

With the introduction of [District Development Authorities](#) (see O'Neill 2006) and amendments to the Organic Law on Provincial and Local Level Governments, Papua New Guinea's O'Neill Government has set in train an ambitious and game-changing institutional reform agenda that is set to re-constitute the political settlement by vesting additional powers in Open members of parliament (MPs). Compounding this, there are concurrent and not particularly well-aligned reform agendas being pursued by different constitutional authorities. These include amendments to the Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates, currently before parliament, the Constitutional and Law Reform Commission's pending review of the Organic Law on National and Local-level Government Elections (OLNLLGE) as well as the expected Boundaries Commission review in 2015.

Given the strong likelihood of reforms that will affect the conduct of and preparations for the 2017 elections, a consideration of the 2002 reforms to OLNLLGE, which saw the introduction of Limited Preferential Voting (LPV), is timely. In this, the first in a series of In Briefs assessing the shift to LPV, the impact upon mandates and electoral outcomes is considered.¹

The Shift to LPV

In his Report to Parliament on the 1997 National Election, electoral commissioner Reuben Kaiulo advocated for the re-introduction of preferential voting 'premised on the need to reduce the number of candidates to ensure that the MP has a wider basis of support and endorsement, and also to promote collaboration among candidates and counter the surge in violence' (Kaiulo 2002:170). In doing so, he also predicted that administering elections under LPV would 'be more costly, become slower and less tidy' (ibid:179). The latter has proved true on all counts (see Haley & Zubrinich 2013).

Elections in PNG attract large numbers of candidates and are fiercely contested. Voter turnout is always high, and, with each election, candidate num-

bers have tended to increase. Consequently, MPs are elected with small mandates. In 2002 and 2007, individual seats were contested, on average, by 25/26 candidates. The 2012 elections saw a 25% increase in nominations and a record 3,435 candidates, with Simbu Regional fielding 71 candidates. The turnover rate for MPs in PNG is also high, with only 40% of incumbents returned at the two most recent elections.

The Impact of LPV on Mandates

In the three general elections prior to the introduction of LPV (1992, 1997 and 2002), the majority of candidates were elected with less than 20% of the vote, and many with overall vote shares of less than 10%. In 2002, 58% of MPs (63/109) were elected with less than 20% of the vote and 20% (22/109) with less than 10% of the vote in their respective electorates. The mean percentage of votes required to win a seat was 20.1%, and only 4 MPs achieved a vote share of greater than 40%.

It was expected that LPV would 'require candidates to widen their support base' (Standish 2006: 197) and 'promote the election of more broadly supported candidates' (Reilly 2006:189). Certainly it has done the latter, although it remains the case that the vast majority of MPs still only manage to garner support from a minority of their constituents. It is also the case that MPs' primary support bases have changed little. For example, 56% of MPs elected in 2007 (59/105) and 2012 (60/107)² received a primary vote share of 20% or less, compared with 58% in 2002.

Analysis and scrutiny of the 2007 and 2012 election results reveals that after allocation of preferences the 'mandates' of winning candidates broadly increased by 50%,³ such that successful candidates typically have the support of approximately one-third of voters in their respective electorates. The national average mandate in both 2007 and 2012 was 33%, with winning candidates garnering on average 21.9% of the primary vote in 2007 and 21.4% in 2012.

While MPs elected under LPV have wider popular mandates than those elected in 2002, few, even with

the benefit of preferences, managed to secure 50% of the vote. In fact, only eight MPs elected in 2007 and four elected in 2012 secured more than 50% of the allowable ballot, and only four in each case secured an absolute majority with the primary count.

Under LPV, the number of candidates securing a mandate of greater than 40% has, however, increased significantly. While only 4% of MPs gained a mandate of greater than 40% in 2002, 11% did so in 2007 and 23% in 2012. This is heartening, as PNG MPs have long been criticised for delivering services only to those who vote for them. Nonetheless, the jury is very much out on whether increased mandates have produced better and more equitable service delivery.

The Impact of LPV on Electoral Results

Another way to measure the impact of LPV is to consider the number of cases in which the distribution of preferences saw a candidate other than the one who led after the primary count go on to win the seat. In the 2007 and 2012 elections, close to one quarter (23%) of all candidates who led on first preferences subsequently lost. Both 2007 and 2012 also saw a number of sitting MPs unseated despite gaining the largest share of first preferences. Preferences proved most influential in respect of the provincial seats, where 30% of candidates who led after the primary count failed to hold on to their lead through the distribution of preferences.

Conclusion

As Ruben Kaiulo predicted, administering LPV elections is more costly and more complicated. With LPV there has been a five-fold increase in the current price of elections from K75 million in 2002 to 365 million in 2012 (Henderson and Boneo 2013:11). In addition, the return of writs was extended twice in both 2007 and 2012. Even with the widened support base LPV guarantees, more than 90% of PNG MPs are still elected by a minority of their constituents. Moreover, three-quarters of results would remain the same if a simple first-past-the-post count was applied, begging the question: Has LPV delivered the returns its proponents hoped for and can PNG afford to retain LPV?

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Endnotes

- 1 LPV is a voting system in which electors rank their top three candidates in order of preference. Ballots are initially distributed based on each elector's first preference. If a candidate secures more than half the votes cast, they win. If not, the weakest polling candidates are eliminated in turn and their votes transferred through a series of instant runoffs until one candidate secures more than half of the allowable ballot.
- 2 Full results for the 2007 and 2012 elections are not publically available, with results for four electorates missing in each case. The analysis provided herein is based on the available results.
- 3 MP mandates under LPV are calculated by expressing the total votes received after preferences are distributed as a percentage of the total allowable ballot.

References

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