Do Pacific Electoral Systems Matter or is Political Culture Everything?

An Introductory Working Paper

Jon Fraenkel, PIAS-DG

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The Pacific Island states have often been upheld as ‘natural laboratories for constitutional and electoral experimentation’¹. Over recent years, ambitious reform efforts have aimed at strengthening political parties, stabilising governments and encouraging moderation and compromise amongst competing ethnic groups. The Westminster-based system has been widely and frequently criticised. Such discussions often centre on somehow changing the interface between customary and (‘western’) rational-legal authority, or on the issue of whether or not indigenous forms of leadership need to be more closely linked to processes of parliamentary selection. Yet little is known about the on-the-ground operation of the extraordinarily diverse range of electoral systems and institutions across the Pacific. This paper looks at some of the issues raised by contemporary debates concerning electoral reform in the region and surveys some of the main institutional variations across the Pacific, drawing on insights from many of the papers submitted for this conference.

Finding appropriate electoral systems, and constitutional set-ups, for Pacific Island countries initially became important issues during the decolonisation period. In most colonies, the franchise was extended and the official majority abolished only shortly before independence. In some cases, indigenous forms of authority, even where these were, in significant part, creations of the not-so-distant past, provided the bases for the post-colonial order (Samoa, Tonga). In other cases, customary leadership was incorporated by way of establishment of bicameral legislatures (Marshall Islands, Fiji). In yet others, efforts to establish supposedly less partisan and more communally oriented systems of representation were abandoned, notably under local pressure (Solomon Islands)².

² Ghai, Y. ‘The Making of the Independence Constitution’, Solomon Islands Politics, (eds) Larmour, P. & Tarua, S. IPS, Suva, 1983, p27. The British colonial government in fact considered the Westminster system unsuitable in the Solomon Islands due to its ethnic diversity and absence of party-based politics and because the ‘divisive effect of a government and an Opposition which are essential to the successful operation of a Westminster model does not appear likely to provide a simpler, effective and unifying system of government at this stage’ (BSIP Interim Proposals on Constitutional Development, Legislative Council Paper 119, Honiara, 1968 para 15). Instead a ‘Governing Council was introduced in 1970 (influenced by the 1936-46 Donoughmore Constitution in Sri Lanka), in which MPs participated together in separate committees. The system was condemned by local politicians, particularly Mamaloni, and abandoned in 1974 in favour of a Westminster-based system.
In most cases, the choice of electoral laws for legislative assemblies was initially strongly influenced by the model bequeathed by the colonial power. Hence, most British colonies adopted first-past-the-post (or plurality) systems, while the French colonies used doubleballots or list proportional representation for territorial elections. The US territories embraced plurality voting, although often with more or less hybrid presidential systems without direct elections (FSM, Marshall Islands), rather than directly elected Governors (Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas and Guam) or Presidents (Palau) with separately elected legislatures. Nauru’s peculiar Borda Count system, which involves preferential voting with successive preferences counted as a diminishing fraction of the first choice vote, was one exception. Block-voting was widely adopted for specific constituencies, and more generally in Guam and Kiribati. PNG had an Australian-style preferential voting system but abandoned this at independence in favour of a first-past-the-post system. Vanuatu is one of the few remaining countries in the world with a single-non-transferable vote system.

Thirty or so years later, the issue of the appropriateness of ‘imported’ institutions still plays a significant role in discussions of electoral reform in many Pacific Islands, as do claims that democracy may be a ‘foreign flower’, unsuitable in the Pacific context. In Melanesia in particular, the Westminster system and first-past-the-post voting laws are frequently deemed unsuitable, alien, and even responsible for weak, divided and inefficient governance. Electoral institutions are also often considered to have negative repercussions in other ways. Fiji’s communal voting system is often argued to underpin ethnically polarised voting patterns. After the May 2000 coup, many indigenous Fijians similarly identified the newly imported Australian-style alternative vote system as having fuelled ethnic Fijian/Indo-Fijian antagonism and provoked the Speight insurgency. In each case, electoral institutions are believed to have profound, discernible and problematic influences over political behaviour.

Connected with such assessments, institutional reforms are frequently tailor-made to remedy such perceived defects. Fiji’s mid-1990s Constitutional Review Commission, for example, suggested that post-independence electoral institutions possessed a ‘divisive effect’ and set out to ‘break down the barriers which force ethnic parties to take a narrow,

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4 SNTV has been abandoned in Jordan and Japan, but continues to be used in Taiwan, and has recently been adopted in Afghanistan.


7 Reeves Report, Street Report, Lawson. Note the ethnic Fijian critique of this view in the initial SVT submissions to the 1997 Constitutional review. ‘Even if the Fijians were to concede tomorrow to have a complete common roll system, that will not change the average person’s belief that as Taukei, they should control the governance of this country. Secular political ideologies and principles do not because of their admirable qualities or purity of moral purpose, necessarily dissolve or obliterate cultural, religious and behavioural differences, that compel people to identify together as one people and to emphasise these distinctive characteristics as against other people’ (SVT, ‘Respect and Understanding: Fijian Sovereignty, the Recipe for Peace, Stability and Progress’, Submission to the Constitutional Review Commission, reprinted in Lal, Another Way, p153).

8 See Commodore Bainimarama’s affidavits to the March 2001 Prasad Case.
communal view of their best interests⁹. Changes in electoral laws were identified as the ‘main stimulus for the emergence of a multi-ethnic political culture’¹⁰. A new electoral system, it was hoped, would facilitate greater cooperation and moderation among leaders of the 44% Indo-Fijian and 52% indigenous Fijian communities. The eventually selected Alternative Vote system (AV), with its provisions for parties to swap preferences, it was claimed, would offer stronger ‘electoral incentives to moderation and compromise’¹¹.

In PNG, recent electoral reforms have aimed at addressing perceived defects in the inherited Westminster system by strengthening political party organisation by use of funding provisions and outlawing party-hopping, while the goal of avoiding continual government instability has informed efforts to restrict ‘no confidence’ challenges to incumbents¹². As in Fiji, a form of preferential voting has been adopted in PNG with the objective of encouraging candidates to broaden their support and appeal to voters outside their immediate clan (or in Fiji’s case, ethnic group). Many have argued that Pacific Island states might be better served by ‘the use of indigenous models for governance as the foundation for state governments’¹³.

Ironically, despite such concerns, the main contemporary electoral reforms in the Pacific have, like the institutions established at independence, been largely imported. Fiji’s new alternative vote system was strongly influenced by debates in the international political science literature about appropriate electoral institutions for ‘ethnically divided societies’, and also by the use of that system in elections to the lower house in neighbouring Australia¹⁴. The multi-party cabinet provisions at the same time adopted in Fiji, and then, influenced by that innovation, in New Caledonia as part of the 1998 Noumea Accord, initially drew on the experience during the transition from Apartheid in South Africa¹⁵.

⁹ CRC 1996, p277, 20 [my emphasis].
¹⁰ CRC 1996: 310, 309
¹¹ CRC 1996: 11-12, 312, 317
¹⁵ See Nick Maclellan, ‘From Eloi to Europe: Interactions with the ballot box in New Caledonia’, this conference. One of Fiji’s constitutional review commissioners, Tomasi Vakaatora, describes the CRC’s deliberations over the South African model. ‘When we returned from South Africa we saw the unworkability of the multi-party cabinet in that country … some of the people that called themselves constitutional engineers tried to push this idea. They were trying to push it onto people like us and they did it in South Africa in the election in 1994 after they were dismantling the Apartheid system. … When we went there in 1996, two years after they had [adopted] this system, we saw quite clearly that it wasn’t working, Mandela was the president, Dick Clarke was the vice-president. They came from two different groups of political thought … they could not match their ideas. … We heard in no uncertain terms from the general secretary of the African National Congress that they wouldn’t adopt the multi-party cabinet
PNG’s reforms have as their main objective the strengthening of an institution that, so many argue, sits uneasily on Melanesian soil, the ‘western’ political party. Robust political parties are commonly deemed crucial to making the Westminster-style system work more effectively (i.e. reforms are not at all aimed at displacing this).

Despite widespread contemporary rhetoric, there is widespread contemporary rhetoric enthusiasm for what we might call indigenous-friendly constitutional and electoral innovation, those countries which have institutions thought to fit better with customary forms of leadership and authority have had these for a long time. Tonga’s monarchical system, in which the King appoints 12 members of parliament, 33 nobles select 9 representatives and 9 are elected by a common suffrage, is a legacy of the 19th century, although significant reforms occurred in 1914, which strengthened the power of the King against the nobility. Samoa’s matai-based system was included a part of the constitution backed by popular plebiscite in the early 1960s, although this has more recently been reformed. Since 1990, the franchise is no longer restricted to matai alone, although it remains the case that only matai may stand as candidates for parliament. Customary chiefs in Micronesia have less political or institutional power than they had during the earlier post-war years.

Reserved parliamentary seats for chiefs during the Trust Territory era have been abandoned, although the Marshall Islands retains a rather inactive Council of Iroij (chiefs) as its upper house. The Marshallese 1999 and 2003 elections both saw a ‘commoner’ President, Kessai Note, and his United Democratic Party, elected in preference to a coalition centred around support for high chiefs from the Kabua dynasty (which notably followed the UDP in opting for party organisation at the 2003 polls, the first time Marshallese elections have followed the two-party model). Even in Vanuatu, where the role of chiefs is often extolled in dealing with grass roots social discontent, customary leaders have fared poorly in post-independence elections.

Much recent concern with electoral reform has centred on Melanesia, rather than Micronesia or Polynesia. The reasons are obvious. Coups in Fiji (1987, 2000) and the Solomons (2000), high turnover of incumbent MPs in PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, and government instability have fuelled this concern with governance in the western Pacific. That these countries have the lowest per capita GDP in the region, despite being the most resource-rich of the Pacific nations, has also encouraged concern with issues and institutions associated with top-level state management. In Melanesia also, reforms have seldom aimed at promoting customary authority systems, with one significant exception. Fiji’s effort, after the 1987 coup, to institutionalise indigenous customary chiefship under the new constitution in 1992 foundered because they saw that it couldn’t work’ (Constitutional Dilemma, Interview with Tomasi Vakatora, Sunday Times (Fiji), 18th July 2004). It was the Joint Parliamentary Select Committee, rather than the CRC, that proposed Fiji’s multi-party cabinet provision.

16 Campbell, I, The Quest For Constitutional Reform in Tonga, this conference; Kerry, J. ‘The Role of the Nobles Representatives in Tongan Political Culture and parliamentary Representation’, this conference.
17 Matai is often translated as ‘chief’, although the expression ‘chief’ means very different things across the Pacific. In Samoa, many adult males carry matai titles (but very few women), whereas Tongan nobles are very much a minority in the population.
18 ‘Hereditary chiefs are succeeding less in democratic elections’ (Crocombe, R. The South Pacific, IPS, USP, Suva, 2001, p490).
19 For a survey of the constitutional role of chiefs across the Pacific, see Crocombe, R. The South Pacific, IPS, Suva, 2001, p507-509.
22 Both the Solomon Islands and PNG have had ten changes of government since independence, respectively, in 1975 and 1978. Vanuatu has had 11 changes of government since 1991.
Fijian paramountcy in the 1990 constitution, earned little domestic or international legitimacy. By the mid-1990s, reform was again on the agenda. The key constitutional issue, finding institutions to encourage the emergence of multi-ethnic governments and to bring together leaders from the (then) 41% Indo-Fijian and 52% ethnic Fijian populations, was not one that could be handled by consensus via the one-sidedly indigenous frame of reference.

Further westwards, suggested reforms aimed at institutionalising customary chiefly (or big-man) authority have been fraught with difficulties. In the Solomon Islands, greater cohesiveness on the island of Isabel has long been associated with the considerable authority of paramount chiefs (an ongoing ‘cultural invention’, according to anthropologist Geoffrey White\(^23\)), although this was also encouraged by the fact that Isabel is 99% Anglican (as contrasted with its more religiously and ethno-linguistically fractured neighbours, Guadalcanal, Malaita and Makira). This political homogeneity helped Isabel avoid many of the disruptions caused by the Isatabu uprising on Guadalcanal and the Malaita Eagle Forces coup in Honiara in June 2000\(^24\). In part influenced by such examples, contemporary constitutional review proposals in the Solomon Islands have recommended the institutionalisation of chiefly authority across the country’s nine provinces in separate state constitutions. Exceptional fluidity, and normally non-inherited, styles of ‘chiefly’ authority, particularly in the eastern Solomons (aside from the Polynesian outliers and some mainland coastal areas like Lau and Sa’a on South Malaita) are likely to make that a difficult and ultimately counter-productive task\(^25\).

For many long-time observers, the important issue is not finding new ways to institutionalise customary authority, but rather that the conduct of contemporary elected Melanesian politicians and Prime Ministers is unworkably modelled on the customary feast-giving ‘big man’, accumulating assets and financial resources from the state and dispensing personal favours to associates, clients and clansfolk\(^26\).

In both Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, so-called “unbounded politics” has been associated with a weak party system, a high degree of government instability and an extraordinarily high rate of incumbent MP turnover. Some 70% of sitting parliamentarians failed to get re-elected at the 2002 PNG elections. In the Solomon Islands 2001 election, 64% of those elected were new members\(^27\). Why? Sam Kaima

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25 At the same time, it would be absurd to dismiss such debates because, as one often hears, any promotion of ‘chiefly’ authority smacks of institutionalising authoritarianism, as even a cursory glance at the late 1940s Maasina Rule movement should make obvious. The more sensible concerns are about freezing in a once-and-for-all way highly fluid leadership structures and the negligible representation of women by this method.

26 *The “big men” of politics are not unlike big men within localized, clan-based Melanesian society. Their claim to power rests on continuity in the political arena and their ability to garner and maintain strong regional and island support. They act as magnets around which newly elected politicians gravitate in loose alliances to bargain for power. If a leader falters in the competition, new aspirants are likely to seek out alternative leaders who can prove more successful in the parliamentary struggle for government and ministerial positions* (Steeves, J. ‘Unbounded Politics in the Solomon Islands: Leadership and Party Alignments’, *Pacific Studies*, 19, (1), 1996, p118, for Vanuatu, see Bolenga and Fraenkel, ‘Unbounded Politics; Assessing the Evidence in Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands’).

27 The temptation to identify this high MP turnover with ‘Melanesian’-style leadership should be avoided. In Samoa also incumbent turnover is up around the 50% mark (Fry, G.E. ‘Successions of Government in
describes the dilemmas facing candidates in the Markham open constituency in PNG, where 23 candidates contested for a single seat and the victor secured only 13.9% of the vote in 2002. He argues that candidates obtain support by direct distribution to voters, rather than offering alternative policy platforms likely to promote constituency or national development. If elected, cash-strapped MPs face extraordinary pressures to recoup expenses. As Henry Okole shows, this is one of the reasons why, if MPs are not in cabinet, sitting on the ‘middle benches’ is highly attractive. In both the Solomon Islands and PNG, so-called yo-yo or rubber band politicians frequently cross the floor, and parliamentary proceedings become engulfed in perpetual ‘no confidence’ conspiracies. Under perpetual threat, beleaguered Prime Ministers restrict parliamentary sittings to a minimum to avoid such contests, in the process frustrating the institutional objective of initiating and reviewing legislation. The result is gridlock and political paralysis.

In the Solomon Islands, as in PNG, following each general election, victorious MPs gather together to select a new Prime Minister (rather than following the ‘Westminster’ tradition of the Head of State selecting as Prime Minister the leader of the party believed to command a majority in the house). Premierships elections are particularly susceptible to bribery and corruption. During the 2001 election of Prime Minister Sir Allan Kemakeza, some MPs are alleged to have received $50,000 to ‘vote the right way’. Asian logging companies have, at other times, used financial inducements to secure favourable outcomes. A former Taiwanese ambassador was forced to resign after admitting that he had successfully persuaded two MPs to switch sides in the wake of the 1997 election. New MPs, just emerging victorious from costly election campaigns, face pressures to recoup expenses by selling their vote to the highest bidder.

Such practices occur despite the presence of Ombudsmen, Leadership Codes, media revelations and sharp criticism from neighbouring metropolitan powers. Indeed, political leaders who have been tried, convicted and imprisoned for fraud have, at times, proved easily able to secure re-election. Former Vanuatu premier Barak Sope, for example, was re-elected in his Efate constituency shortly after his release from prison (for forgery and fraud) following a presidential pardon. Sir Allen Kemakeza, while in charge of the Ministry for National Reconciliation, had been sacked from the Solomon Islands government of his predecessor for having personally obtained $850,000 in ‘compensation’ for damaged or lost properties. He nevertheless became Prime Minister after the 2001 polls. Given the existence of formal legal provisions and checks designed to prohibit such practices, it is doubtful whether electoral or institutional reform can do much to halt such practices (which require rather a strengthening of law and justice systems). Censure from the electorate, although real enough given the high rate of MP


30 Standish, B. ‘Elections, Political Conflict and Democracy in Papua New Guinea’, this conference

turnover, is unfortunately not necessarily aimed at dislodging the better distributors among such parliamentarians or ministers\textsuperscript{32}.

In the Solomon Islands, one plausible method of circumventing irregularities surrounding premiership elections and avoiding legislative paralysis might be a shift to a directly elected presidency, and stronger separation between a presidential-appointed executive and a popularly elected legislature\textsuperscript{33}. As in PNG, elections in the Solomon Islands are a double-barrelled process. MPs are first selected to their constituencies on the basis of highly localised concerns. Once they converge on Honiara, the premiership election rarely follows any clearly discernible mandate from the constituencies. In 1997, 49\% of MPs lost their seats, in an election widely thought to indicate a strong popular vote for reform. Bartholomew Ulufa’alu narrowly secured office and set out to challenge the system of ‘cronyism’ that had developed under his predecessor Solomon Mamaloni’s administration. Yet the new government was based on a fragile coalition. It faced perpetual ‘no confidence’ challenges while in office, until it was overthrown in a coup on June 5\textsuperscript{th} 2000. At the 2001 polls, an even larger number of MPs lost their seats (54\%), but in the scramble for the premiership, Sir Allen Kemakeza proved victorious and formed a government drawing on stalwarts from the Mamaloni era (widely viewed as a period when ministers took full advantage of the gains from office during the unsustainable logging extravaganza). Three prominent members of the Malaita Eagle Forces became ministers\textsuperscript{34}. The reception for Kemakeza’s election in Honiara was a lacklustre affair. Judging by reports in the local media, hospital workers, plantation workers from Russell Island and marchers on the streets of Honiara preferred the deposed Ulufa’alu, although those in Kemakeza’s offshore island fiefdom of Savo favoured their long-serving member\textsuperscript{35}. Bartholomew Ulufa’alu might well have won in a direct nation-wide presidential election. Had the 2001 result been different, the current Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands might have found itself working in tandem with a reformist administration, rather than propping up the deeply compromised Kemakeza government.

Yet, in Melanesia, direct presidential elections would be likely to raise fears of ethnic domination over the state\textsuperscript{36} and risk facilitating the emergence of more authoritarian forms of government (no doubt many Melanesian premiers would be glad to be unshackled from the threat of ‘no confidence’ votes in parliament). The Solomon Islands, for example, is highly ethnically diverse, with around 85 distinct ethno-linguistic groups spread across its nine provinces. People from the island of Malaita represent around 30\% of the national population (and considerably more if one adds Malaitan

\textsuperscript{32}There have been few studies of what determines success or failure in parliamentary elections (although see Hegarty, D. ‘Electoral Vulnerability in Papua New Guinea’, unpublished paper presented to the Political Studies Seminar, UPNG, 7\textsuperscript{th} June 1982). Leadership duration has been extensively investigated in Africa (Bienen,H & Van de Walle, N, ‘A Proportional Hazard Model of Leadership Duration’ Journal of Politics, 54, 1992, p693). We urgently need a comparative study of the rate of turnover of incumbent ministers, as a point of comparison with the turnover of incumbent MPs in Melanesia to test the proposition that access to cabinet portfolios provides potential pecuniary gains that are successfully used to retain office. We also, similarly, need investigations of on-the-ground patronage systems in the constituencies of Prime Ministers. Note that the conclusions of such investigations would be uncertain. Former Fiji Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka’s Natewa constituency, for example, remains one of the most impoverished in the country, although President Ratu Mara’s Lakeba exudes a prosperity seldom seen in Fiji.

\textsuperscript{33}John Henderson, ‘Would a Presidential System be Better for Melanesia?’, this conference.

\textsuperscript{34}Although one has since lost his seat due to conviction and imprisonment for extorting $S5,000 from the local daily newspaper, The Solomon Star and for beating up a New Zealand police woman.

\textsuperscript{35}Fraenkel, J. The Manipulation of Custom; from Uprising to Intervention in the Solomon Islands.

\textsuperscript{36}Ulufa’alu himself is from the Langalanga area on Malaita.
settlers in the capital, Honiara, and its environs. The Western Province had 15.3% of the national population in November 1999, and Guadalcanal 14.7%. Regionalist pulls are strong. At independence in 1978, the Western Breakaway Movement demanded greater autonomy or even independence, and ‘state government’ (or federation) proved an important part of the demands of the Guadalcanalese Isatabu guerrillas during 1998-2003. This is also the key issue in the current Solomon Islands constitutional review. As Glen Petersen shows in the case of the Federated States of Micronesia—also (if less so) a polyglot nation bringing together diverse groups and a country where politics is largely organised around such regional pulls rather than left-right or other divisions—resistance to a directly elected presidency stems from fears by other states that populous Chuuk would thereby control the country’s highest offices.\(^{37}\)

Philip Powell’s suggestion of ‘atomistic federalism’ in Melanesia, with both devolved and centralised controls, takes on a greater salience in this light.\(^{38}\) Contemporary debates surrounding the recent Eminent Person’s Report and the Pacific Islands’ Forum’s ‘Pacific Plan’ certainly do not (yet?) envisage a Pacific super-state, but they do suggest a more active and interventionist role for the Secretary General. One attraction of strengthening regional controls might be to lessen the possibility of ethnic capture of the state and to diminish what Sinclair Dinnen describes as the ‘softening’ of the post-colonial state in PNG and elsewhere in Melanesia.\(^{39}\) Yet there are also dangers associated with the emergence of any ‘Pacific parliament’, coupled with enhanced district-level control. (i) The remoteness even of national government remains a major issue in many of the Pacific Islands, and not just in Melanesia. Punitive defeat of incumbents is often directed towards those MPs who shift permanently out of their constituencies to reside, rather more comfortably, in faraway capitals. (ii) Devolution strategies have not necessarily produced better financial management. Many provincial authorities in Melanesia have been dissolved due to financial mismanagement and other irregularities. (iii) In Melanesia, which accounts for around a quarter of the world’s total languages, even small regional assemblies can be fractured by multiple competing ethnic allegiances.

The major difficulty facing institutional engineers is not that their inspiration comes from overseas (which is not a problem if the inspiration makes good sense), but that proposals often take insufficient heed of the local context. What drives Pacific politics - and this varies from country to country and region to region - is often only vaguely understood even by well-informed observers. Donor organisations are frequently unaware of the likely repercussions of proposed reforms. Consider one example of electoral engineering hopefully sufficiently old and long ago abandoned to have lost its once partisan advocates and detractors.

In Fiji in 1965, the British colonial authorities introduced a so-called ‘cross-voting’ system. This was a grand plan to reconcile Indo-Fijian calls for common roll with ethnic Fijian attachment to separate ethnically-reserved constituencies. The system was extended at independence in 1970, and survived until the 1987 coup. As a result, we can examine a run of six elections over 22 years. How did this system work? All registered citizens could cast four votes. Each chose a ‘communal’ candidate, but in addition cast a further three votes in common franchise constituencies (figure 1). Ethnically demarcated

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\(^{37}\) Petersen, G. ‘On Checks and Balances within the Federated States of Micronesia’s Presidential System’, this conference; see also Hezel, F. ‘The Chuuk Problem’.


electorates selected the communal candidates. In the ‘cross-voting’ or ‘national’
electorates, all registered voters regardless of race cast ballots for candidates whose
ethnicity was ‘Fijian’, ‘Indian’ or ‘general’. In these contests, it was the ethnicity of the
candidates, rather than the voters, that was legally pre-determined. After 1970, 25 MPs
were returned from cross-voting or ‘national’ constituencies, and 27 from communal
constituencies (notably a much higher proportion of common roll constituencies than
deployed under the 1997 constitution).

The ‘cross-voting’ system, influenced by similar colonial experiments in Tanzania and
elsewhere, was intended to encourage the emergence of national statesmen (or
infrequently women) who could successfully appeal across the ethnic divide. In the Fiji
context, the system was no doubt thought to advantage the Alliance Party, founded as it
was on the common political front forged by Fijian and European members against the
more narrowly Indian-backed Federation Party (later National Federation Party - NFP).
This was, after all, a reform influenced by that older, more conservative, school of
electoral engineering which was hostile to institutional reforms designed to upset
established power structures 40.

Whichever way, those reforms did not work as expected. After a period of adjustment,
the larger political parties all became adept at finding candidates from other ethnic
groups who they could field in the ethnically-reserved seats. The Federation Party,
although it at first faced difficulties in securing reliable allies, soon found sufficient
‘Fijian’ and ‘general’ candidates to stand on its platform, and renamed itself the National
Federation Party (NFP). Yet its support always remained solidly Indo-Fijian. The NFP
won elections in April 1977 and, in coalition with the Fiji Labour Party, in 1987. In the
first case, a constitutional crisis and in the second case a coup halted the largely Indo-
Fijian-backed parties from assuming or retaining office.

For our purposes here, the important point is that in nearly all constituency contests
between 1965 and 1987 (when the system was abolished), it was the ethnic composition
of the national constituencies that determined outcomes 41. In other words, a cross-voting
or national seat with a majority Indian electorate returned an MP associated with the
NFP (or NFP-FLP in 1987), whereas a similar seat with a majority European or
indigenous Fijian electorate tended to return an MP from the Alliance Party. As NFP

40 Little attention is paid, by contemporary electoral engineers, to that earlier Conservative post-war
tradition, despite its far deeper historical awareness of democratic change in Europe and North America,
and its engagement with similar issues about electoral reform during de-colonisation-induced transitions.
‘No electoral system can be democratically effective unless it both creates a government for the country and
gives power in shaping the government through the electoral system to those who possess power outside
the electoral system. To put this bluntly, an electoral system must be founded on realities, and not on
aspirations. An electoral system can do a little to change the shape of the future, but only if it recognises
the existence of the present, which includes the past. Too wide a gap between aspirations and reality can
produce only electoral humbug and the negation of democracy’ (Mackenzie, WJM. ‘Representation in
Plural Societies’, Political Studies, 11, (1), 1954, p57). To modify this argument, reforming electoral
institutions is a potentially disastrous method of contesting entrenched power. The better method is to
eliminate inbuilt electoral biases. This may render possible the emergence of political forces able to challenge
vested interests. It does not try to circumvent the political difficulty of so doing by enlightened institutional
short-cuts. Where the short-cut route is instead taken, it does not have sufficient popular support to prove
sustainable, and therefore encourages a rather more heavy-handed type of effort to shift institutions to
entrench elite privilege.

41 This is discussed in greater detail in Fraenkel, J. ‘Electoral Engineering and the Politicisation of Ethnic
Frictions in Fiji’, in Bastian, S & Luckham, R (eds) Can Democracy be Designed? The Politics of Institutional Choice in
leader AD Patel had predicted, the system encouraged the emergence of ‘Uncle Tom’ or ‘stooge’ type Fijian and Indo-Fijian politicians, whose legitimacy relied on party affiliations with the other community. One long-serving Indo-Fijian (Muslim) Alliance MP from the predominantly ethnic Fijian outer-island Lau ‘cross-voting’ constituency, Ahmed Ali, described his difficulties in trying to forge links with Indian voters as like trying to build a house by putting the roof on first. The main impact of the cross-voting system was not to facilitate the emergence of national leaders able to appeal across the ethnic divide. Nor was it to guarantee the Alliance Party’s hold on office. It was rather to strengthen political party organisation in Fiji, and encourage ethnic loyalties to become expressed via votes for ethnically-defined parties and policy platforms, rather than votes for individuals on account of their ethnicity.

Where this system might have been expected to promote moderation or greater cooperation across the ethnic divide was in the near-parity cross voting seats, where registered voters from the two main ethnic groups appeared in more or less equal proportions. In Fiji, these were the regions around the capital, Suva, in eastern Viti Levu. Everywhere else, the cross-voting constituencies were either overwhelmingly ethnic Fijian or Indian. Yet eastern Viti Levu has, since independence, been the area of the sharpest racial antagonism in Fiji. It is in these constituencies that the extremist Fijian Nationalist Party (FNP) received its strongest vote. This is the only region that has ever returned FNP MPs. It was the Suva-Nausori area that was the crucible of popular backing for Fiji’s coups in 1987 and 2000. This highlights the politically contingent effect of electoral institutions, even in conditions that meet the formal pre-requisites set out by contemporary electoral engineers. Where moderate forces are already strong, it is likely that politicians will reach out to other communities. Where they are not, roughly equal-sized electorates may encourage politicians to strengthen ethnic appeals, and play upon xenophobia, in the hope of maximising the turnout from their own community. There may also be resort to divisive vote-splitting campaign tactics, such as the NFP’s payment of extremist Fijian Nationalist Party candidates’ deposits at the April 1977 polls. Indeed, one long-time observer of Fiji’s electoral politics, Brij Lal, accurately identified these types of response also at the national level in the wake of Fiji’s 1982 polls when he wrote

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42 ‘The idea uppermost in the voter’s mind when he considers the candidates of other races is which one is likely to help his racial group most so that instead of erasing the racial outlook it will intensify it. Every race will be looking for the stooge or puppet from other communities who is likely to help their race’ (A.D. Patel, NFP leader, cited in Pacific Review, 25th August 1965, p7).

43 The Alliance lacked ‘in any district the chance of creating a firm base for continuing interaction between a leader and his community. Trying to achieve rapport with Indians through Indian parliamentarians elected on national seats with Fijian support and utilizing them in building a party with an ardent Indian following was like attempting to build an edifice roof first’ (Ali 1977b: 195). This author, Ahmed Ali, was one such MP. He was an Indo-Fijian parliamentarian regularly elected by ethnic Fijian voters in the Lau cross-voting constituency.

44 Reilly, B & Reynolds, A.; Horowitz.

45 Indeed, the mid-1970s rise of the FNP itself is an example of the emergence of political currents irrespective of incentives associated with the electoral system. By splitting the Fijian vote for the Alliance Party, the FNP crucially influenced the outcome of the April 1977 polls in Fiji. The National Federation Party was returned with two seats more than the Alliance Party, although a decision by the Governor General, as well as the quick emergence of internal fissions, stopped it from forming the government.

46 See Fraenkel, J. & Grofman, B. ‘Does the Alternative Vote Foster Moderation in Ethnically-Divided Societies’

political success in Fiji is … contingent upon maintaining solidarity in one’s own ethnic community while actively promoting disunity among the opposition’s.\(^{48}\)

In other words, electoral institutions do matter. They do have an important impact on voter loyalties, alliances and coalitions, party strategy, and the composition of legislative chambers. But the impact they have is rarely that envisaged by their architects\(^ {49} \). Unanticipated tactics or shifts in party strategy, or modifications in voting habits, often frustrate initial objectives, and yield unpredicted and occasionally undesirable outcomes\(^ {50} \).

It is worth remembering that the ‘electoral engineering’ school commenced its modern renaissance drawing on Giovanni Sartori’s 1960s argument that electoral systems were ‘the most specific manipulative element in politics’\(^ {51} \). The inspiration then was professional envy. In the 1960s, Keynesian economics was in its ‘golden-age’, and many dubious claims were made about the ability of governments to fine-tune the business cycle, eliminate unemployment and guarantee steady and robust economic growth. Some political scientists aspired to a similar mastery over political processes, and viewed electoral systems as the means to accomplish this goal. In the Cold War era, left-right divisions were too omnipresent for this type of thinking to acquire much support or to have much practical impact. Politics was still dominant. The world had not yet entered that ‘post-politics’ age when political objectives could be perceived to serve non-partisan or seemingly neutral and benign objectives via institutional change.

It is no accident that modern electoral engineering came into its own during the 1990s transition from Apartheid in South Africa. The key player, the African National Congress (ANC), had been steeped in Stalinist influences but during the 1980s and 1990s had jumped aboard the ‘new left’ roller-coaster. The main issue in the early 1990s was how to handle formerly highly politicised cleavages between the black majority and the white minority. The new, more moderate, ANC leadership was willing (temporarily) to embrace power-sharing with the white minority, and open to electoral reforms which might serve to encourage moderation and compromise during the difficult transition years. Focussing on South Africa, the world’s leading lights in the electoral engineering school vied with each other, setting out distinct and far-reaching proposals for constitutional reform. The initial post-Apartheid constitution resembled in key respects that advocated by Arend Lijphart, combining PR with provisions for mandatory power sharing. By contrast, Donald Horowitz had recommended instead a multi-member alternative vote system. Although Horowitz’s proposals were not accepted in South Africa, they did have an important bearing on the choice of electoral systems in Fiji.

As part of the new 1997 constitution, Fiji introduced the alternative vote system (AV), along with provisions for mandatory power-sharing. All parties with more than 10% of seats in the house were entitled to cabinet portfolios. By requiring victors, in single member electorates, to obtain 50%+1 of the vote, it was hoped that politicians would adopt more moderate stances on ethnically divisive policy issues to appeal across the ethnic divide. Yet the system, here again, did not work as expected. The story will be


\(^{49}\) B.D. Graham makes a similar point about the choice of voting methods, and in particular the alternative vote, in Australia in 1919. Sitiveni Rabuka and Jai Ram Reddy framed the 1997 constitution in a way thought to maximise their chances of election, but went to a crashing defeat at the May 1999 Fiji polls.

\(^{50}\) In one sense, this is fortunate given that institutional reforms are usually driven by politicians intent on keeping hold of power.

familiar to many, and can only be briefly summarised here. The centrist coalition that initiated the constitutional compromise found itself heavily defeated at the May 1999 polls. Instead, the Fiji Labour Party (relying mainly on first preference support from the 44% Indo-Fijian community combined with transfers of lower order preference votes under the control of party officials) found itself with an absolute majority. The country’s first ever Indo-Fijian Prime Minister, Mahendra Chaudhry, took office, at the head of a coalition including several small Fijian-backed parties. Precisely a year later, that government was overthrown in a coup perpetrated by indigenous Fijian extremists, backed notably by many rank-and-file members and backbench MPs from parties whose leaders had joined the coalition government.

After the May 2000 coup, the constitution was restored by a decision from Fiji’s Court of Appeal, paving the way for fresh elections, again held under the alternative vote system. At the 2001 polls, two exclusively ethnic-Fijian-backed political parties, the Soqosoqo ni Duavata ni Lewenivanua (SDL) and Matanitu Vanna (CAMV) secured the largest number of seats, and formed a coalition government. Ironically, given the hoped for pro-moderation effects of the electoral system, the self-styled ‘Moderates Forum’, was wiped out, with its preferences serving to elect instead the more extremist Fijian parties in key marginal constituencies. Even strong enthusiasts for the adoption of AV have acknowledged that Fiji’s system proved faulty, although they hold the continued use of a large number of communal seats and curious provisions governing split-format ballot papers responsible. Some still argue for the retention of that system, no longer upholding enthusiastically its supposed moderating effect on ethnic divisions, but rather on the thinner grounds that electoral systems should rarely be changed lightly. Others argue that Fiji’s system is likely to generate highly disproportionate results, anti-moderation effects and poorly balanced, ethnically-based governments again in future.

Whichever way, Fiji’s electoral system has shown itself to be an odd and unwieldy construct, which generates outcomes very different to those envisaged by its architects or supporting theorists. Combining a majoritarian electoral system with a proportional multi-party cabinet is unlikely to yield either sturdy government (one of the key supposed benefits of majoritarian systems) or governments that proportionally represent different strands and alignments within the electorate (the intended advantage of proportional systems). One of the advantages of AV is that it permits like-minded parties to run on separate slates and to combine through the process of distributing preference votes (witness the Liberal/National coalition in Australia). Conversely, the 10% of seats rule qualifying entry into cabinet discourages smaller parties. If politics continues to revolve around ethnic polarization (as seems likely for at least the first decade or so after the coup), there is currently some incentive for larger ethnically-based political parties to strongly discourage rivals within the same ethnic group from fielding candidates and splitting the ethnic vote. Smaller parties are less likely to reach the 10% threshold.

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53 This was only because Labour was ranked last and the SDL or CAMV in penultimate position. As in 1999, negative ranking proved a critical determinant of electoral success in the most marginal seats.
57 This, however, may now be over-turned by a Supreme Court ruling that, unexpectedly, set a precedent for including independents from the House of Representatives and the Senate in multi-party cabinets, a
required for inclusion in cabinet. Hence, the net effect of these particular electoral institutions designed to promote multi-ethnic government, moderation and compromise would logically be - once the big parties appreciate this – may be to encourage the formation of two single-party rival ethnic blocs, who proceed to do ferocious racially-charged political battle with each other for ethnic control of the state at general elections\(^{58}\).

New Caledonia, by contrast, has long relied on list system proportional representation for its territorial elections, although it too in the 1998 Noumea Accord introduced provisions for multi-party cabinet and power-sharing in territorial governments. Like Fiji, New Caledonia is an ethnically bipolar society, but with a 40% white population and 48% Kanak population. Whereas Fiji, after two elections under AV, has seen voters line up behind two political parties, one representing Indo-Fijians (Labour Party) and the other representing ethnic Fijians (SDL), New Caledonia’s 1980s fissures have become less marked in the wake of the electoral boycotts and violence of the mid-1980s, with a greater number of parties emerging. Nick Maclellan concludes (at least for the period prior to the 2004 polls) that the divisions and boycotts of the mid-1980s were subsequently displaced by a new [Kanak] engagement with electoral institutions, following the 1988 Matignon-Oudinot Accords and the 1998 Noumea Accord. The independence movement Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS) has entered the institutions of government, and Kanak independence leaders serve in a multi-party government alongside their conservative opponents\(^{59}\).

The 2004 results suggest a further fracturing of the once-robust pro- and anti-independence coalitions. The number of lists submitted rose from 20 in 1989, to 21 in 1995, 23 in 1999 and 31 in 2004. FLNKs, which relies mainly on Kanak voters, proved unable to agree a joint list across New Caledonia’s three provinces in 1999. In 2004, so great was the fracturing of the Kanak vote between competing parties in the Southern Province that none reached the 5% threshold. All six of the 1999 Southern Province representatives lost their seats. Conversely, Jacques Lafleur’s Rassemblement UMP lost 12% of its 1999 vote in 2004, with the new coalition Avenir Ensemble being the major beneficiary. Avenir, argues Maclellan, is shifting the political agenda away from divisive ethnic issues towards a greater concern with ‘issues of corruption, cronyism and gender politics’\(^{60}\). In contrast to Fiji, here a proportional representation system appears to have taken the heat off the inter-ethnic issues, enabled the emergence of smaller parties and shifted the political agenda away from the politics of ethnicity (although further comparative research is required on this issue). Nevertheless, the debacle following the 2004 elections provides a good example of another defect often associated with proportional representation systems: the reliance on forming governments based on weak and shifting coalition arrangements (and the same could be said of contemporary developments in Vanuatu).

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\(^{58}\) The other options are to revisit the constitutional compact of 1997 or that demographic changes, that will already have reduced the share of the Indo-Fijian population down to around 40% and the ethnic Fijian share up to around 55% continue up to the point the ethnic focus at election time no longer has the same salience.

\(^{59}\) Maclellan, N. ‘From Eloi to Europe: Interactions with the ballot box in New Caledonia’, this conference, 2004.

\(^{60}\) Maclellan, ‘From Eloi to Europe’, p12.
Sartori takes majoritarian electoral systems, such as first-past-the-post or the alternative vote, to be ‘stronger’ systems (in the sense of being more easily manipulated by electoral engineers) whereas the various forms of proportional representation are deemed weaker because, by definition, they keep shares of seats closely in line with shares of the national vote. Yet, in Melanesia, list PR might (for better or worse) be deemed ‘stronger’ in the sense that it forces party organisation on communities who would otherwise be likely to adopt looser organisations. First-past-the-post (or single member district) elections, by contrast, involve less ‘manipulation’ in the sense that they retain close connections between individual MPs and their constituents.

It is the impact of electoral incentives, rather than the institutions themselves, that is particularly difficult to gauge. There is, obviously, no doubt about the effect of Tonga’s electoral (or appointment-based) institutions in propping up the monarchy. Under Samoa’s matai-only system, political power remains closely tied to the customary hierarchy. Electoral laws in French Polynesia and New Caledonia, including recently the requirement that party lists alternate men and women (the parity law), have ensured that the French territories have the highest share of women members of parliament in the region (see table). What is more difficult to judge is, for example, the impact of electoral institutions on coalition formation and dissolution. Electoral theorists often make big claims about causation in this respect, without much supporting empirical research. Donald Horowitz, for example, strongly urged the Fiji’s Constitutional Review Commission to adopt the alternative vote system. After the first elections in May 1999, he pointed to the pre-election alliance between Sitiveni Rabuka’s SVT and Jai Ram Reddy’s NFP as one of the benign ‘effects’ of the new preferential voting system. As the political situation worsened in Fiji, Horowitz claimed this was due to the absence of ‘powerful actors’ willing to sustain moderate responses to inbuilt electoral incentives. The rival Peoples Coalition was also initially upheld as a triumph of the constitutional engineers, but was later claimed to be a post-election coalition formed in response to the belatedly added multi-party cabinet provisions. Eventually, the precariousness of the People’s Coalition government as deemed to have been a response to the Lijphartian power-sharing provisions contained in the 1997 constitution.

Though greater caution is needed about such claims about institutional effects, it is extraordinarily difficult to establish more rigorous tests. In the case of Fiji’s 1965-1987 cross-voting system, detailed scrutiny suggests significant political party-strengthening influences. List PR in New Caledonia, SNTV in Vanuatu and preferential voting in Nauru and Kiribati presidential elections need considerably more empirical research before we can establish their political or strategic repercussions. Defects associated with the operation of the ‘Westminster system’, such as the absence of strong political parties and the supposedly unsuitable adversarial government/opposition polarity, are frequently associated with calls for some more ‘culturally appropriate’ design of political institutions.

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61 Sartori on electoral engineering
63 ‘Unreserved seats are too scarce, the unreserved seats are insufficiently heterogeneous in composition, and, because post-electoral coalitions are not based on compromise necessary to lure voters across group boundaries, they are inadequate to foster conciliation’ (Horowitz, D. ‘Constitutional Design: An Oxymoron?’ in Shapiro, I. & Macedo, S. (eds.) Designing Democratic Institutions, Nomos XLI, New York University Press, pp253-284, 2000, p268).
Yet, here again, perceived ‘effects’ are rarely scrutinised in detail, and alternatives are rarely spelt out. Presidential systems also have potential pitfalls, as do proportional systems. More practical proposals, such as John Rougan’s call for double-ballots in the Solomon Islands coupled with some kind of ‘recall system’, merit attention.

Table; *Women in Pacific Parliaments* (December 2001)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size of Legislature</th>
<th>Number of Female Members</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>French Polynesia</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guam</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Caledonia¹</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niue</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cook Islands</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiji</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samoa</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiribati</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marshall Islands</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Papua New Guinea</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tuvalu</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanuatu</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: [http://abc.net.au/timetotalk/english/issues/issues_four.htm](http://abc.net.au/timetotalk/english/issues/issues_four.htm)

¹ Following the introduction of the new parity law, the number of women representatives rose to 36 (or 47%) in New Caledonia in 2004 (Macellan, ‘From Eloi’, p9).

It remains to be seen whether limited preferential voting, introduced only in the wake of the 2002 election in PNG, generates a more moderate and broadly acceptable genre of MPs, or whether feverishly competitive and highly factionalised elections in PNG simply assume new forms. The current transition to limited preferential voting in PNG is intended to arrest the proliferation of candidates and vote-splitting, particularly in the Highlands. By requiring voters to mark three preferences, it is hoped that candidates will broaden their appeal beyond their immediate clans. Yet accurately assessing the repercussions of that reform require a key question to be addressed. Why do so many candidates currently stand in PNG elections? Why did an average of 26 candidates contest each constituency in 2002? Why did some not stand aside to allow ideologically like-minded allies to defeat powerful adversaries? The answer is surely that there is (or perhaps there is *as yet*) no ideologically unifying dimension to the political process.

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⁶⁴ As Ron May shows using ballot box data from Angoram, however, victors apparently due already, under FPP, successfully widen their support across regions. It is rather the losers whose support is confined to clan support.
encouraging candidates to group themselves along a left-right or any other such ideological axis. Little at present restrains candidate proliferation. If so, the response to the introduction of LPV may well simply be to further increase the number of candidates contesting elections. Wire-pulling contestants will seek out two closely allied dummy candidates to gather preferences which are then centralised towards major contenders during the count. Even in Fiji, where strong national and regional organising dimensions to the political process do prevail, parties campaigning under that new preferential voting system have already used such dummy candidates in the hope of strengthening their position. Dummy candidates may also be used to split rival candidates votes and to gather distinct pockets of support behind a single favoured victor.

If so, the counting process will become even more protracted than in 2002. Imagine an immediate full adjustment to the new electoral provisions in the presence of an issue-devoid political spectrum (IDPS). The average number of candidates per constituency would rise from 26 to 78. The average number of counts would be 77, the initial two-thirds of which would eliminate the dummy candidates, whittling the number of contestants back down to round the 26 level. Thereafter, successive counts would eliminate the 1st preferences recorded on ballot papers on which the 2nd and 3rd preferences were already exhausted. In such circumstances, the result would be exactly the same as under a first-past-the-post system. Victors could still be elected with considerably less than 50% of the vote. Of course, this is only one possible outcome. In some circumstances, there may be a genuinely ‘most preferred’ candidate able to pick up a substantial number of 2nd or 3rd preferences. On the islands or in the urban areas, new broader lines of political division may eventually reduce candidate proliferation. But it does highlight one imminent potential under the new system in the presence of a fully IDPS. In such circumstances, the introduction of LPV, aimed as it is at restraining candidate multiplication, is likely to generate the precise reverse of what is intended.

Conclusion

Electoral systems do matter. Political culture is not ‘everything’. But electoral systems often matter in ways that differ from those envisaged by their architects, and building in clear political objectives to such institutions is potentially a risky approach. Much of the attraction of modern electoral engineering formulas arises from claims that this might provide mechanisms for challenging the power of vested interests, or elites, might mitigate ethnic tension or promote moderation or might force aspiring parliamentarians to broaden their appeal. Yet these are political tasks, which are unlikely to succeed unless popular support can be mobilised behind them. The dangers associated with short-cutting that arduous task by institutional means were vividly illustrated by the Fiji experience. Knowledge of the political context is critical to deciding which electoral laws are likely to best promote participation, to enable the emergence of issue-based political strategies, to improve economic management, and to strengthen the often tenuous popular mandates of Pacific governments. Better-tuned reform projects would tend to

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65 At the 2001 polls, the SDL fielded multiple candidates in some constituencies, hoping to draw together these votes during the preference counting process.
66 For the purposes of simplification, we assume here that all dummy candidates get less votes than all genuine candidates. To the extent that this does not occur, there is some potential for dummies to get elected.
67 Yet, if there were such preferred candidates then there would have been fewer candidates under the former first-past-the-post-system. Like-minded rivals would have stepped aside to avoid splitting the vote. Clearly, this was not the case in most electorates.
follow from improving understanding of the relationship between political culture, electoral performance and institutions. Institutional reforms are more likely of success if these become seen as more neutral and facilitative frameworks, and if these enable existing domestic pressures for change, rather than superimposed structures based around extravagant reform objectives.

End.