



# State, Society & Governance in Melanesia

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## Improving Women's Electoral Chances through an Evidence-Based Approach: Temporary Special Measures and Institutional Approaches

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In Brief 2016/36

*This is the third In Brief of a series of eight developed as background papers for a three-day workshop titled 'Improving women's electoral chances through an evidence-based approach', hosted by the Centre for Democratic Institutions and the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program at the Australian National University in Canberra, June 2016. The In Briefs are designed to accompany the [workshop synthesis report](#).*

One potential method of increasing the number of women in politics is through the use of institutional measures designed to ensure a minimum level of women's representation. These are often called 'temporary special measures', although they are not always intended to be temporary. The United Nations and other international organisations have strongly promoted special measures as a method of rapidly increasing the number of women in politics (Clark and Rodrigues 2009). Yet despite significant global uptake in the 1990s and 2000s, and the promotion of them by international bodies, few Pacific states have introduced special measures to date. In many post-conflict societies, special measures are first introduced as part of a new political settlement; this has occurred in some parts of the Pacific region in periods of political transition (Bougainville and Timor-Leste), but not in others (Solomon Islands).

At the subnational level, there are special measures in place in Bougainville, the French Pacific territories and Vanuatu. Of the quotas that have been introduced in the Pacific region, the 'parity laws' in French Polynesia and New Caledonia have been the most successful in terms of increasing women's representation. In this system, female and male candidates must be equally represented, in strict alternation order, on party lists. Women currently make up 52 per cent of the French Polynesian Assembly and 44 per cent of the New Caledonian Congress; if they were included in national-level women's representation league tables, they would be third and fifth in the world respectively. The type of

special measures introduced in the French Pacific is not easily applicable in most other Pacific political systems, however, as it requires a strong party system to function effectively. This is obvious in the experience of Wallis and Futuna, where the same system has been implemented in the context of a weak and fragmented party system, with more limited results; currently just 4 out of 20 representatives in its assembly are women.

The most common form of special measures advocated in Pacific countries has been reserved seats. The advantage of a reserved seats system is that it can be grafted onto almost any political system. Reserved seats for women have been introduced in the Bougainville House of Representatives and at municipal council level in Vanuatu. Similar systems have also been proposed at national level in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and other countries. Criticisms of existing reserved seats systems in the Pacific are that they have a silo effect, with a majority of female candidates competing against each other rather than against men; and that reserved seats can act as a ceiling on women's representation, leading to a perception that reserved seats are 'women's seats' and general seats are therefore 'men's seats' (Baker 2014). In both successful and unsuccessful campaigns for special measures in the Pacific region, there has been criticism that it is an externally driven agenda rather than a local initiative.

Other, more innovative approaches have been trialled or proposed in the Pacific region. Samoa adopted at parliamentary level a relatively unusual 'safety net' system, which sets a minimum level of women's representation at five members of parliament, but does not come into effect unless the number of women elected outright in a general election falls beneath this threshold, in which case additional seats for women are instituted. To be eligible for additional seats, women must have been candidates in the general election, so that all women entering parliament are campaigning against men in the same electoral process. The proposed new local-

level government structures in Bougainville will have parity representation, with one woman and one man elected from each ward. To ensure equality in not only representation but also leadership, the positions of chair and deputy chair for each council must be held by members of the opposite sex, and must alternate between a woman and a man each term (Nisira 2016).

Most institutional approaches to the issue of women's political under-representation have focused on temporary (or non-temporary) special measures, but these are often politically difficult to implement, especially at the national level. Other approaches include gendered components of party strengthening legislation, electoral procedures and campaign finance regulations. Legislation designed to increase political stability and to strengthen political parties has often included a gendered component. In Papua New Guinea, the *Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates* includes a provision that any party which endorses a female candidate who goes on to win at least 10 per cent of votes in her electorate is refunded 75 per cent of her campaign expenses. This led to an increase in party endorsement among female candidates in the 2002 election, but the number of successful female candidates actually decreased. The 2014 *Political Parties Integrity Act* in Solomon Islands included provisions designed to encourage the selection of women candidates, with a minimum requirement of 10 per cent women's representation on party lists, and a grant of SB\$10,000 per successful woman candidate to be paid to the political party that endorsed her. In the election that year just 3 out of 12 political parties endorsed more than 10 per cent women candidates, with half of all registered parties endorsing none. In general, the provisions on women's political participation in such legislation tend to be weak, and the incentives ineffective. Other methods of incorporating gendered components into such legislation, however, could be workable. One suggestion in Papua New Guinea is to allow parties to endorse a second candidate in constituencies provided that one of the candidates is a woman. Another institutional approach would be to encourage the participation of women in political party structures, perhaps by gender-specified positions on party executives.

One local initiative to encourage women's participation in elections in Papua New Guinea has been gender-segregated polling. This is meant to protect the right of women to vote freely, which might feasibly also benefit female candidates (this, of course, rests on the assumption that female voters in the absence of intimidation would choose to vote for a woman, which is not always true). The uptake of gender-segregated

polling has been limited, however, so it is not available for the vast majority of female voters. Yet these kinds of locally driven responses to gendered electoral issues are important to highlight.

While temporary special measures are the institutional approach that garners the most attention, other approaches seem to be more politically feasible in many parts of the Pacific. In this space, however, there are few examples of proven workable and effective methods. Institutional approaches also require significant buy-in from a range of actors, including political parties, parliamentary actors and regulatory agencies. In many cases, seeking regulatory (non-legislative) change is potentially an easier space to work within. A key issue in both institutional and regulatory reform is how to build politically effective coalitions to support reform. Examples from the region, such as the campaigns for reserved seats in Vanuatu and in Bougainville, may help shed some light on potential pathways to reform and how donors might help.

### Author Notes

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### References

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