



Preference deals spell trouble for teal, headaches for Nats

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Body

WA Liberals have helped bail Labor out of trouble in its heartland seat of Fremantle, with the ALP boosting Liberal hopes of toppling the leader of the Nationals and securing a host of other -regional seats.

How-to-vote cards registered with the Western Australian Election Commission in recent days could have implications for a number of seats across the state that may be in play at next month's election.

While the preferences decisions of Labor and the Liberals will have no bearing in seats where the parties' candidates finish in the top two, there are a number of seats where they could become relevant.

WA has an abnormally high number of genuine three-cornered contests due to the lack of a formal coalition between the Liberals and Nationals, with the latter choosing to field candidates in several metropolitan seats. The Nationals are in the unusual position of being the official opposition party in WA after the Liberals could secure only two of 59 lower house seats in the historic 2021 election rout.

This election has also given rise to the odd situation of incumbent Nationals and Liberals MPs fighting for one seat. Opposition Leader Shane Love is battling his former Nationals colleague Merome Beard for the new seat of Mid-West, after large parts of Mr Love's seat of Moore were merged with parts of Ms Beard's now-abolished North West Central. Ms Beard defected from the Nationals to the Liberals shortly before the abolition of North West Central was confirmed.

Labor's decision to preference the Liberals over the Nationals in Mid-West could prove critical if Labor finishes third, although Mr Love told The Australian that he was confident that the fight for the seat would come down to a battle between him and Labor.

"I think it'll be a National-Labor contest, the same as it's been for the last two or three terms," he said.

The Nationals have been critical of gun reforms introduced by the Cook government and supported by the Liberals, and Mr Love said he was now used to seeing Labor doing as much as it could to hurt the Nationals' prospects.

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"They have actually taken a pretty strategic view in recent years to try not to help us in any way, because I think they find that once a National holds a seat it becomes a bit harder to pry it away," he said.

The Nationals and Liberals have had an uneasy relationship during the last term of parliament, with the parties at odds over how to carve up the already limited resources of opposition. That partnership has been further frayed due to Ms Beard's defection and the Nationals' targeting of city seats. In Fremantle, meanwhile, the Liberals have decided to preference incumbent Labor MP and Water Minister Simone McGurk over the Greens and Climate 200-backed independent Kate Hulett.

Ms McGurk has come under pressure in Fremantle from voters eager to see more action from the Cook government on climate.

While the Liberals put Labor second-last in Fremantle in 2021, the party has now put Ms McGurk ahead of the Legalise Cannabis, Animal Justice and Greens parties as well as Ms Hulett. Liberal preferences are particularly relevant in Fremantle given the party's third-place finish at the most recent election. It is understood the Liberals made the decision based on principle, with the benefit of seeing Ms McGurk lose in Fremantle offset by the prospect of a vocal anti-gas MP taking her spot. Ms Hulett -accused Labor and the Liberals of a "dirty deal" to save Ms McGurk.

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