

Labor faithful stand by PM despite Rudd's popularity
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By Phillip Coorey

KEVIN RUDD remains vastly more popular than either Julia Gillard or Tony Abbott, but most Labor voters still believe the government should stick with Ms Gillard.

Overall, however, 52 per cent of voters back a change, while 42 per cent are opposed.

The poll of 1400 voters was taken from Thursday night to Saturday night and shows 60 per cent of voters prefer Mr Rudd, compared with 31 per cent for Ms Gillard. These numbers have been relatively steady since May.

Labor voters are fairly evenly split, 45 per cent backing Mr Rudd as leader and 50 per cent backing Ms Gillard. When asked whether the government should change leaders, Labor voters are reluctant.

The poll finds 61 per cent of Labor voters oppose changing leaders, while 36 per cent support a change. These numbers are reversed among Coalition voters, with 31 per cent opposed and 63 per cent in support.

In a match-up against Tony Abbott, 57 per cent of voters prefer Mr Rudd as prime minister, compared with 36 per cent for Mr Abbott. These numbers are virtually unchanged from two months ago.

Nielsen pollster John Stirton cautioned this does not necessarily mean Mr Rudd would beat Mr Abbott in an election, only that he is more popular.

As long as Labor's poll numbers remain so low, leadership chatter will remain a chronic problem for the government.

Supporters of Ms Gillard are nervous about the August 14 resumption of Parliament. Mr Rudd's supporters have spent some of the winter break agitating and trying to generate momentum for change.

The Minister for Defence, Stephen Smith, who backs Ms Gillard, ruled out any return by Mr Rudd. "It's not going to arise in any hypothetical or real way," he told ABC TV's *Insiders* program. "The Prime Minister was comprehensively returned to the office of leader of the Labor Party when she was challenged by Mr Rudd a few months ago.

"So we've dealt with that matter and, in my view, it's not going to arise again."

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