

In 1990, the Samoa passed legislation broadening its electoral franchise. Before this, only *matai* (heads of extended family groupings) had been allowed to vote; from the 1991 general election, the franchise was extended to all registered adult citizens (Soʻo 2001).

As a result, more than four times as many ballots were cast in 1991 than in 1988. Franchise expansion also brought qualitative change in who could vote — because *matai* are more commonly men, post-1991 there were many more women voters, for example (Soʻo and Fraenkel 2005). Yet surprisingly, given the magnitude of the change in this key input into Samoan electoral politics, there is little evidence of commensurate changes in electoral outcomes. Figures 1, 2 and 3 come from the Pacific Politics Database, currently being compiled by SSGM in conjunction with other researchers.<sup>1</sup>

Figure 1 shows (on the left axis) the number of candidates standing in the average electorate in each general election in Samoa, and (on the right axis) the vote share of the average winning candidate. In both, a trend is present, but the trend does not change in any meaningful way across franchise expansion. Despite there being many more voters, candidate numbers did not change in 1991,<sup>2</sup> and, although winners now had to win many more votes, winner vote share did not change significantly either.

Figure 2 shows the proportion of incumbent members of parliament (MPs) successfully defending their seat in each general election. One might have anticipated franchise expansion sweeping away the old guard in the face of democratic change, yet

Figure 1: Average Candidate Numbers and Winner Vote Share Over Time

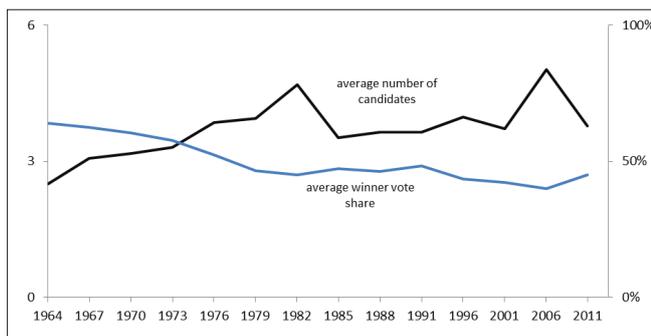
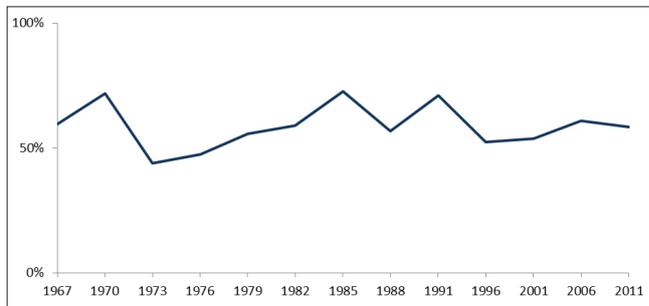


Figure 2: Percentage of Contesting Incumbents Who Successfully Defended Their Seats



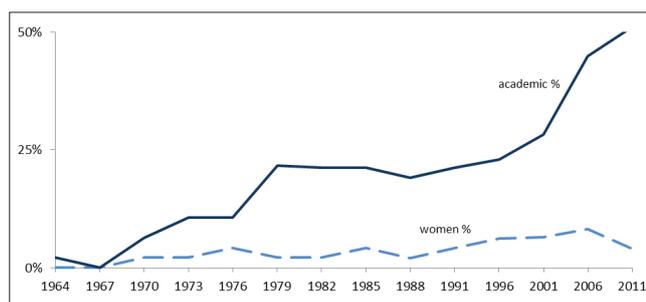
incumbent survival was actually slightly higher than usual in 1991, and the long-term average has not changed substantially since.

A similar absence of change can be found in other aspects of Samoan politics. In the case of party politics, Soʻo and Fraenkel (2005) convincingly argue that, while some political actors hoped franchise expansion might help their particular political faction, expansion actually did little to change party competition.

Figure 3 moves beyond results to examine the traits of election winners, plotting over time the percentage of Samoan MPs who have an academic qualification, as well as the percentage of MPs who are women. There is a clear trend for tertiary education, and a much less substantial, but still real, increase in women MPs. Alongside a slow decline in winner vote share and a steady rise in candidate numbers, these two aspects of the outcomes of Samoan electoral politics are examples of areas where change is occurring. However, timing wise, education changes do not appear to have been substantially driven by franchise expansion. The case of gender is less clear: franchise expansion may have prompted some increase in women MPs (perhaps as a result of more women being able to vote), yet the change was not dramatic. Possibly, the effect could have been larger if candidature itself has not remained restricted to *matai*.

One potential explanation of why such a dramatic change in the formal rules of electoral competition in Samoa has brought so little visible

Figure 3: Percentage of MPs Who Have Academic-Type Tertiary Education and Percentage Women



change in the outcomes of electoral politics is to do with the strength of Samoan social institutions and the impact this has on political contestation. In this view, local traditional governance remains strong and has had ramifications for electoral politics. In many instances, even if voters are formally free to exercise their individual choice, family units or villages still decide collectively— something that has a significant impact on electoral outcomes (Soʻo 2008; TuimalealiʻIfano 2001; Vaʻa 1983). Social institutions, it should be noted, are not completely impervious to change themselves, including change wrought by politics (Soʻo and Fraenkel 2005; Soʻo 2008). However, such social change is much more gradual than the dramatic shift in the formal rules of Samoan electoral politics that occurred in 1991, and the ongoing strength of social institutions in shaping collective interactions, including in matters electoral, provides a plausible explanation of why changes in formal electoral rules have had little obvious impact.

Importantly, in noting that franchise expansion has not had a major impact on election outcomes in Samoa, we are not arguing that extending the vote was unimportant. It is possible it may have had impacts on other aspects of governance, or on economic growth or inequality (these are all matters for further study). There are also good reasons for supporting universal franchise beyond any quantifiable impact on politics (including the protection of social institutions in the Samoan case; see Soʻo and Fraenkel 2005).

In terms of future study, the election outcome patterns described suggest further work to all of us. Yet each author of this *In Brief* has their own academic area of focus: respectively, elections and

voter behaviour, political leadership, and Pacific studies. Our methodological preferences also differ. For electoral studies, which has long been interested in the impact of formal political institutions on election outcomes (Cox 1997; Norris 2004), Samoa provides an example of the important role played by social institutions, and fits with the new contextual turn in the field (Ferree, Powell and Scheiner 2014). For scholars of political leadership, it suggests the need for further study of how political actors understand and respond to social and political change. And for Pacific studies, it offers an example of how people in the Pacific, embedded in indigenous cultures, encounter and reconstruct imported systems.

## References

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## Endnotes

- 1 In the case of the Samoan data, we are particularly grateful to Jon Fraenkel and the Samoan parliamentary library for their assistance.
- 2 This is also true for the figure for the Effective Number of Candidates.

