

Dutton has changed his tune on China. Will voters care?

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The reason behind Liberal leader Peter Dutton's decision to launch the federal election campaign in the seat of Chisholm in Victoria is clear.

'If we win Chisholm, we're a step closer to winning government. And if we win government, we can get Victoria and our country moving again,' he [said](#).

Labor's Carina Garland won Chisholm at the last federal election with a margin of 6.4 percent. Many [commentators](#) have observed that the Coalition's loss of this marginal seat was mainly thanks to a swing to Labor on the part of Chinese-Australian voters, who comprised [around 30 percent](#) of the electorate in 2021 in suburbs such as Glen Waverley, Mount Waverley, Mulgrave, Ashwood and Box Hill.

Like Chinese-Australian voters in several other key electorates, they were apparently fed up with Scott Morrison and the Coalition's hawkish China policy. As a result, the Coalition suffered a similar fate [in electorates](#) such as Reid and Bennelong in New South Wales, and Tangney in Western Australia.

The recent redrawing of electoral boundaries and the consequent abolition of the division of Higgins means that voters – including many Chinese-Australians – living in Box Hill South, Box Hill, Blackburn, Blackburn South and Clayton will be voting in the electorate of Menzies instead of Chisholm at the next federal election. According to [Antony Green](#), the retribution will reduce the Labor margin from 6.4 percent to 3.2 percent in Chisholm.

This will pressure Keith Wolahan, the Liberal incumbent for Menzies. After the redistribution, the influx of Chinese voters from Chisholm may just be enough to turn Menzies into a marginal Labor seat. Among all those MPs and election candidates who are actively pursuing Chinese-Australian voters, Wolahan has the highest profile on the Chinese social media platform [Red](#), with up to 8,000 followers. Meanwhile, vying for Carina Garland's seat in Chisholm, Liberal candidate Katie Allen has also been extremely active on Red, participating in community activities, and offering medical expertise and health-promoting advice to Chinese-speaking followers.

In the hope of counteracting Wolahan's influence in Menzies, Labor has preselected Gabriel Ng, a lawyer with Malaysian heritage, as its candidate in Menzies. Ng has also signed onto Red to engage with Chinese-speaking voters.

To many Chinese-Australian voters, the most obvious difference between the 2022 election and the forthcoming election is the absence of China from the electoral agenda. Who could forget those large trucks

with [advertisements](#) showing the Chinese president, Xi Jinping, voting for Labor [in cities across Australia](#), alongside the words ‘CCP SAYS VOTE Labor’? Who could forget senator Eric Abetz [grilling](#) Chinese-Australians at a Senate inquiry, demanding they publicly and unconditionally condemn the Chinese Communist Party dictatorship? And who could forget a feverish [Dutton](#) sounding the alarm about a future war with China, and comparing China to Nazi Germany in the lead-up to World War II?

You will see no such rhetoric this time around. Realising that its hostile China stance cost rather than gained it votes, the Coalition has gone into damage control. In fact, Dutton did a 180-degree policy reversal in 2023 during Chinese Premier Li Qiang’s visit, [announcing](#) he was ‘pro-China’ and he would ‘love to see the trading relationship [with China] increase two-fold’.

Even though the likes of shadow home affairs minister James Paterson and shadow defence minister Andrew Hastie, [described as](#) ‘self-styled ‘wolverines’ against Chinese influence’, [continue to warn](#) against ‘capitulation’ to the CCP, Dutton leaves the ‘bad cop’ role to his underlings, while himself consistently refraining from making provocative comments about China – contrary to his previous approach.

But will Chinese-Australian voters forgive the Coalition for using China as a domestic political football, treating them as collateral damage from its erstwhile vigorously anti-China policies? And if the Coalition were to sweep into government again, would it continue its historical distrust of Chinese-Australians, treating them as potential agents of Chinese influence or, worse still, likely spies?

While the Coalition hopes to avoid the punishment it received from Chinese-Australian voters at the last election, it is not certain whether Labor’s calm and principled approach to China and its efforts to engage the Chinese-Australian communities will continue to yield political dividends. Chinese-Australian voters, like all other Australian voters, are having to cope with the reality of rising grocery and energy bills, mortgage stress and housing challenges.

Will those more conservative voters in Chinese communities that shifted to Labor last time be driven back into the arms of the Coalition by the cost of living crisis and high inflation, believing – rightly or wrongly – that a Coalition government would be better economic managers? While many Chinese-Australian voters may have previously prioritised foreign policy and political concerns over economic considerations, no-one should presume things will be the same this election.

Looking beyond Australia, it isn’t clear either how global trends will be played out in the Australian context. A newly released [post-election survey in the US](#) found that Asian-American voters shifted to the right in their 2024 presidential vote. As a result, Trump received a greater share of votes from most major Asian ethnic subgroups, especially those with Vietnamese and Chinese heritage.

We won’t know the answers to these questions till after the election, but come Chinese New Year at the end of January, you will see politicians of all stripes visiting Chinese shops, shaking Chinese hands, cuddling Chinese babies and making Chinese dumplings – all the while trying to say Happy New Year in Mandarin or Cantonese, and then going home to post photos of their activities on Red.

A Chinese community leader in Perth told me that when Scott Morrison went to meet Chinese-Australian voters during the last election, some community members asked to have their photo taken with him – a request flatly declined by his staff without explanation. Clearly, while Morrison wanted Chinese votes, he was not keen for the wider public to see him cosying up with Chinese voters.

We can be fairly certain that this won’t happen this time.

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