

One-term state and territory governments in Australia

Bill Browne

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Received wisdom suggests that one-term governments are rare in Australia. New governments benefit from incumbency, the “sophomore surge” and perhaps a reluctance among voters to change directions twice in a short period of time.

In 2010, Opposition Leader Tony Abbott warned that “It's hard to beat a first term government” while Minister Chris Bowen acknowledged that “many people think there's a historical rule in Australia that first term Governments aren't defeated”, but argued this was a historical accident.¹ Facing the Turnbull Government in 2016, Senator Penny Wong argued “First-term government is very hard to defeat”.²

In his reflection on the 2022 election, academic Murray Goot acknowledged (before going on to explain the logical errors in) the prevailing sentiment:

Not since 1931 has any [federal] government failed to win a second term. So predictable has the victory become that political commentators routinely refer to the “reluctance” of voters to despatch a government after just one term.³

The expectation was the same for state and territory governments. The Napthine Government entered the 2014 Victorian election the underdog, argued election analyst Antony Green, “a unusual situation for a first term government in a country

¹ Bowen (2010) *Interview with Richard Glover, 702 ABC Sydney*, <https://ministers.treasury.gov.au/ministers/chris-bowen-2009/transcripts/interview-richard-glover-702-abc-sydney>; SBS (2010) *Tony Abbott promises to end deficit*, <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/b-full-transcript-b-tony-abbott-promises-to-end-deficit/87ce0lkd1>

² Brissenden (2016) *Voters will have to choose between “very different views about the future”*: Senator Wong, <https://www.abc.net.au/am/content/2016/s4458254.htm>

³ Goot (2022) *Governments usually win a second term. But could the new Labor government be an exception?*, <http://theconversation.com/governments-usually-win-a-second-term-but-could-the-new-labor-government-be-an-exception-184845>

that traditionally gives governments at least two terms in office.”⁴ The 2014 Victorian election upset was celebrated by Opposition Leader Bill Shorten, who said “the conceived wisdom is that first term governments never lose”, and reportedly shocked Liberals in other states: “First-term governments that have broadly managed to avoid major scandal are supposed to be returned”.⁵

The one-term Napthine Government turned out to be a harbinger, rather than a blip. It was followed by the one-term Newman Government in Queensland in 2015, the one-term Giles Government in the Northern Territory in 2016 and the one-term Marshall Government in South Australia in 2022. Of the four first-term state/territory Coalition Governments facing elections after the Napthine Government’s defeat, only the Hodgman Government in Tasmania was re-elected.

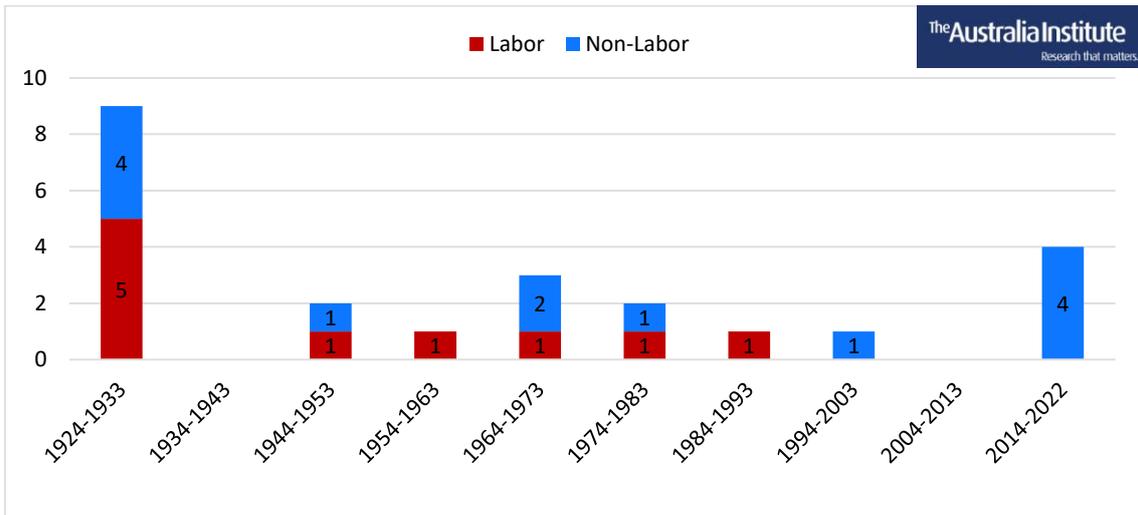
There has not been another 10-year period in Australian history in which there were four one-term state/territory governments of the same party since 1924–1933, the decade encompassing the beginning of and most severe parts of the Great Depression. In that time, there were five Labor and four non-Labor one-term state governments (as well as a one-term federal government, the Scullin Labor Government).

Since 1970, there have been 10 one-term state/territory governments, eight of which were Coalition governments.

⁴ Green (2014) *Napthine Government Starts from Behind in Key Marginal Seats*, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-07-03/napthine-government-starts-from-behind-in-key-marginal-seats/9388458>

⁵ Richardson (2019) *Will Marshall still be The Man in 2019?*, <https://indaily.com.au/opinion/2019/01/07/richardson-will-marshall-still-be-the-man-in-2019/>; Shorten (2014) *Doorstop Interview: Moonee Ponds*, <https://www.billshorten.com.au/doorstop-interview-moonee-ponds-2>

Figure 1: One-term state/territory governments by 10-year period



Appendix

Our criterion for a one-term government was a government elected from 1922 onwards, which was not re-elected at the first election it faced since being elected.

Name	State	Elected	Lost	Party
John Gunn/Lionel Hill	SA	1924	1927	Labor
Jack Lang	NSW	1925	1927	Labor
Joseph Lyons	Tas	1925	1928	Labor
Richard L Butler	SA	1927	1930	Liberal Federation
Thomas Bavin	NSW	1927	1930	Nationalist/Country
James Scullin	Cth*	1929	1931	Labor
Arthur Edward Moore	Qld	1929	1932	Country and Progressive National
Jack Lang	NSW	1930	1932	Labor
Lionel Hill/Robert Richards	SA	1930	1933	Labor
James Mitchell	WA	1930	1933	Nationalist/Country
John Cain	Vic	1945	1947	Labor
John McDonald	Vic	1950	1952	Country
John Cain	Vic	1952	1955	Labor
Frank Walsh/Don Dunstan	SA	1965	1968	Labor
Steele Hall	SA	1968	1970	Liberal and Country League
Angus Bethune	Tas	1969	1972	Liberal
John Tonkin	WA	1971	1974	Labor
David Tonkin	SA	1979	1982	Liberal
Michael Field	Tas	1989	1992	Labor
Rob Borbidge	Qld	1996	1998	National/Liberal
Ted Bailieu/Denis Napthine	Vic	2010	2014	Liberal/National
Campbell Newman	Qld	2012	2015	LNP
Terry Mills/Adam Giles	NT	2012	2016	Country Liberal
Stephen Marshall	SA	2018	2022	Liberal

* Not included in state/territory figures.

There are three types of edge case using this criterion:

A government loses a vote of no confidence in its first term, only to win the subsequent election. We have not included these cases in the table, on the grounds that the government was not defeated at its first election since being elected.

For example, Labor formed government after the 1924 Victorian election with the support of the Country Party, only for the Country Party to withdraw support. Labor formed government again after the next election (1927) again with the support of the Country Party, only for the Country Party to withdraw their support again.

A government formed between elections loses at the first election it faces. We have not included these cases in the table, on the grounds that the government was not elected the first time.

For example, when the Country Party withdrew support from Labor after the 1924 Victorian election, its leader John Allan became premier with the support of the Nationalists. The Country Party lost the 1927 election.

A government formed between elections wins its first election and loses its second.

We have included the one relevant case (Lyons, 1925) in the table, on the grounds that the government only won election for one term.

In that case, the Nationalist Party formed government after the 1922 Tasmanian election, but was replaced by the Lyons Labor Government in 1923. Labor won the 1925 election, but lost the 1928 election.