WESTERN SYDNEY VOTES

THE VOICE REFERENDUM

W CENTRE FOR WESTERN SYDNEY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

With respect for Aboriginal cultural protocol and out of recognition that its campuses occupy their traditional lands, Western Sydney University acknowledges the Darug, Eora, Dharawal (also referred to as Tharawal) and Wiradjuri peoples and thanks them for their support of its work in their lands (Western Sydney and beyond).

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KEY POINTS

1 Western Sydney broadly voted 'No' to the referendum, but above average levels of support for 'Yes' were recorded in half of the region's electorates.

2 Electorates in Sydney's West with above average rates of educational attainment – such as Parramatta and Reid – registered greater support for 'Yes' at the referendum.

3 The outer Western Sydney, Liberal held seat of Lindsay which takes in Penrith and surrounds, recorded the highest referendum vote for 'No', at 69 per cent.

4 Some areas of well above average levels of cultural and linguistic diversity voted 'Yes' well above the national rate. For example, Reid (47%), Parramatta (45%) and Greenway (43%).

5 The inclusion of a structural parliamentary reference in the proposed constitutional change served to intensify focus on political integrity.

6 'Yes' proponents assured Western Sydney voters there was no cause for concern, while opponents argued the change was radical. Convergence on the issue of trust proved critical.

7 Misinformation, coupled with highly targeted social media campaigning was a significant change from what Western Sydney voters have experienced at prior polls.

DIVERSE REGIONAL SENTIMENT

OPPOSITION to the Voice to Parliament referendum was recorded to varying degrees across the Western Sydney federal electorates. While the region broadly voted 'No' to the referendum, above average levels of support for 'Yes' were observed in key electorates.

"Western Sydney's diverse voting behaviours underscore the importance of informed government engagement with the region's diverse communities."

The Centre for Western Sydney's analysis emphasises the increasingly diverse nature of voter sentiment across the region. As demonstrated in Figure 1, support for 'No' exceeded the national average in half of Western Sydney electorates. This reflects increasing diversity in voting behaviours at recent federal and state elections, as the Centre detailed in prior reports.

Support for 'No' was strongest in the outer Western Sydney seat of Lindsay, which takes in Penrith and surrounds. The electorate's Liberal member, Melissa McIntosh was a prominent campaigner for the 'No' case, noting upon confirmation of the outcome, "We really do have the best community in the country!" Liberal MP, Alex Hawke also campaigned for 'No'; however, support for 'No' in his nearby electorate of Mitchell was below the national average.
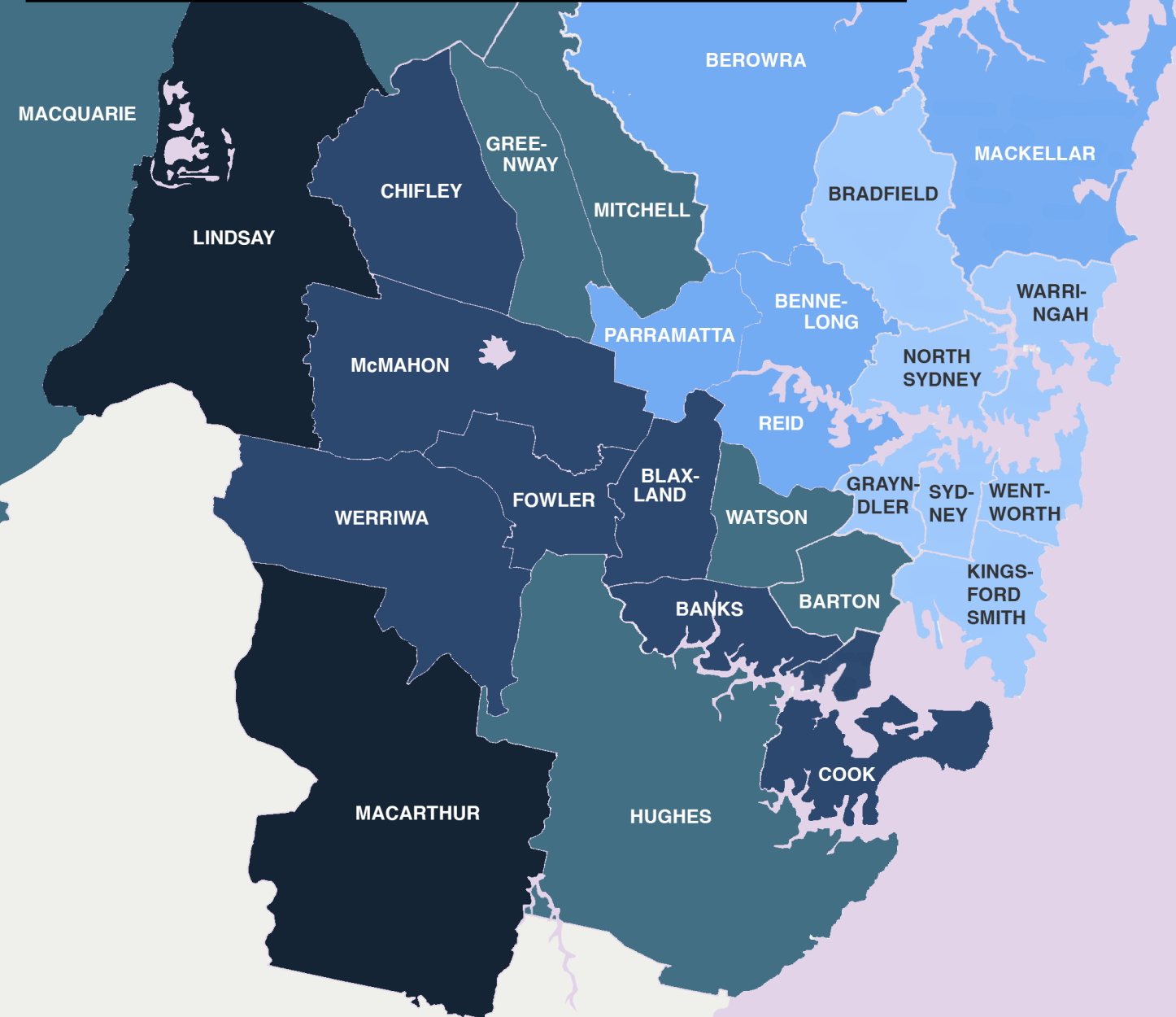
REFERENDUM RESULT

Figure 1: The 'No' Vote Compared

Proportion of voters who voted 'No', by electorate, at 2pm Sunday 15 October.

69.3	Lindsay		**55.8**	Barton
65.1	Macarthur		**54.5**	Parramatta
64.8	McMahon		**53.0**	Reid
63.6	Cook		**52.9**	Berowra
62.1	Blaxland		**52.1**	Bennelong
61.7	Banks		**49.8**	Mackellar
60.7	Werriwa		**48.6**	Bradfield
60.3	Fowler		**45.2**	Kingsford Smith
59.8	Chifley		**41.2**	Warringah
58.7	Hughes		**40.6**	North Sydney
58.5	Mitchell		**37.7**	Wentworth
58.5	Watson		**29.1**	Sydney
57.0	Greenway		**25.7**	Grayndler
56.9	Macquarie			

> 65	60 - 65	55 - 60	50 - 55	< 50

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Map labels: MACQUARIE, LINDSAY, GREENWAY, CHIFLEY, MITCHELL, BEROWRA, BRADFIELD, MACKELLAR, McMAHON, PARRAMATTA, BENNELONG, WARRINGAH, NORTH SYDNEY, REID, FOWLER, BLAXLAND, WATSON, GRAYNDLER, SYDNEY, WENTWORTH, WERRIWA, BANKS, BARTON, KINGSFORD SMITH, MACARTHUR, HUGHES, COOK

DISTINCT SUBREGIONAL VOTING BEHAVIOURS

DISTINCT SUBREGIONAL VOTING behaviours emerged across Western Sydney. While some outer and central areas of the region – Lindsay (69.1%), McMahon (66.4%) and Macarthur (64.9%) – strongly opposed the referendum question, other areas were well above the national average support for 'Yes'.

> **"While some areas strongly opposed the referendum question, others were well above the national average of support for 'Yes'."**

Support for 'Yes' exceeded the national average (39.5%) in the highly diverse seat of Reid, where 'Yes' registered 47 per cent. Held by Labor's Sally Sitou, over 60 per cent of Reid's residents speak a language other than English at home. It is also the most educated seat in Sydney's west, with over 47 per cent of the seat's adult residents holding a university degree.

Education may have proven a factor elsewhere across Western Sydney, whereby seats with higher than regional average levels of educational attainment voted 'No' at rates below the national average. This trend was evident in Parramatta (54.5% for 'No') and Greenway (56.8%). Both electorates are – like Reid – among the region's most culturally diverse.

POLITICAL INTEGRITY

THE REFERENDUM WAS ALWAYS going to be challenging in a region like Western Sydney, where trust in government has been profoundly compromised in recent years. The inclusion of a structural parliamentary reference in the proposed constitutional change intensified focus on political integrity.

> **"While there was general acceptance of the case for constitutionally recognising the 'First Peoples of Australia', the political dimension of the proposition proved complex."**

The concept of the proposed Voice interacting with executive government likely tested perceptions of political integrity corroded by, for example, the inequitable lockdown measures endured by sections of Sydney's West, and persistent inequities in government investment in employment creation, wage equity, education, health, transport, arts and culture compared to other parts of Greater Sydney.

As with the recent federal election, voting patterns look to have been less impacted by integrity issues in areas subject to higher levels of government investment in infrastructure and education; Parramatta being a notable example.

Preliminary analysis suggests rates of 'No' voting exceeded wider averages in parts of Western Sydney that overlay with areas where targeted COVID restriction measures were accompanied by blaming rhetoric and 'othering', for example, sections of Lindsay, McMahon, Fowler and Blaxland.

TARGETED MISINFORMATION

THE PREVALENCE OF MISINFORMATION during the referendum campaign was notable, with 'Yes' campaigners struggling to counter un-evidenced narratives distributed through social media and group chat platforms and reported in the mainstream media.

"Distrust in government and politicians as well as barriers to accessing reliable information meant that misinformation often went unchecked and unchallenged."

Despite attempts by experts to address this by providing factual information through some media outlets, incorrect narratives persisted, with an increasing number of voters turning away from traditional media to gain information from alternative sources.

Misinformation, coupled with highly targeted social media campaigning was a significant step change from what voters have experienced during previous elections. It remains to be seen whether the pursuit of 'post-truth' politics is viewed as a pathway for either side of politics to win over an increasingly cynical voter base in the lead up to the next Federal election.

CONVERGING CAMPAIGNS

THE IDEA GOVERNMENT BE TRUSTED to enable the proposed Voice consultative mechanism was brought sharply into focus in campaigning by both 'Yes' and 'No' camps.

> **"'Yes' proponents assured voters there was no cause for concern, while opponents argued the change was radical."**

The convergence of both messages on the issue of trust proved pivotal to the outcome. It rendered a consultative change political; a point compounded by the failure to secure bi-partisan support.

A longer more consultative campaign on the part of 'Yes' proponents may have countered scepticism. A program focussed on education, co-design and greater community engagement could have enabled greater grassroots articulation of the case for change. Importantly, empowering local communities to have a wider, informed dialogue on the issues would have assisted in building the momentum needed to bring about change and counter misinformation.

Western Sydney is a complex and diverse region. As the Centre's analysis of this referendum, and recent state and federal elections has shown, it warrants a level of sophistication and dialogue in campaigning that has been missing from contemporary politics.

Sydney's West is a demographic snapshot of what wider Australia will look like in decades ahead. Its cultural and linguistic diversity; its dynamic socioeconomic trajectories. These are the characteristics against which future political campaigning will be tested. This referendum proved that once again.

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About the Centre for Western Sydney

WESTERN SYDNEY UNIVERSITY is the only university in NSW with a legislated commitment to conduct research that meets the needs of Western Sydney communities. Fulfilling this unique mandate for research, the University established the Centre for Western Sydney in 2014.

Combining world-class research expertise with frank and fearless advocacy on issues of importance to Western Sydney, the work of the Centre for Western Sydney is guided by its ambition for a thriving Western Sydney that is understood and respected for its strengths and contributions regionally, nationally, and internationally. Delivered through a strong politics of listening, the Centre aims to drive informed dialogue and action in the region.

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