe, concedes defeat at the Federal Labor Reception at Hyatt Place Melbourne, Essendon Fields, in Melbourne, Australia, May 18, 2019. (Reuters)

There was so much public confidence of a Labor victory that Australian online bookmaker Sportsbet paid out 1.3 million Australian dollars (\$900,000) to bettors who backed Labor two days before the election. Sportsbet said 70% of wagers had been placed on Labor at odds of \$1.16.

A rival betting agency said he had accepted a record AU\$1 million wager on Labor.

Shorten, who campaigned heavily on reducing greenhouse gas emissions, said Saturday morning that he was confident Labor would win, but Morrison would not be drawn on a prediction.

Morrison is the conservatives'™ third prime minister since they were first elected in 2013.

Tony Abbott, who became the first of the three conservative prime ministers in the 2013 election, conceded defeat Saturday in the Sydney seat he has held since 1994.

Polling suggests climate change was a major issue in the seat for voters, who elected an independent candidate, Zali Steggall. As prime minister in 2014, Abbott repealed a carbon tax introduced by a Labor government. Abbott was replaced by Turnbull the next year because of poor opinion polling, but he remained a government lawmaker.

Senior Labor lawmaker Chris Bowen said his party may have suffered from what he conceded was an unusual strategy of pushing a detailed policy agenda through the election campaign.

Morrison began the day Saturday by campaigning in the island state of Tasmania, where the Liberals appeared to have gained two Labor-held seats. He then flew 900 kilometers (560 miles) home to Sydney to vote and to campaign in Sydney seats.

Shorten campaigned hard on more ambitious targets to reduce Australia's™ greenhouse gas emissions.

The government has committed Australia to reduce its emissions by 26% to 28% below 2005 levels by 2030. Labor has promised a 45% reduction in the same time frame.

Shorten, a 52-year-old former labor union leader, has also promised a range of reforms, including the government paying all of a patients'™ costs for cancer treatment and a reduction of tax breaks for landlords.

Morrison, a 51-year-old former tourism marketer, said he had closed Labor's™ lead in opinion polls during the five-week campaign and predicted a close result.

Morrison promises lower taxes and better economic management than Labor.

Both major parties promised that whoever wins the election will remain prime minister until he next faces the voters'™ judgment. The parties have changed their rules to make the process of lawmakers replacing a prime minister more difficult.

During Labor's™ last six years in office, the party replaced Prime Minister Kevin Rudd with his deputy Julia Gillard, then dumped her for Rudd.

- AP