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Notes on recent elections

The 2014 parliamentary elections in Solomon Islands

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1. Elections and electoral process in Solomon Islands

The Melanesian country of Solomon Islands held its first general election in 1967 while still a British colony and has maintained an uninterrupted sequence of elections since (Moore, 2013). The elections held on November 19, 2014 were the country's ninth since independence.[1] Post-independence elections have been held approximately every four years, including during the 1998–2003 conflict. Suffrage in Solomon Islands is open to those over the age of 18 and voting is not compulsory. Elections are held using a single member district plurality system and there are currently 50 constituencies (Steeves, 2001; Wood, 2014b).[2]

National-level political governance is based around a unicameral parliament headed by a prime minister. Voters elect their constituency's Member of Parliament (MP) and MPs vote in a secret ballot to select the prime minister from their ranks. The prime minister then appoints ministers to head government departments, choosing ministers from amongst sitting MPs (Steeves, 2001).

Although political parties exist in Solomon Islands they are not strong: voters very rarely vote along party lines (Wood, 2014d: 8) and, free from fear of voter sanction for doing so, MPs change their party loyalties frequently or simply act as independents (Steeves, 2011).

One consequence of Solomon Islands' combination of electoral and parliamentary rules, and weak parties, is that elections occur in two distinct 'rounds': voters elect MPs, who then enter a protracted phase of wheeling and dealing before the secret ballot in which the prime minister is elected (Fraenkel, 2008). Another consequence is that, once in power, prime ministers spend much of their time attempting to shore up their tenure and prevent MPs from defecting to the opposition. Parliament is often prorogued as the prime minister of the day attempts to stave off no-confidence motions, and between 1980 and 2014 eight prime ministers resigned mid-term having

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[1] Four general elections were held pre-independence.

[2] Redistricting has occurred a number of times both pre and post-independence. The most significant post-independence redistricting took place in 1993 and saw the number of constituencies increase from 38 to 47. The most recent redistricting occurred in 1997 and involved comparatively minor changes. Constituency boundaries have remained the same since 1997. The single member district plurality voting system has been used for all constituencies in all elections since 1973. In 1970, and 1973 it was used in all constituencies except for one outer island constituency where the constituency's MP was chosen by a college of community leaders and chiefs (Wood, 2014b).

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either lost a no-confidence motion or in the face of no-confidence motions they knew they could not win (Wood, 2014c: 80).[3]

In terms of process, notwithstanding issues to do with vote buying discussed in Section 2, given Solomon Islands is a poor (World Bank, 2013a) and poorly-governed (World Bank, 2013b) country, it has run elections reasonably well. Electoral processes have not been perfect but elections have been free of large-scale violence, and mostly free of ballot tampering, ballot stuffing and counting fraud (Paternorte and de Gabriel, 2010; Wood, 2014a). The only area where formal electoral process has been clearly wanting has been that of the electoral roll. From the mid-1990s the number of registered voters began to exceed estimates of the voting age population by an increasing degree, to the point where, by 2010, the number of registered voters was 1.59 times greater than estimates based on census data suggested it should be. However, while an inflated roll appears in instances to have enabled people to vote twice, the actual number of votes cast in elections never exceeded estimates of the voting age population, which suggests major electoral maleficence taking advantage of roll inflation has been rare.[4]

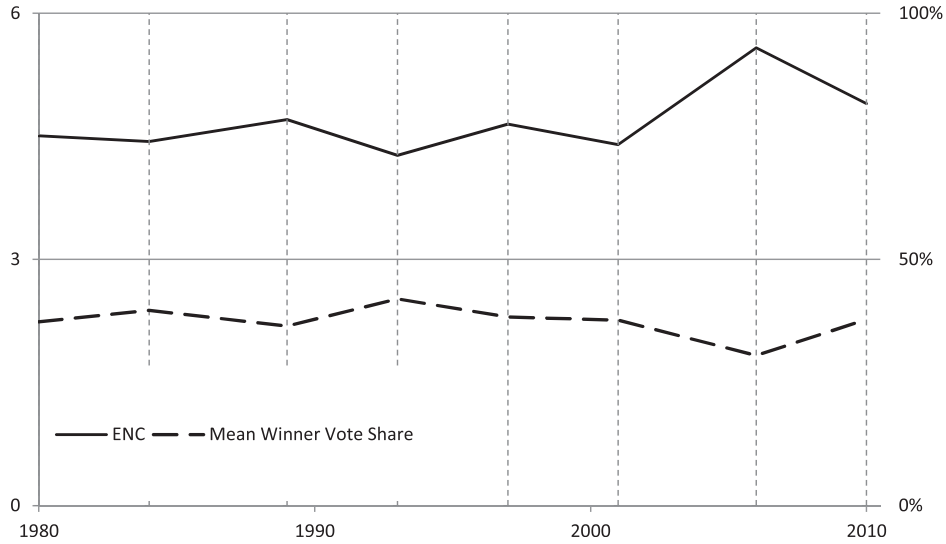

Fig. 1. Effective number of candidates and mean winner vote shares (general elections).

Figure notes: Dashed vertical lines are election years.

2. Elections, election outcomes and voter behaviour

Election outcomes in Solomon Islands deviate from the predictions of one of political science's central theorems: Duverger's Law. This can be seen in Fig. 1: although the Solomon Islands has held elections using a single member district plurality electoral system, the average Effective Number of Candidates (ENC) per electorate has not converged towards two as Duverger's Law predicts and has remained high.[5] Associated with high ENCs have been low winning candidate vote shares (also shown in Fig. 1). Incumbent turnover rates have been high too — on average, at each general election between 1980 and 2010, 47 per cent of contesting incumbent MPs have lost (Wood, 2014b: 6). As Fig. 1 suggests, while there have been fluctuations in results statistics over time, no clear trends are present. Similarly, has been no strong trend in incumbent turnover rates.

While key national-level electoral statistics have been free of dramatic variation over time, there has often been considerable change over short timeframes within individual constituencies. Over the space of a few elections individual constituencies have often shifted from having numerous candidates standing to having few and vice versa, and from being won with small vote shares to being won easily by a powerful candidate.

The central qualitative feature of Solomon Islands electoral politics is inarguably that, when they are free to choose, voters in Solomon Islands elections vote for the candidate they think most likely to directly target resources to helping them, their family or their community if elected. With 'help' in this instance meaning 'material help' — typically money, food, or goods such as roofing iron, solar panels or outboard motors (for in-depth discussion of this

[3] Successful no-confidence motions in Solomon Islands do not require a general election in their wake. Instead, what follows is that MPs vote to select a new prime minister from their midst.

[4] All electoral data used in this article, as well as source material and a constituency, map can be downloaded at https://solomonislandselections.wordpress.com/election-results/.

[5] While discussions of Duverger's Law often refer to the Effective Number of Parties nationally, the logic of the law holds equally for candidates within constituencies (indeed this is how it was initially formulated). For a useful overview of how Duverger thought the law acted see Duverger (1986).

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