

Australia isn't right-wing, it's cautious

The election upset shows that voters don't want to rock the boat



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Ahead of Australia's general election on Saturday, one party had campaigned on the idea that politics and the economy were rigged in favor of the elites. It attacked its opponent relentlessly for siding with the "top end of town." It insisted that things needed to be shaken up to stop serving multinational corporations and vested interests. That party lost.

The results were surprising. The centre-right coalition, led by Prime Minister Scott Morrison, remained in power against the opposition Labour party, which had led in every poll for years. But aside from being an upset, the election shared little in common with Donald Trump's 2016 victory, the Brexit referendum or other populist insurgencies around the world.

This was a campaign in which the politics of race, xenophobia and immigration played almost no part. (That's probably because of the atmosphere after terrorist attacks in Christchurch, New Zealand, in March.) There was nothing in Morrison's election pitch, perhaps other than continued support for coal mining, that seemed particularly aimed at rousing right-wing voters. Even on climate change, a major election issue on which there was some distance between the parties, Morrison argued his party was acting sufficiently — not dismissing it as some elite conspiracy. No, the lesson from Australia's election isn't that this country is right-wing but that it's conservative — as in cautious.

You could, if you were being unkind, call Labour's platform populist. And in fairness, the moment seemed right for its agenda: A royal commission into Australia's banks recently revealed all manner of unethical practices and underwrote a public sense of disgust at corporate lawlessness. Stagnating wages following the decline of a mining boom have meant that many



Prime Minister Scott Morrison of Australia with his family after his unexpected victory on Saturday

Australians are facing financial stress. House prices in the biggest cities have galloped wildly out of reach of many would-be first-time buyers.

To address these very real economic concerns, Labour put forward serious, bold policies on complex issues that it argued overwhelmingly benefit the wealthy, in particular tax breaks on investment properties and retirees' stock market dividends. It was probably the most ambitious set of reforms any party has taken to an election in a generation.

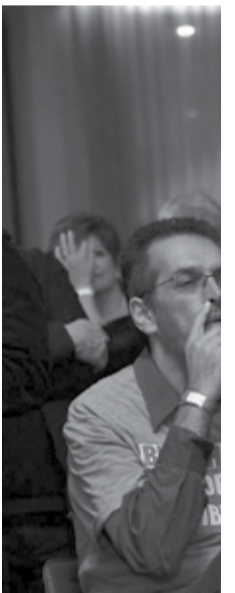
The coalition contrived to run without a significant policy agenda beyond offering tax cuts. Overwhelmingly, its campaign was a negative one, attacking Labour's platform as reckless and anti-aspirational. But this wasn't a populist message, either. In fact it's a message of contentedness and caution. Its fundamental assumption is that broadly speaking, the system works fine: Trickle-down economics brings prosperity, and to the extent things could be better, such

as wages, the answer is patience and more of the same. Labour couldn't be trusted precisely because it wanted to shake things up.

That this argument delivered the coalition a stunning victory in what appeared to be an unwinnable election does not represent some new Australian political logic. Rather, it follows a well-established tradition and conventional wisdom: The Australian electorate is averse to big change.

It is no coincidence that the last time an opposition attempted a policy platform this bold was in 1993 and the result was the same, only with the parties reversed. At that time, Labour was in government, and the coalition managed to lose what is frequently described as "the unlosable election." It is also no coincidence that Labour, which is Australia's party of reform, has been in power for only 29 of Australia's 74 postwar years. It also tends to come to power when a moment of crisis is brewing: world

In ordinary times, slow change. Use the coalition, but Australia's conservative is in peril. The last 2007 when it underwent reforms, which an attack on work power balance hurt. Labour's proposal is that it tried to



Supporters of opposition election in Melbourne

Is Italy's front-runner a Marshmallow?



Italian Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister Matteo Salvini (C) delivers a speech holding a rosary during a rally of European nationalists ahead of European elections



BEPPE SEVERGNINI

Matteo Salvini is far in the lead for this month's European elections, but Italians are hard to rein in

On May 13, at a rally near Bergamo, the heartland of right-wing party the League, which is ahead in polls approaching this week's European elections, its leader Matteo Salvini asked the police to remove a banner hanging from a window. It read: "You are not welcome."

Not a smart move on his part. Suddenly, anti-Salvini banners started popping up wherever he went. Some were quite funny. One man in Florence posted a banner from his tiny attic with a challenge to the authorities to take it down: "Bring a long ladder. I live on the fifth floor," he wrote.

On May 18, at the rally with several leaders of the European far right, including Marine Le Pen of France and Viktor Orban of Hungary, Salvini could watch another joyful display. Banners mocking him were everywhere. A man dressed as Zorro — including an eye-mask and a sword — appeared on a balcony in the Piazza del Duomo, where the crowd gathered to listen to the speeches.

We Italians are an irreverent bunch, and hard to rein in. Our deep-rooted distrust of power, in regular times, may be a drawback; but in exceptional moments like this one, it's a form of insurance. Lately, Salvini has become more prone than ever to acting over the top. Speaking from a balcony that was used by Benito Mussolini, downplaying fascism at every turn, flirting with supremacist groups and praising Vladimir Putin's Russia are hardly appropriate, in a democracy, for a party leader who is also interior minister and deputy prime minister.

But jumping to conclusions is also wrong. There is no chance that Italy will become an authoritarian state, let alone a second fascist regime. We are too undisciplined for that. And



People hold a photograph anti-racism, anti-fascist

Salvini may be a no dictator.

It's undeniable monitored. His general election is a government win — which got near as a springboard. employment, trans his inexperience self-promotion. T about the danger: fear but accomplish illegal immigrants pronto, are still he. But the idea of letting people drive with many Italian