

Despite weak governance, challenging geography, and conflict at the turn of the millennium, Solomon Islands has succeeded in holding eight general elections since becoming an independent nation in 1978. Elections, particularly recent ones, have also been admirably free of large-scale maleficence associated with the electoral process. However, around their periphery vote buying and voter coercion are issues, and some aspects of process — most notably the roll — have been imperfect. In this *In Brief* I discuss Solomon Islands elections, starting with aspects of elections that have worked well, before examining problems. Finally, I look forward to elections scheduled for later this year (2014) and beyond.

Success in Electoral Function

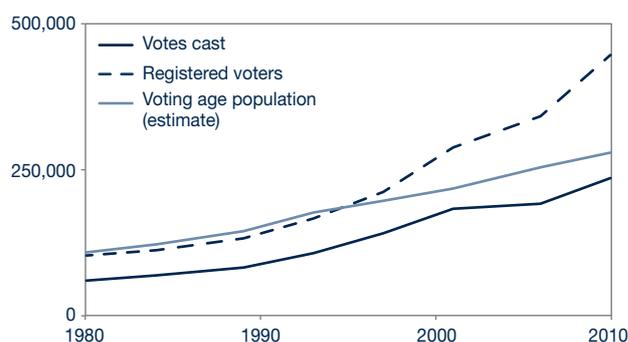
Solomon Islands is a poorly governed country. The state struggles with activities involving large-scale coordination and Solomon Islands falls into the bottom quartile of all countries in the World Bank's indicators of government effectiveness (World Bank 2013). Yet, despite this, and the country being laid across a series of island groups with poor transport infrastructure, elections run quite well. Polling stations get ballot papers, voters generally get to use (and know how to use) ballot papers, and ballot boxes — usually — make it to counting places (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat 2010; Paternorte and de Gabriel 2010). Crucially, recent elections offer no evidence of the counting process itself being subverted (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat 2010; Paternorte and de Gabriel 2010; Wood in press). Process has not been perfect — for example, at certain times in certain places, some voters have figured out how to vote twice. Yet by the standards of developing countries, notwithstanding minor issues and the more major problem of the roll discussed below, elections have run well enough — much better than recent elections in neighbouring Papua New Guinea, which have been violent in places, have seen practices such as ballot stuffing, and which have, at times, had local-level electoral process compromised by partisan officials (Haley and Zubrinich 2013).

Key ingredients in successful electoral operation in Solomon Islands to date include aid-funded technical assistance, which has augmented local capacity while also acting as a counterbalance to political pressures that might otherwise undermine electoral performance; and able local staff, who work quite well on in-the-field logistics.

Problems with the Electoral Roll

As can be seen in Figure 1, since the late 1990s, Solomon Islands' electoral roll has grown faster than the country's voting age population. Much of this appears to be the product of administrative neglect; and, as can be seen by the fact that votes cast have never exceeded the voting age population, roll inflation has not been something candidates have taken advantage of on a large scale. However, there have been cases where roll issues have disenfranchised voters, while allowing others to vote twice. Fortunately, in the lead-up to the 2014 election a new roll has been compiled, this time making use of (expensive) biometric technology to prevent double registrations. The new roll appears much more accurate in regard to population size, and the adoption of biometric technology has contributed to this (*Solomon Star* 2014a), although most of the improvement appears to have simply been a product of a new roll being compiled.¹ The new roll still has flaws — in particular it appears that candidates have attempted to register ineligible supporters from other locations in their constituencies — but it is improved.

Figure 1: Total votes, registered voters, and estimated voting age population, 1980–2010



Source: data from author's election results database, calculations from censuses, and Steeves (2001) for 1984.

Vote Buying and Voter Coercion

The two areas where Solomon Islands elections deviate most starkly from ideal electoral practice are vote buying and voter coercion. Sensitivity around these practices makes it hard to quantify their prevalence. However, vote buying appears very common, while voter coercion varies in frequency, being more common in certain

areas and more frequently experienced by less powerful individuals within entities such as communities and kinship groups (Marau 2010; Wood 2014). Importantly, while there are examples of candidates who appear to have won by showering electorates with cash, or through threat of force, winning elections typically requires more than these practices alone. Nevertheless, both issues are concerning and, in the case of vote buying, appear to be increasing.

The 2014 Elections and Beyond

With the same ingredients in place that have led to well-run elections in the past, it seems likely the 2014 elections will be of reasonable procedural quality. They will also benefit from a better roll, although the issue of ineligible voters registered in the wrong electorates may lead to tension. Unfortunately, vote buying and voter coercion appear likely to be as present in 2014 as they have been previously (Solomon Star 2014b).

Post 2014, efforts should be made to ensure roll quality, and to find the most cost-effective means of doing this (as noted, biometric technology is expensive, and issues of equipment maintenance may increase costs over time). For researchers, much remains to be learnt about vote buying and voter coercion, including how such practices can occur despite what appears to be a secret ballot (to successfully buy a vote or coerce a voter a candidate needs to be fairly confident they can find out who the voter has voted for). Impact evaluation could also be used to determine whether voter education campaigns are any use in tackling such issues, and if they are not, what else might be done. There is also a lot to be learnt about campaigning more generally, in areas such as the role of local powerbrokers in winning candidates votes.

Most importantly, ongoing aid work assisting and maintaining relationships with the Electoral Commission is essential. The decay of electoral quality in Papua New Guinea since the late 1990s shows that well-run elections are not inevitable in western Melanesia. It would be unfortunate for Solomon Islands' fragile achievements in this area to be lost.

Author Notes

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Endnote

- 1 Double registrations picked up by the biometric technology only accounted for roughly 4 per cent of the reduction in roll size, although the biometric effect may have been larger as a result of knowledge of biometric technology deterring people from registering twice.

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