



## Understanding Electoral Politics in Solomon Islands

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### Introduction

The Melanesian state of Solomon Islands is scheduled to hold its next national election in late 2014. This will be the country's ninth general election since it became an independent state in 1978 and, by developing country standards, it has performed admirably in regularly holding reasonably free and fair democratic elections.<sup>1</sup> However, democracy has not brought with it good governance. Solomon Islands ranks poorly in most governance indicators — in government effectiveness, for example, it fell in the bottom quartile of all countries for which the World Bank had data on in 2012 (World Bank 2013). Members of parliament (MPs) perform their legislative function poorly, and government departments under-provide, or fail altogether in providing key public goods and services, in part because of poor political management.

This paper discusses elections, electoral politics, and governance in Solomon Islands. It provides a basic overview of electoral politics and the country's history of elections before discussing electoral process — electoral rules, how elections are run, and what does and does not work in their running. As it does this, the paper argues that, while there have been issues, such as those to do with the roll, and instances of candidates apparently being able to find out who voted for them, generally electoral process is quite good in Solomon Islands.

The paper then discusses voter behaviour (why voters vote for the candidates they vote for) before explaining how the choices voters make contribute, amongst other factors, to Solomon Islands' political problems. Here the argument offered is that the central problem of Solomon Islands politics stems from the nature of the country's voter-politician relationship. Because of the material and political circumstances they find themselves in, voters vote

in search of personalised or localised benefits. The term political scientists use to describe this particular type of electoral relationship is 'clientelism' and although the choices voters make amidst clientelist politics are reasonable on their own terms, such voting incentivises MPs to focus on the local at the expense of the national, and contributes to the governance problems Solomon Islands faces. Importantly, in the Solomon Islands case, clientelism is both a cause and a product of poor governance and, as a result, the clientelism problem is a self-reinforcing one and unlikely to be easily shifted.

In its concluding section, the paper assesses the potential for, and potential causes of, political change, also discussing the ramifications for aid donors and their work. The central argument advanced here is that the problems of Solomon Islands politics will not be easily educated or engineered away. However, there is scope for positive change, and ways that donors may carefully contribute to this.

### Electoral Basics

Solomon Islands elections are held using a single-member district plurality (first past the post) voting system. In it, voters cast one ballot on which they indicate the candidate they wish to receive their vote. The candidate who wins the plurality of votes (more votes than any other candidate, but not necessarily more than 50 per cent of votes) in a constituency becomes its MP. This voting system is similar to that used in the United Kingdom but differs from the preferential voting systems used in Australia and the system of proportional representation used in New Zealand. Since independence, general elections have been held roughly every four years (1980, 1984, 1989, 1993, 1997, 2001, 2006 and 2010). There have also been at least 20 mid-term by-elections, replacing MPs who have been removed from office by court challenge or who have passed away.

There are currently 50 constituencies in Solomon Islands, each of which sends one MP to the country's unicameral parliament.<sup>2</sup> Figure A1 in the appendix provides a map of Solomon Islands constituencies.

### Voters and Constituencies

Voting is not compulsory in Solomon Islands elections. Suffrage is extended to citizens aged over 18 years of age.<sup>3</sup> A total of 237,872 people voted in the 2010 general election.<sup>4</sup> Figure 1 charts Solomon Islands elections since independence and shows the number of registered voters, the total number of votes cast, and the estimated voting age population.<sup>5</sup> General election years are shown as dashed, vertical lines. Figure 1 also offers a sense of voter turnout. While turnout has been nominally low in recent elections (only 53 per cent of registered voters in 2010), this is primarily the product of an inflated roll (discussed below) and, when calculated as a proportion of the estimated voting age population, turnout is high (85 per cent in 2010).

There is major malapportionment between Solomon Islands' 50 electorates. The smallest electorate in estimated voting age population, Malaita Outer Islands, with an estimated voting age population of 1,310, is less than a tenth the size of East Honiara, which has an estimated 15,846 potential voters.<sup>6</sup> The largest electorate that does not contain any of the greater Honiara urban area is Nggela, with an estimated voting age population of 9,350.

### Parties and Parliament

Political parties exist in Solomon Islands, yet their structure and function are not those of political parties in most OECD democracies. Not only are parties numerous (in the wake of the 2010 election there were ostensibly nine in parliament and at least 14 parties stood candidates in the election) but they are fluid (Steeves 2011). Since independence, numerous small political parties have formed, often in the lead-up to elections, only to vanish without a trace, either failing to get any MPs elected to parliament or being abandoned by their newly elected 'members' (Alasia 2008; Fraenkel 2008, 79; Kabutaulaka 2008, 105; Pollard 2006, 169; Ratuva 2008, 29). Even larger parties tend to

have only skeletal party infrastructures and are, typically, readily abandoned by MPs in instances when they feel their ambitions will be better served by other alliances. In 1990, prime minister Solomon Mamaloni defected from the party he was leader of, effectively ejecting it from government (Fraenkel 2008, 63). Although name changes make tracing party fortunes difficult, it would appear that, of those parties listed by Steeves (2001, 804) as comprising the 1997 parliament, only one, the Liberal Party, remained in parliament as of 2010. And its hold was tenuous — just two MPs.

Political parties in Solomon Islands are not bound by ideological beliefs — there are no left-wing parties or right-wing parties, and manifestos, where they exist, vary little in any meaningful sense between parties (Dinnen 2008). Parties are also not church-based, nor are they grouped by geography or ethnicity (Fraenkel 2008, 68); there is no Catholic party, no Malaitan party, no Polynesian party, no Kwara'ae-speaker party. Candidate membership of parties is also far from universal: in the 2010 election, roughly 70 per cent of candidates ran as independents.

To the extent they play a role in structuring politics in Solomon Islands, parties do so as conduits of patronage, channelling funding from businesses and wealthy individuals to promising candidates in the lead-up to elections, and to affiliated MPs when in power. Importantly, parties often serve as building blocks during negotiations around the formation of government (see, for example, Allen 2008, 43; also Kabutaulaka 2008, 105). The parliamentary leader of a political party with a number of MPs in parliament, if they can hold their loyalty, earns themselves additional leverage in coalition negotiations, increasing the chance they may be awarded a powerful ministry (Kabutaulaka 2008, 105). While some parties have at times contained MPs who shared political visions of sorts, the primary bonds holding parties together are personal, strategic or financial, rather than ideological (Fraenkel 2005).

And so, while parties do play some role in structuring parliamentary politics, they form a very flimsy base on which to build a structure. Only once has an individual party won a nominal

Figure 1: Total Votes, Registered Voters, and Estimated Voting Age Population

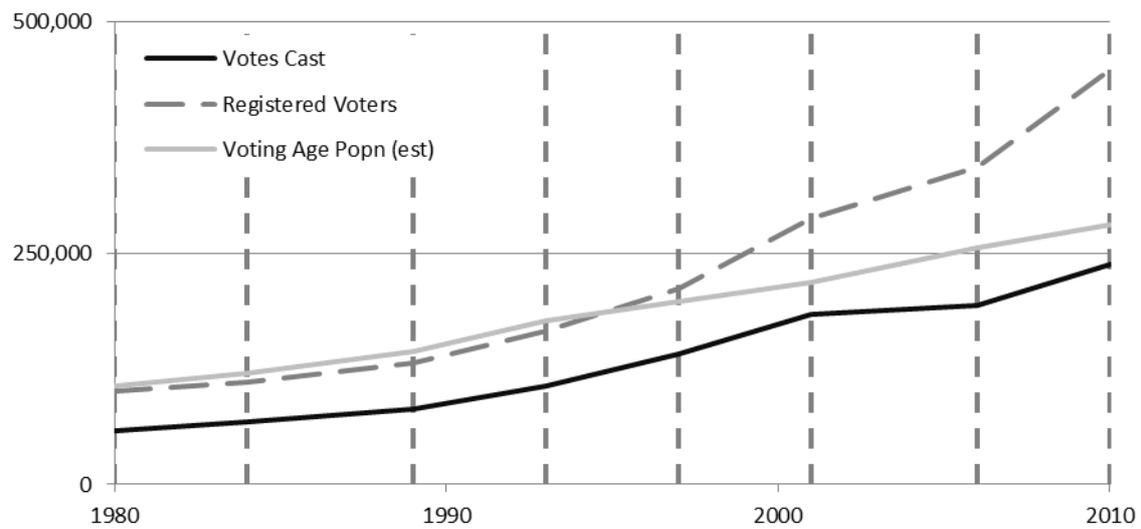


Chart notes: data from election results database, calculations from censuses, except Steeves (2001) for 1984 registered voters.

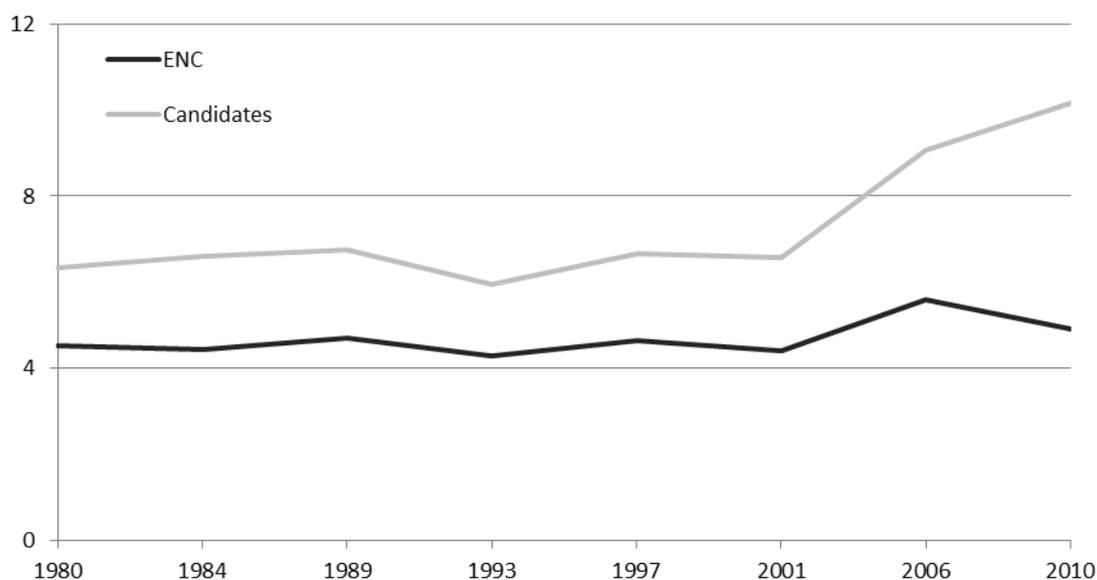
majority of seats in a Solomon Islands national election, which means that governing coalitions of several parties plus independent MPs are the norm (Steeves 2001). And this, along with the very weak bonds within parties, is the source of much instability.

The situation of parties may change in the wake of legislation passed in 2014 aimed at strengthening political parties, although it is far from certain it will have this effect. The legislation contains rules formalising the structure of parties and requiring their registration, as well as offering a small amount of funding to parties with MPs in parliament. It also has some rules covering party coalition formation prior to and in the wake of elections. Yet the party registration rules on their own are not likely to dramatically strengthen parties: it is hard to see how registration rules alone will create coherent party machines without shared beliefs or commitment to unite members. Meanwhile, amounts of funding made available for parties are very small compared to the amounts of money already present in Solomon Islands politics. And, although ambiguities make interpreting the law difficult, it appears as if the outcome of the rules regarding coalition formation will be little change in the nature of parliamentary party politics (although at this point predicting both intended

and unintended consequences of the legislation is not easy and there is, perhaps, a possibility that change will follow over time). What is more, even if the legislation does bring some change, it is unlikely legislation alone will change the other key feature of parties in Solomon Islands — that they are based around patronage rather than shared policy vision.

Parliament is presided over by a prime minister who is elected in a secret ballot of MPs — something that occurs both in the wake of general elections and when prime ministers are removed mid-term. The prime minister chooses ministers, from amongst the MPs in parliament, to serve in charge of government ministries. The prime minister serves only as long as he or she has the support of a majority of parliament's MPs and, as might be expected given the fluidity of party allegiance, it is not unusual for prime ministers to be removed from office by a no-confidence vote or to resign in advance of a no-confidence motion they cannot win (such mid-term removals have occurred just over once per parliamentary term on average since independence). In Solomon Islands, leadership changes of this sort do not lead to the dissolution of parliament or general elections. Instead, they lead to a secret ballot of MPs to select a new prime minister. Parliament is often prorogued as the prime minister of the

Figure 2: Average Candidates and Effective Number of Candidates, General Elections



day seeks to avoid no-confidence motions and the costly negotiations that come with staving them off. Amidst this, ministers obtain and secure their portfolios not through performance, but by navigating parliamentary horse-trading, hitching their support to the right prime ministerial aspirant at the right time.

### Candidates and Winners

Elections are enthusiastically contested in Solomon Islands, with numerous candidates standing. Figure 2 shows the mean number of candidates per electorate in each general election since independence, as well as a calculated measure, the Effective Number of Candidates (ENC), which can loosely be thought of as a calculated approximation of the average number of competitive candidates.<sup>7</sup>

Interestingly, while there is no clear trend in ENC, candidate numbers have trended upwards in the last two elections, with the differing trends between the two measures reflecting the fact that there has been an increase in poorly performing candidates in the two most recent elections.

Indeed, although elections are enthusiastically contested, success — either in the form of actually winning an election, or simply in the form of winning a respectable vote share — is hard to come by. Of the nearly 1,700 individual Solomon Islanders to have stood in general elections since

independence, only 196 have ever won. The median candidate, across all general elections since independence, has won only 9.4 per cent of the votes cast in their electorate.

Even winners themselves do not necessarily win large vote shares. Figure 3 shows, for each general election since independence, the maximum, minimum and median winning candidate vote shares. While a small number of candidates have won with large majorities (the highest winner vote share in a contested election was 87.4 per cent, and occasionally candidates have won unopposed), the median candidate has won with a plurality vote share of just under 34 per cent of the vote. In instances candidates have won elections with as little as 10.7 per cent of votes cast.

Tenure for those few candidates lucky enough to win is often short. Since the first post-independence election, on average nearly half (47 per cent) of those incumbent MPs who have defended their seats have lost. Figure 4 shows the percentage of incumbent MPs who contested and lost in general elections.

One by-product of such high turnover rates is that, in any given parliament, only a small subset of MPs will have substantial political experience. For example, in the 2010 parliament (in the immediate wake of elections), 48 per cent were in their first

Figure 3: Winning Candidate Vote Shares, General Elections

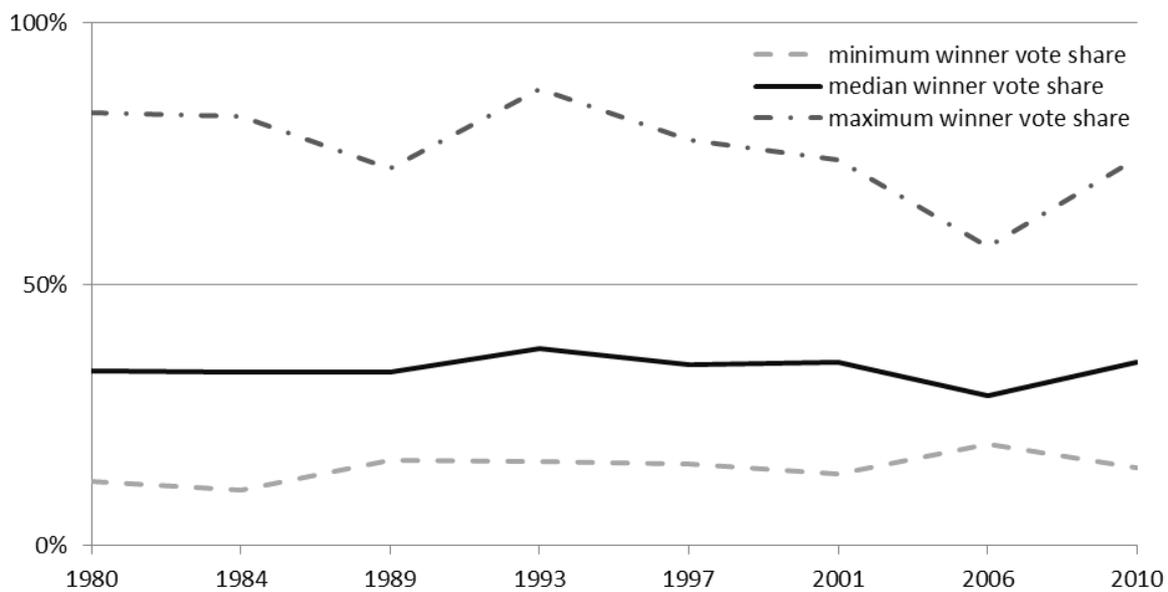


Chart notes: the numerator in the calculation reflected in this chart is the number of incumbent MPs who contested and lost in each general election; the denominator is the number of incumbent MPs who contested.

term and only 14 per cent of MPs had two or more previous terms under their belts.

Those Solomon Islanders who are elected as MPs are not a representative subset of the population. Although women make up just under half Solomon Islands' population, since independence only two women — Hilda Kari and Vika Lusibaea — have ever been elected to parliament. In the last general election, no women were elected (Vika Lusibaea was subsequently elected in a by-election).<sup>8</sup> In terms of education, in 2010 nearly 70 per cent of all MPs had undertaken some form of non-vocational tertiary education (Corbett and Wood 2013, 325). This contrasts with just 4.4 per cent of the over-12 population of the country as a whole (SINSO 2011b, 2). Similarly, while all or almost all MPs in recent parliaments have worked in the formal economy (either in the private sector or in government) (Corbett and Wood 2013, 327), 62 per cent of Solomon Islanders reported in the 2009 census (SINSO 2011a, 2) that they worked outside the formal economy in subsistence agriculture. Also, reflecting the fact that Honiara is the centre of the country's economic and government activity, most MPs, including those from rural electorates, whilst usually originating in the electorate they represent,

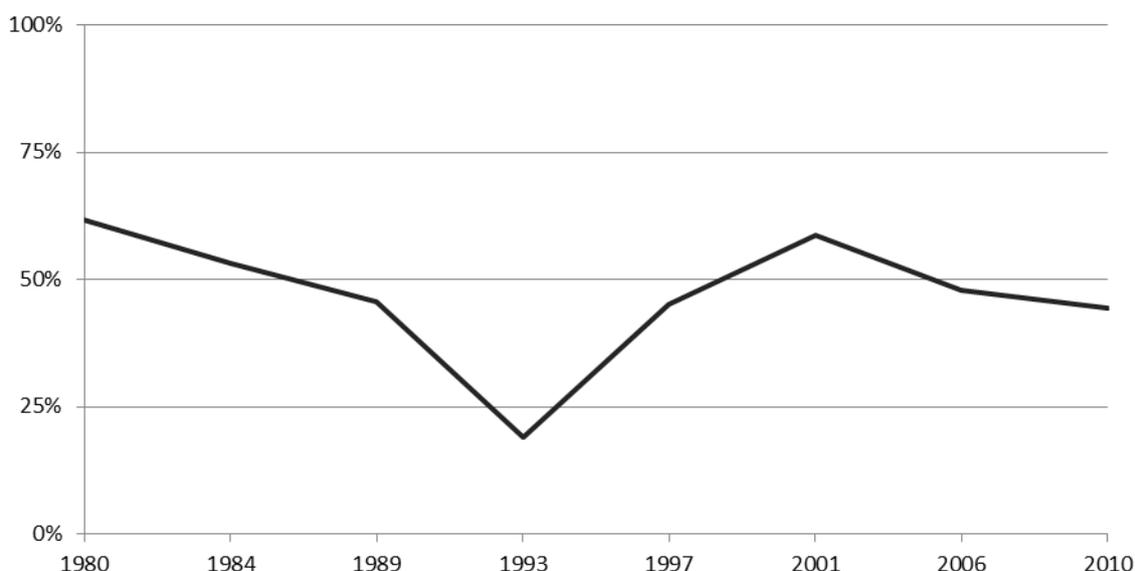
tend to have lived and worked in Honiara for much of their adult lives prior to entering politics.

### Electoral Process

Elections are administered by the Solomon Islands Electoral Commission. Notwithstanding the two specific shortcomings identified below, given that they are held in an environment of low administrative capacity, and across a country that also presents considerable geographical challenges, recent elections (particularly those in 2010) have been quite well run. And, as a result of the electoral commission, domestic and international observer teams, and a system of open vote counting that permits candidate's agents to scrutinise the counting process, election results are mostly free of any wrongdoing directly involving the mechanics of the counting process itself (Commonwealth Secretariat 2010; East West Center 2010; PIFS 2010). Process is not perfect but it is good enough to contrast starkly with recent elections in Papua New Guinea, and should be viewed as a notable achievement.

Although elections themselves have been generally well run, there have been specific issues both with the electoral roll and also with ballot secrecy.

**Figure 4: Incumbent Turnover as a Percentage of Contesting Incumbents, Solomon Islands General Elections**



Owing to internal migration, vagaries in the spelling of people's names, and the absence of any formal system of personal identification, compiling an accurate electoral roll in Solomon Islands is challenging. However, the accuracy of the 2010 roll was sub-standard even taking into account such constraints. As can be seen in Figure 1, the number of registered voters on the roll was much greater (1.6 times) than the estimated voting age population. For the most part, roll inflation (as is suggested in Figure 1 by the fact that actual votes cast were still less in 2010 than estimated voting age population) has not been something that candidates have been able to systematically take advantage of on a large scale. However, on a small scale at least, inaccuracies in the roll have led to voter disenfranchisement in some instances and, in others, enabled people to cheat by voting twice or voting using the names of deceased people on the roll (Commonwealth Secretariat 2010; East West Center 2010).

In 2014, significant investment was put into creating a new electoral roll for Solomon Islands — a roll making use of biometric technology. And, although there are still concerns with candidates attempting to manipulate the system (*Solomon Star* 29/5/2014), it appears as if the compilation of the new roll has considerably reduced previous roll inflation (Wood 2014a).<sup>9</sup> What remains to be seen

at this point is whether candidates will still succeed at least to some extent in manipulating roll-related inaccuracies to their advantage, and whether a reasonable-quality roll can be maintained over time.

The other electoral issue, in part at least, associated with election mechanics has been that it appears it is sometimes possible for candidates to discover who voted for them. Owing to sensitivities in this area (people being reluctant to admit they have broken the law), it is hard to say with certainty how candidates garner this information, or the relative prevalence of various different methods. However, the following is clear:

1. Often candidates learn through informal processes. Most major candidates have agents in most villages who they task with winning votes. Via village gossip, promises made by various family heads, and observing who associates with who within a village, these agents can usually provide candidates with reasonably accurate 'guestimates' of who has voted for them.
2. Sometimes votes are bought in a manner that ensures knowledge. Specifically, voters collect their ballot paper and, instead of depositing it, remove it from the polling station and sell it to a candidate's agent who later fills it out and deposits it.<sup>10</sup>

3. Possibly, some candidates learn who has voted for them via the public counting of ballot papers. One former campaign manager told me that during the 2006 election his team ascertained who had voted for them by obtaining a copy of the electoral roll, which provides a list of voters' names matched to registration numbers. Then, during the public counting of ballots, his scrutineers compiled lists of voter registration numbers taken from ballot papers as they were being publicly counted. Paired with the roll, these numbers provided them with names. During interviews conducted in 2011 and 2012, similar stories were relayed by other interviewees. However, from examining ballot papers, it appears that cheating in this manner ought not be possible as voter registration numbers do not appear on the portion of the ballot paper that is deposited in the ballot box. Rather they are only printed on ballot stubs and from that mapped to ballot paper itself through a letter code. To get from the letter code, which would be visible to scrutineers, to the voter's name would require possession of the ballot stub or some other table that allowed tracing from letter codes to voter numbers. This may be possible in instances, although acquisition of the relevant information would appear difficult (and indeed changed to be even more difficult in the 2014 election).

It may be that voting is actually more secret in Solomon Islands than most voters believe it to be. In addition to plausible stories of how candidates learnt, interviews also turned up implausible tales. And from the perspective of a candidate, having people believe you know if they voted for you is almost as useful as actually knowing; candidates certainly circulate stories to this effect.

### The Choices Voters Make

Having described electoral basics, key features of election outcomes, and electoral process, this paper now moves to voter behaviour, and, in particular, to the question of why voters voted for a particular candidate.

Figure 5 provides a useful starting point in this discussion. The figure is derived from responses to

a question asked in the 2011 People's Survey — a large-N survey run annually in Solomon Islands (ANU Enterprise 2012). As part of the survey that year, voters were asked why they voted for a particular candidate in the 2010 national elections. To create the chart, responses that were too broad to be interpretable (such as 'Because I liked the candidate') were removed, and the chart is based on people's first responses to the question, although they were allowed up to three (the assumption here being that the first response would best capture the respondent's main motivating factor).<sup>11</sup>

There are limitations to what survey data can tell us of voter behaviour. In particular, social desirability bias means that features such as coerced voting and vote-buying are under-reported (Gonzalez-Ocantos, et al. 2012). Also, issues of category overlap complicate matters (how would a voter respond, for example, if they voted for someone from their tribe/clan who was also well educated and from their village?)<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, the results provide a good sense of the range of factors influencing voters' choices in Solomon Islands, and similar responses were given in qualitative interviews conducted by the author, suggesting the categories provided are broadly accurate, even if we might need to interpret the actual frequencies of particular responses with some care.

### Are Voters Free to Choose?

The first question to ask about voter choice is whether it actually exists. Are voters free to choose in Solomon Islands?

Not always. Nearly nine per cent of People's Survey respondents answered that they were 'told to vote for them' — a response suggesting they had little choice. What is more, owing to the sensitivity in this area, it is quite possible the figure is an understatement. Data from interviews (conducted by the author of this paper) suggest that coerced voting varied in prevalence from community to community, and also that different types of voters experienced it to different degrees. In particular:

1. Young voters and women appeared to be the most likely to be deprived of the freedom to choose how to vote. This stems from power dynamics within communities and social norms

**Figure 5: 'Why Did You Vote For the Candidate You Voted For?'**

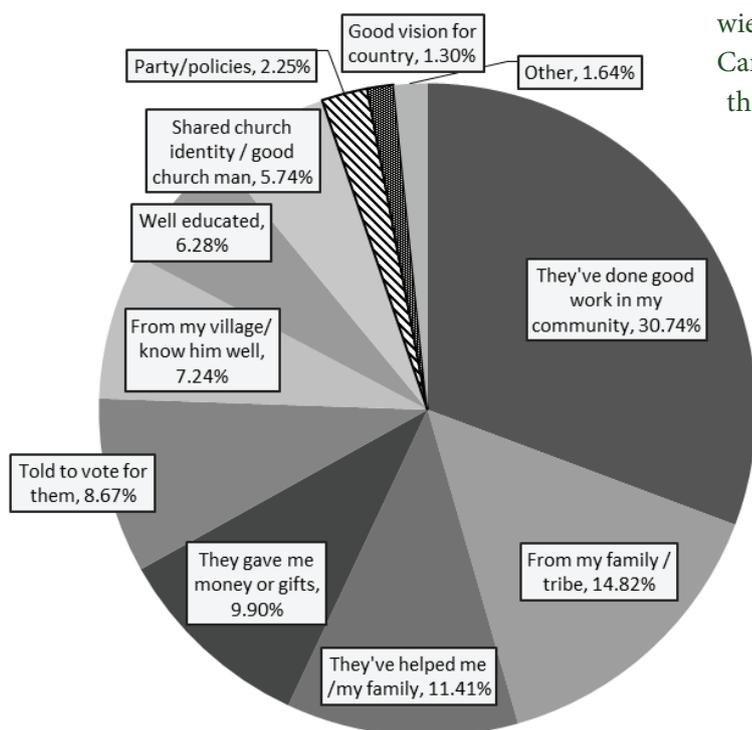


Chart notes: n=1445 (this equals the total number of respondents who made any of the above responses in their first reply). Source data provided by the authors of the 2011 People's Survey.

that require women and the young to follow the choices of (male) heads of families in most aspects of life, including voting.

2. Voter choice appeared likely to be more constrained in areas where candidates possessed the power to punish those that do not vote for them. For example, in one village in Malaita a couple were interviewed who said that they had voted for the local candidate because the candidate owned the land on which they grew their food, and there was a risk that if they had not voted for the candidate they would have been run off their gardens.
3. The extent to which voters are free to choose varies in ways that correspond to the strength and nature of local institutions. For example, in West 'Are 'Are constituency, villages in its northern half are governed by community-selected leaders whose sway over villagers, at least with respect to voting, is limited. On the other

hand, in the southern half of the constituency, villages are ruled by hereditary chiefs who wield greater power within their communities. Candidates interviewed from West 'Are 'Are said that in the northern half of the constituency, candidates have to win voter support from voters or families individually. On the other hand, in the southern half of the constituency, candidates win votes by winning the support of village chiefs, who can be relied upon to deliver the support of their village. Similarly, before its recent schism, the Christian Fellowship Church (CFC) was able to get its followers to vote with almost perfect loyalty for CFC candidates.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, other churches, such as the Church of Melanesia, have had almost no power to do this.

Importantly, although coerced voting appears quite common in parts of Solomon Islands, survey data, as well as interview

data, suggest that many Solomon Islanders are still free to choose.

**What do Voters Seek when Casting Votes?**

When they are free to choose, Solomon Islands voters typically vote for the candidate they think is most likely to help them, their family, or possibly their community, directly. They do not vote on national issues or quality of national governance.

This can be seen clearly in Figure 5. Only two of the response types 'Party/Policies' and 'Good vision for country' (together totalling 3.55 per cent) — pertain to national politics. All of the others, to the degree that they reveal spatial preferences, suggest voters choose primarily on the basis of local considerations. And most of the politicians who were interviewed noted that local performance mattered most when voters in their constituency evaluated their performance.

For example, Varian Lonamei, member for Maringe Kokota constituency, when asked what voters assessed his performance on, stated that:

[T]hey look at what they benefit from. They don't see if you have contributed to the national economy or contributed to national

affairs. They will tend to say, 'oh you are a good member if you provide that for me'.  
(Interview, Varian Lonamei)

Such voting in search of localised or personalised benefits is the most salient feature of Solomon Islands electoral politics. It is strongly associated with the behaviour of most Solomon Islands MPs who, reflecting the fact, typically focus their energies towards delivering to their supporters, and who tend to pay only very intermittent attention to broader issues of national interest.

While, as discussed later, voting in search of localised returns contributes to Solomon Islands' political problems, it is important to note that, on its own terms, taking into account the social, economic and political context that voters in Solomons inhabit, it is a reasonable action (Haque 2012). Because the reach of the state into rural Solomon Islands is very limited and because voters have never experienced dramatic shifts in the quality of national governance directly related to election results, they have little reason on the basis of experience for expecting that voting nationally will have any impact on their lives. Moreover, voters can only elect one member of parliament out of 50, and there are no strong political parties to give them confidence that their vote for national change is being matched by sufficient votes of other Solomon Islanders around the country in a way that leads to a parliamentary majority for national change. Therefore, voters who desire national change are constrained by a collective action dilemma, which means that even those voters who believe that national change will ultimately have the largest positive impact on their welfare cannot vote for it. At the same time, voters' material needs are immediate and real — all the more so because their government is so poor at providing public goods and services. Under these circumstances, voting in search of personalised or localised gain is entirely understandable.

#### **Factors Influencing Voter Choice — Clans, Wantok Ties and Churches**

The next question to be asked is: how do voters choose a candidate when they vote seeking localised or personalised assistance'?

One part of the answer to this question is readily apparent from the types of response provided in Figure 5: unlike voters in most OECD democracies, Solomon Islands voters very rarely vote along party lines. As they are assessing candidates with respect to their likelihood of providing personalised or localised assistance, it is individual traits, not party affiliation, that matter.

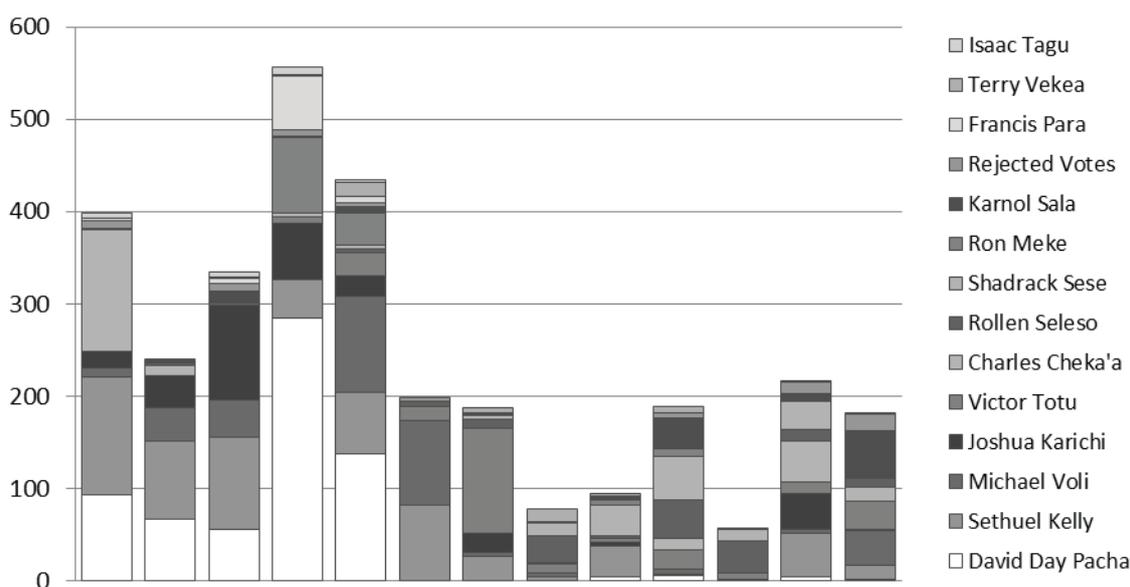
Figure 5 also highlights one type of individual trait important in voter's decisions, and which has been well described in other work on western Melanesia. This is voting on the basis of relational ties or similar links — voters voting for candidates with whom they have close family, clan or church-based ties (May 2006; Premdas and Steeves 1994; Reilly 2004). If anything, the survey data probably under-report such relational voting, as social desirability bias likely leads to a reluctance on the behalf of interview respondents to admit to voting in this manner (this is well described in work elsewhere on ethnic voting and similar types of voting. See Lieberman and Singh 2012). Also, there is likely to be considerable overlap between categories such as 'the candidate has done good work in my community' and 'the candidate is from my family/tribe', which may further increase under-reporting of this type of voting.

While kinship and church-based voting is common, it is not, for the most part, based around blind primordial loyalties that drive voters to vote as they do through some form of instinctive desire to support their own. Rather, it occurs because group-based norms and social rules make kin/family/co-religionists more likely to help them should they become MP (Wood 2014b). There is, in other words, a very strong link between voting in search of localised or personalised assistance and voting for kin or church members or something similar — candidates with these sorts of ties are the most likely to deliver this sort of assistance.

One interviewee in Guadalcanal explained this well:

[I]n this country one thing that is very big is nepotism. So voters go for clan, or voters go for friends, or voters go for those who they know, or voters go, 'this man has always

Figure 6: South Guadalcanal Results by Polling Station 2006



helped me, I'll pay him back and vote for him because he always gives me something.' (Interview 1, Guadalcanal)

And in Small Malaita constituency, a community leader offered a similar reply, adding church to the list:

Some people vote for relatives. Some people vote for their candidate for religion: SDA [Seventh Day Adventist] or SSEC [South Seas Evangelical Church]. That's how I see it. In Solomon Islands elections people follow, they don't look for the right man, they look for relatives or friends if you're good for me, then I'm good for you ... Voters look for their wantoks [people whom they share relational ties with] or their friends [inaudible] their thinking is, 'relatives it's easy to ask them for a little bit of assistance.' (Interview 1, Malaita)

**Factors Influencing Voter Choice — Assistance and Performance**

While voting following relational and similar ties is common in Solomon Islands, such ties are not the sole basis of candidate assessments. This is suggested by Figure 5 (even allowing for social desirability bias and category overlap leading to under-reporting of voting following relational

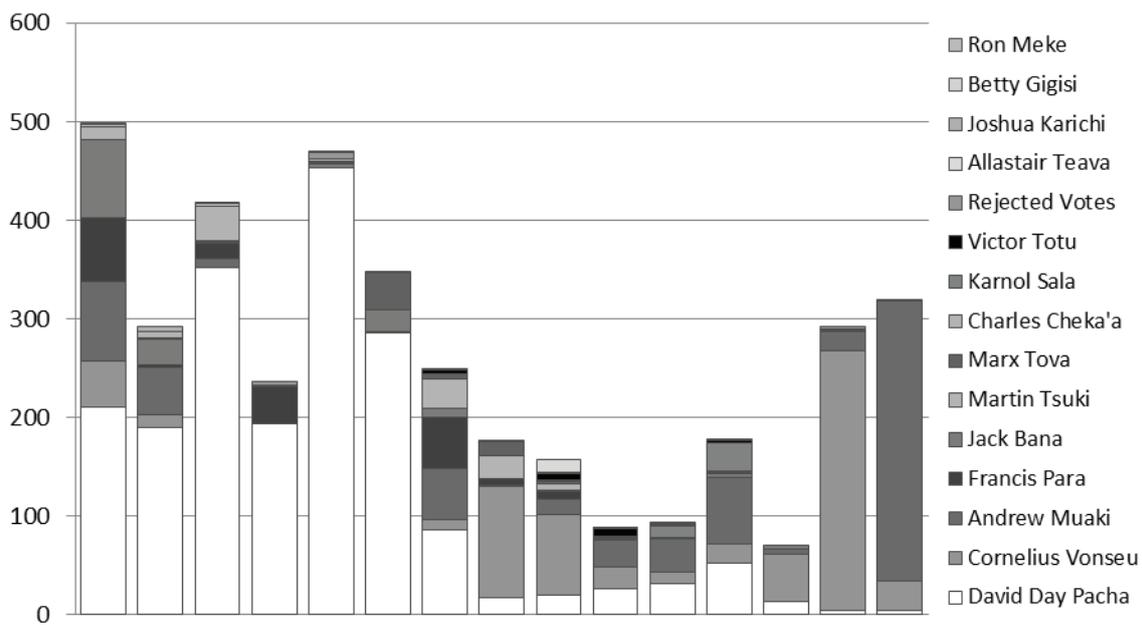
ties). Two of the three most prevalent responses in Figure 5 — 'they've done good work in my community' and 'they've helped me/my family' — point to another key factor shaping voter choice: the candidate's track record of helping. This is also suggested in the quotes above.

The last two elections in the constituency of South Guadalcanal illustrate the impact of tangible assistance on voter choices.

In 2006, David Day Pacha, who had been born in South Guadalcanal but had lived most of his life in Honiara, won for the first time, with a small plurality vote share (just over 21 per cent of the vote). This win came primarily through support from his village of origin, church support and kin ties. Figure 6 shows results by polling station from the 2006 election in South Guadalcanal, with polling stations being ordered by approximate geographical proximity. The far left bar in both charts reflects the most westerly polling station. Pacha's votes are shaded in white. Reflecting the nature of Pacha's support, his support is foremost in his village's polling station and a few neighbouring polling stations.

Come 2010, Pacha won almost 50 per cent of all votes cast and, as Figure 7 shows, spread his support base across the west of the constituency and won votes almost everywhere, except for the constituency's eastern edge.

Figure 7: South Guadalcanal Results by Polling Station 2010



The explanation for this pattern of results became apparent quickly during fieldwork in the electorate in 2011. In the west, Pacha was popular because he delivered, including to people who were not necessarily his kin or from his church. In the east, he was unpopular because he had not delivered. In between, his performance was mixed, and this was reflected in his support. In villages in the west, houses were fitted with solar panels, communities had outboard motor boats, and people had money to run small stores. This had all been provided by Pacha, who had used government ‘constituency development’ funding to pay for most of it (Pacha, like all Solomon Islands MPs, is provided, through a range of mechanisms, with government money to spend on his constituents, more or less at his discretion). And voters factored his largesse into their appraisal of him.

For example, when asked, a man from a village in the west had the following to say about voting in 2006 and 2010:

The first time he [David Day Pacha] stood I did not vote for him. But then he took his CDF [RCDF — government constituency funding] and when I saw that over the four years he worked [as an MP] he had done lots of the things I expected other MPs to do, but which they never did. So I say “oh this man, I

like him. I like his work. He is honest. He has integrity.” (Interview 2, Guadalcanal)

Members of Pacha’s campaign team told a similar tale. One, for example, said speaking about winning votes that:

When he stood in 2006, it was a bit hard as some people did not know David Day. Some people, like us, already knew him, because we are related. But when we went round telling other people to vote for him they asked “if he becomes member will he really do what you are saying or won’t he?”...When he won, once we voted for him, then they saw some things David Day did. It opened their eyes. (Interview 3, Guadalcanal)

Pacha established (or at least greatly enhanced) his reputation for assisting whilst serving as MP, yet non-incumbent candidates can also go some way to garnering a reputation with their work outside the political sphere. In the Isabel constituency of Gao and Bugotu, Samuel Manetoali won for the first time in 2006, in part because he had gained a reputation for helpfulness while working as a lawyer in Isabel’s provincial government.

At the same time, despite access to significant amounts government funding, many MPs find it surprisingly hard to demonstrate to a significant

slice of their electorate that they are able providers of assistance. They struggle because demands are numerous, and private distribution of wealth a far less efficient means of enhancing welfare than the provision of public goods by a well-functioning state. They also struggle because, dwelling in Honiara (a political necessity even for those who were not originally based there), they have to rely on local interlocutors to convey resources for them — agents who often appropriate resources to advance their own personal ends. What is more, voters appear to be well informed of the amounts of constituency funding available and so adjust their expectations of MPs accordingly. Together, these factors have in the past gone quite some way to offsetting the incumbency advantage that government constituency funding ought to offer sitting MPs.<sup>14</sup>

#### **Factors Influencing Voter Choice — Vote-Buying**

Overlapping with the process of winning votes through gaining a reputation as someone who assists is vote-buying. Although its illegal nature makes it a phenomenon that is very hard to quantify (in Figure 5, the 9.9 per cent who stated they voted the way they did because of money of gifts is almost certainly an underestimate), vote-buying appears very common in Solomon Islands, as it is in many developing countries. In Solomon Islands, the night before elections is colloquially known as ‘Devil’s Night’ because of the vote-buying that occurs (Marau 2010).

At first glance, the presence of vote-buying in Solomon Islands is puzzling: theoretically, the secret ballot ought to make vote-buying difficult by preventing purchasers (candidates and their agents) from being sure if vendors (the voters) have honoured the vote-buying ‘contract’ and actually voted for them.

Indeed, voters *do* quite often take money from candidates and vote for other candidates instead. And yet, it is very unlikely that vote-buying would persist if this was all that was taking place; few candidates would waste their money if it really had no effect whatsoever. Vote-buying appears to work at least some of the time. And in part it works: as discussed above, candidates are often able to ascertain at least to an extent who voted for

them — something that changes the nature of the transaction.

To an extent, vote-buying also appears to work as a means of signalling: money given now indicates a candidate who will be more likely to help should they win, something that elicits voter support in anticipation of future benefits rather than directly through the money given itself. As discussed, gaining a reputation as someone who helps is a good electoral strategy, and buying votes serves this function to an extent, although voters tend to place more weight on evidence of helpfulness displayed over longer terms than they do on more transparent attempts at purchasing support.

According to interviewees, vote-buying also appears to work, at least sometimes, because voters feel gratitude for the gift and/or feel it would be morally wrong to take money and not provide the service promised.

#### **Factors Influencing Voter Choice — Brokers**

A final important influence on voter choice is that of local figures whose support most candidates procure (or try to procure — just like voters, such figures quite often take candidates’ money before ultimately supporting someone else). These brokers (to use the terminology of Stokes, et al. 2013) are common to clientelist polities the world over.<sup>15</sup> They gain votes for candidates either through something akin to coercion or because voters trust their judgement and follow their endorsement. In the words of a broker interviewed in Malaita:

In the case of the candidate not living in the village it helps for the agent to spread the word on his behalf. If the candidate comes and gives a talk he is looked at more like a stranger or something. So it’s better that he goes through somebody in the village. (Interview 2, Malaita)

The same interviewee detailed the sorts of people who candidates tried to recruit as brokers:

The candidate will try and select who in the village is a respected person, a community leader or something like that, a chief.

Brokers appear to be present in almost every constituency in Solomon Islands and, on the basis

of the effort and money candidates expend on attempting to obtain their support, clearly play a significant role in winning votes.

### **Problems of Political Economy: From the Choices Voters Make to Quality of Governance**

Of all the characteristics of voter choice in Solomon Islands detailed above, the one with the most important ramifications for political governance is their propensity to vote in search of local gain, rather than on the basis of national governance. This means that Solomon Islands MPs operate under an incentive structure at odds with improved governance at a national level. Because voter assessments are local not national, MPs are neither rewarded nor punished for their performance nationally. Instead of being judged on national performance, MPs are judged on how well they deliver private goods, or localised public goods to their constituents.<sup>16</sup> This means that any MP who seeks re-election needs to focus on delivering these goods to an election-winning-sized portion of their constituency. MPs who do this well are usually re-elected; those who do not usually are not. Whether an MP performs well nationally is largely irrelevant to their election prospects, meaning that their work at this level is not shaped by an incentive structure that encourages performance. Some MPs do still work relatively well nationally, but the fact that they do is simply a product of individual MP characteristics and chance, not incentives born of voter pressure. And, importantly, as a minority of MPs in any given parliament, they are heavily constrained in their ability to bring systematic national-level change.

As discussed earlier, while voters' voting decisions contribute to poor national governance, they are not poor choices on their own terms. Owing to the nature of national government in Solomon Islands, and the collective action dilemma outlined earlier, voting in search of local benefits is a sensible voter strategy, and hardly something voters can be blamed for. Unfortunately though, this also means there is an element of a vicious cycle flowing through electoral politics in Solomon Islands. National governance is poor in Solomons in part because voters are voting in search of

localised benefits. And, at the same time, voters vote in search of localised benefits, at least in part, because national governance is poor. This means the current state of political governance in Solomons is in an equilibrium of sorts, and — as such — resistant to change.

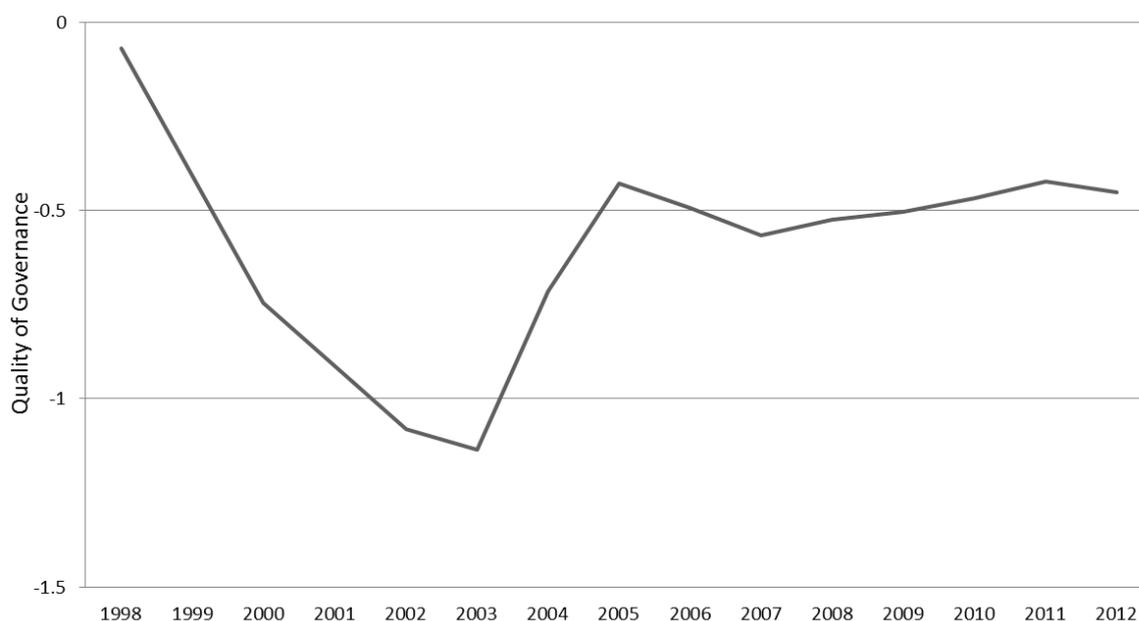
Above and beyond this, the need of MPs and aspiring MPs to deliver goods or money to constituents (either directly as vote-buying or as evidence of their propensity to help) provides an avenue through which money from industries such as logging can purchase undue political influence (Craig and Porter 2013). It also leads to political pressure within parliament for increased government constituency development funding of the sort described earlier in this paper. While it is, perhaps, understandable that MPs in a clientelist polity desire more government funding as a tool for their own use, it is unlikely that such funding represents the most efficient or equitable means of the Solomon Islands state providing services to its citizens.

### **Concluding Analysis**

Solomon Islands is in an unenviable situation with respect to its electoral politics, and political economy more generally. Electoral politics are stuck in a clientelist equilibrium in which the nature of the existing state and a collective action dilemma sees reasonable choices from voters contribute to poor governance — a state of poor governance that contributes, in turn, to the choices voters make.

The apparent intractability of Solomon Islands' governance issues can be seen in Figure 8, which shows that the arrival of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) and the end of the 'tensions' in 2003 saw a rapid improvement in quality of governance as measured by the World Bank. However, this improvement for the most part took the form of a return to something close to preconflict levels, and since then, further improvement has been very slow at best. Electoral politics are not the sole cause of poor governance in Solomon Islands — extractive industries, for example, have also contributed directly to corruption (Bennett 2000) — yet electoral politics have been an important contributing factor (Fukuyama 2008; Haque 2012).

**Figure 8: Averaged World Bank Quality of Governance Indicators for Solomon Islands 1998 to 2012**



*Chart notes: Data come from (World Bank 2013)*

Confronted by the role played by electoral politics in Solomon Islands' poor governance, the obvious question, both for domestic reformers and the aid community, is: what would help? What might improve on the current state of affairs?

Here, first and foremost, the answer needs to start with a counsel of caution: solutions will not be easily engineered. This is an important point, because at times both reformers in Solomon Islands and the international development community have acted as if the answer might be found in areas such as voter education, changing the country's electoral system, or legislating to promote more stable parties. However, in each of these cases there is no good reason to believe the underlying problems of electoral politics in Solomon Islands would be resolved.

Educating voters of their rights and of electoral rules is worth doing, but — as discussed above — most voters' choices are already broadly reasonable in their own terms, and it is unlikely to be possible to educate people away from reasonable decisions. Similarly, while there may potentially be benefits (as well as costs) associated with adopting a system of limited preferential voting in Solomon Islands similar to that adopted in Papua New Guinea

after 2002, yet there is no reason to believe such a change would dramatically weaken the clientelist dynamic underlying politics in Solomon Islands. There is no cause for believing it would resolve the collective action problem voters currently face, or the material situation (immediate needs and a weak state) they currently cast their ballots amidst. Moreover, there is no evidence from the two Papua New Guinea elections post-electoral system change to suggest that its politics have become any less clientelist in nature — indeed, if anything, vote-buying and money politics of the sort associated with clientelism appear to be increasing in Papua New Guinea (Haley and Zubrinich 2013). Similarly, as discussed earlier, there is no obvious reason to expect party-strengthening legislation to transform politics or to shift the country away from its clientelist politics.

The fact that solutions to the problems of electoral politics in Solomon Islands will not be easily engineered does not mean, however, that they will not eventually emerge. Solomon Islands is not alone in its clientelism — variants of this type of politics can be found across the developing world, as well as in the histories of OECD countries

(Hicken 2011; Kitschelt, et al. 2010; Stokes, et al. 2013; Stokes 2009). And clearly, as the non-clientelist politics of most OECD states as well as the slow shift towards more nationally oriented politics in some Latin American countries show, it is possible for countries to evolve out of clientelism, although political scientists are far from clear as to how such evolutions occur.

Fukuyama (2013) provides a good summary of potential explanations of transitions away from clientelism. Of those he covers, the avenue for transformation that would seem to hold the most promise for Solomon Islands is the rise of national-level social movements. Plausibly, such movements might be able to inspire voters into believing that national-level change is at stake in elections, while at the same time providing them with a means of collective action capable of bringing such change about. The rise of such movements, and their success in generating change, it needs to be emphasised, is far from guaranteed. Although the recent growth of a new generation of social movements such as Forum Solomon Islands International (for now still small and mostly Honiara based) offers some cause for a fragile optimism here.

Such change will not come quickly though. And for the world of aid, which — of necessity — spends much time operating in the short to medium term, knowing of the possibility of social movements bringing change eventually, offers little by the way of advice on what can and should be done now. Yet there are some key lessons for aid donors.

The first of these is simply a repeat of the advice offered earlier in this section: it is not likely that solutions to the problems of Solomon Islands electoral politics, or its political economy more generally, can be easily engineered.

The second lesson is also by the way of re-emphasising an earlier point: the incentives of electoral politics pull against the good governance of the country as a whole. Prime ministers normally award ministries to MPs not on the basis of performance but to shore up their support. And ministers in charge of departments do not need to fear the sanction of voters if they do not run their ministries well. On the other hand, they do need to deliver key patronage goods to supporters in

their constituencies if they want to be re-elected. As a result, many government ministries face no political incentives to perform. This is a major barrier to the types of improvements aid donors would like to fund. Yet, to a point, it is not an insurmountable barrier — donors can use their money, influence, and carefully situated technical assistance to improve performance. A good example of this in action is the Solomon Islands Electoral Commission: here, ongoing donor engagement has been crucial in keeping the commission running, and in running elections well. There are, however, limits to what donors can do, and often improvements will only be sustained as long as donors engage. For these reasons, donors need to view their engagement as part of a long-term, ongoing process focused on institutions that are crucial for the country. Once again, the electoral commission is a good example here: it is essential for reasonable elections and elections themselves are central to democratic politics, and were the commission to become completely dysfunctional, the odds of Solomon Islands developing healthy democratic politics would be substantially reduced.

Finally, the aid donor community should focus at least some work on helping strengthen Solomon Islands' public sphere. In my opinion, it would be a mistake to fund the country's emerging new social movements, as this runs the risk of changing the incentives and motivations that currently propel them. However, it may be possible to enhance the work such groups do through promoting transparency (both at the national level and in areas such as the MP controlled constituency development funds) and debate. For example, facilitating or funding debate on national radio (something that already exists to a degree) might be a means of assisting the spread of ideas and campaigns from beyond internet-associated social media into provincial Solomon Islands. Importantly, the donor community, by holding key institutions together, also increases the space for the country's public sphere to form. A country amidst conflict, or where the education system or electoral system completely collapses, is not likely to be one that gives birth to new social movements, healthy social change or political transformation.

## Author Notes

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- Endnotes**
- 1 The one glitch in this record was the toppling, in a quasi-coup, of prime minister Batholomew Ulufa'alu during the 'tensions'. Although, even then, democratic elections continued uninterrupted in the wake of this event. Solomon Islands also held four mass suffrage general elections pre-independence.
  - 2 Prior to 1997 there were 47 constituencies; prior to 1993 there were 38 (with fewer again still in some pre-independence elections).
  - 3 Exclusions exist for severe mental health problems and those imprisoned longer than six months (for more information see the International Parliamentary Union's web-resource <[http://www.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/2289\\_B.htm](http://www.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/2289_B.htm)>
  - 4 Unless otherwise stated, all data in this paper come from the author's election results database.
  - 5 My estimates, on the basis of interpolating census population data.
  - 6 Many Honiara residents return to their rural constituencies to vote in general elections, which means the figure here overstates actual likely voters. However, even if comparisons are based on actual votes cast malapportionment remains significant: 8,229 votes were cast in East Honiara in 2010, compared to only 1,636 in Malaita Outer Islands.
  - 7 Owing to the fact that not all candidates are equally competitive, absolute candidate counts may not accurately reflect the state of competition in any particular electorate. For example, an electorate where one candidate obtains 91 per cent of votes cast, while the remaining nine candidates obtain only one per cent each, is a very different electorate from one where 10 candidates each win 10 per cent of the vote. To account for this, political scientists typically report on electoral competition using a calculated figure, the 'effective number of candidates' (ENC), or 'effective number of parties' (ENP) (Cox 1997). The ENC is the reciprocal of the Herfindahl–Hirschman index of candidate vote shares in an electorate, and is calculated as 1 divided by the sum of all the candidate's squared vote-shares. (Or, in equation form:  $2$  where  $n$  = the number of candidates and  $=$  the vote share of the  $th$  candidate). In the example electorate where one candidate obtains 91 per cent of the vote and the remaining 9 candidates obtain one per cent each the ENC is 1.21, close to one, reflecting the fact that only one candidate was competitive; in the electorate with 10 candidates each obtaining 10 per cent of the vote the ENC is 10, a reflection of the fact that all 10 were equally close to winning.
  - 8 For a full discussion of the impediments facing women candidates in Solomon Islands see Wood 2014c.
  - 9 For the most part, this appears simply to be a product of a new roll being gathered rather than the

biometric technology although the technology did assist in reducing duplicate registrations to some degree.

- 10 It is not possible to say with any certainty, but it appears that this practice is fairly rare, at least compared to Papua New Guinea, particularly in well-policed polling stations.
- 11 In any case, results changed little when based on all three responses.
- 12 Although the People's Survey uses the word 'tribe' (which is also commonly used in Solomon Islands Pijin) this paper follows standard anthropological terminology and uses the term 'clan'.
- 13 While it clearly violates principles of voter choice, at least in some sense it is harder to ascertain whether community leader- or church-directed voting takes place through active coercion (voters fearing the consequences of not following leaders), behavioural norms (following the leaders' simply because that is

what they are used to doing), or because voters trust leader's decisions and follow them out of respect.

- 14 Although the figure was considerably lower in earlier years, by 2013 the amount of funding provided to MPs to dispense in their constituencies was thought to be as high as AU\$850,000 (a figure is based on data provided to the author by a civil society group working on political transparency issues). An interesting question for the 2014 election will be whether this rise in funding is associated with any significant rise in incumbent re-election rates.
- 15 In Solomons Pijin they are often referred to as *kampain mastas* or *kampain manajas*.
- 16 A very partial exception to this seems to be when MPs become prime minister. Some interview evidence as well as increased vote shares for some prime ministers suggests an element of what is presumably electorate based pride boosting prime minister's vote shares, although this has not occurred for all prime ministers.

Appendix

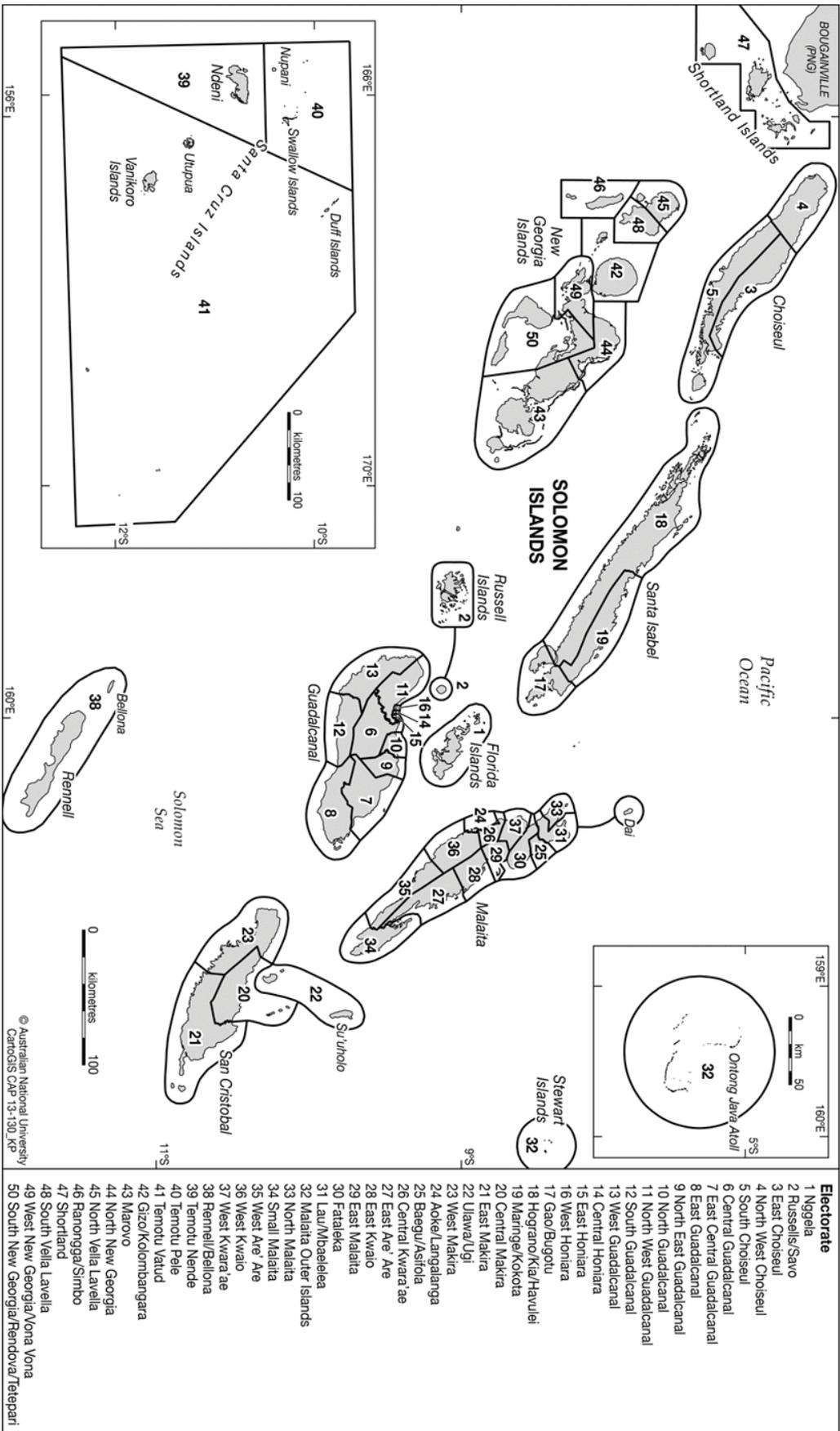


Figure A1: Map of Solomon Islands Showing Constituencies

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