

# For Labor, AUKUS could trigger a warning shot from Chinese-Australian voters

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Any news pointing to an improvement in Australia-China relations — such as Prime Minister Anthony Albanese [accepting an invitation to visit China](#) later this year — is likely to be welcomed by Labor MPs whose seats have large cohorts of Chinese voters.

For instance, last month, Jerome Laxale, Labor's MP for Bennelong, [spoke in Parliament](#) after China removed the barley tariff:

This outcome ... affirms the calm and consistent approach the Albanese government has taken to repairing our international relationships. My community of Bennelong is home to a thriving Chinese Australian community, the second-largest Chinese community in Australia. I'm acutely aware of the significance a strong and harmonious relationship between our two countries has to them.

A short video of Laxale's speech, with Chinese subtitles, was uploaded on Laxale's WeChat channel. The MP was clearly keen for his Chinese-Australian constituency to get the message. After all, it was partly thanks to their votes that he was elected.

A week after Laxale's speech, the heat over AUKUS was on full display at the ALP's national conference. It did not look particularly 'calm and consistent', with Defence Industry Minister Pat Conroy accusing those who [opposed AUKUS of 'appeasement'](#).

Rather than a testament to the power of diplomacy and engagement as Laxale might have hoped, senior Labor figures, in an effort to quash internal dissent, had to name the elephant in the room. James Curran, international editor of *The Australian Financial Review*, noticed that the [dissent at the ALP conference](#) over AUKUS...

... compelled senior Labor ministers to articulate their own version of the 'China threat', with Defence Minister Richard Marles naming 2030 as his D-Day for Beijing's growth in military power. This is the first time Labor has put its fear of China into figures.

It is hard to tell if Labor has considered what its AUKUS position means for Chinese votes, especially in those Labor seats with large numbers of Chinese voters. These include seats held by Carina Garland (Chisholm, Victoria), Sam Lim (Tangney, WA), Sally Sitou (Reid, NSW) and Laxale.

In the next election, most people will probably cast their vote based on everyday survival issues, such as the cost of living and affordable housing. But it would be a wild guess whether and how Labor's retention of the

Coalition's AUKUS pact will affect how Chinese Australians vote. And if this uncertainty is making Labor MPs like Laxale nervous, it's probably for good reason.

After the ALP conference, *Sydney Today*, Australia's biggest online Chinese-language media outlet, [ran an informal poll](#), asking people: 'How will Labor's commitment to AUKUS affect your vote?' Almost 1000 individuals have completed the poll so far: 32 percent said they were Labor voters who will vote for it again; 33 percent were Labor voters who will vote for another party; and a mere 2 percent were non-Labor voters who will vote Labor next time.

The Morrison government's anti-China rhetoric and war-mongering led to a significant loss of Chinese-Australian voters. The Liberals' [number-crunching](#) reveals that in 15 seats with large concentrations of Chinese-Australian voters, the swing against the Liberals was 6.6 percent, compared with 3.7 percent in other seats.

[Richard Yuan](#) was one of those who switched from Liberal to Labor. An adept user of social media platforms, he was also influential in persuading many traditional Liberal voters to change their vote.

He told *Crikey* he would still not vote Liberal next time: 'I don't trust them anymore, particularly their China policy.' But Labor's AUKUS position has also let him down, as he sees hardly any difference in terms of defence strategy.

In Yuan's view, AUKUS is Australian taxpayers' money wasted:

The \$368 billion budget expenses (and it could be much more) would be better spent on tackling and combating inflation and improving people's daily life for ordinary Australians.

But *Sydney Today's* figures have led one writer to predict that many traditionally Liberal voters who voted for Labor at the last election [may switch back to Liberal](#) at the next election. This prediction may not be too far-fetched. Many Chinese Australians have been known to favour the Liberals in the past, believing they are 'better at managing the economy'. Rightly or wrongly, this view endures among many pockets of Chinese-Australian voters. So, given that they now see little difference between Labor and Liberal on China and their shared defence strategy, why continue to support Labor?

It's not just those swinging voters who feel a bit lost. Some rusted-on Labor supporters are struggling to remove AUKUS from the party platform. [Henry Luo](#), a rank-and-file member of the party's Strathfield branch who worked hard to get Labor elected, is actively working with Labor against War (LAW) in his attempt to pass an anti-AUKUS motion in his branch.

He told *Crikey*:

As a Chinese Australian and as a taxpayer, it's a no-brainer. I have no reason to support AUKUS, which is a road to war with China and the militarisation of Australia, with an eye-watering \$368 billion price tag that could be spent on education, Medicare and a lot of better places.

A recent study of Chinese-Australians found most respondents had concerns about [speculation about war with China](#), primarily because they believed such speculation had the potential to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. They were equally concerned about how Chinese Australians would be treated should Australia find itself at war with the People's Republic of China.

The last election saw a small swing of Chinese-Australian votes to [some teal independents](#) and the Greens. However, despite the Greens having been most consistently vocal in their opposition to AUKUS, this message does not seem to be reaching Chinese-Australian voters — let alone their position on defence spending, and foreign policy generally.

It remains to be seen whether the Greens and independents, on the back of Chinese Australians' disillusionment with Labor over AUKUS, see this as an opportune moment to broaden their support base beyond inner-city, middle-class and predominantly white voters. If they have the political interest to forge the

necessary community engagement, they could siphon some voters from both major parties before the next federal election.

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