



# State, Society & Governance in Melanesia

Celebrating 20 years of SSGM and 70 years of Pacific studies at The Australian National University

## Improving Women's Electoral Chances through an Evidence-Based Approach: Practical Strategies for Negotiating the Political Context

Nicole Haley

In Brief 2016/40

*This is the seventh 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](#).*

Candidates who win elections and those who mount credible campaigns invariably engage with the political context in which they are running. They must understand and master both the formal and informal rules of the game. Providing forms of support that empower women candidates politically is a challenging proposition for development partners. Before considering how best to support women candidates, development partners must first understand and acknowledge the local political context(s) to which women candidates must necessarily respond and then what might this mean for development partners seeking to support them.

Any candidate running for office needs to understand how the political system in which they find themselves works and to tailor campaign strategies in response to the opportunities and constraints such systems present. Understanding a political system requires an assessment of the actors, institutions, rules and context which frame elections, and how these components interact (Barbara and Haley 2014; Leftwich 2006). The most obvious institution relevant to candidates is the electoral system and the formal rules and regulations that frame electoral competitions. However, informal rules also play a decisive role in shaping electoral competition in Melanesia. Culture and the importance of kin and ethnic relationships are a particularly important factor in the region, as are the impacts of patronage and clientelism. Understanding how formal and informal institutions interact to create 'rules of the game' is particularly important for candidates as they prepare to run for office.

Practical strategies which support women candidates to run effective campaigns must necessarily focus on helping them work effectively within the rules of the game. There are a number of challenges arising from the political context in Melanesia that successful candidates need to respond to.

### Powerful Coalitions

The capacity to form politically decisive coalitions is an important factor influencing the electoral prospects of any candidate. Depending on the nature of the electorate, this may require obtaining the support of specific community groups, chiefly leaders and business people. Different groups within an electorate will have different priorities and candidates may need to adopt a range of strategies to build effective coalitions. The importance of building coalitions has long been recognised by women's advocacy groups and development partners. Development partner programs have for some time sought to fund a range of women's organisations which have worked to provide a support network for women candidates. Such an approach does not appear to have been particularly successful in straddling the broad range of groups across electorates that need to be included in politically decisive coalitions. Some of the successful political campaigns pursued by women in the region have been notable for their strategic approach to coalition formation. For example, the bus routes campaign mounted by the Young Women's Parliamentary Group in Solomon Islands, while not an electoral campaign, provides an interesting example of an issue-based campaign that has leveraged broad community support and a coalition of decision-makers to progress a public policy issue.

Building decisive political coalitions to improve electoral prospects requires locally responsive campaign approaches. Issues such as the choice of campaign manager, campaign promises and the cultural appropriateness of campaign messaging all come in to play. Wood (2015:16) has noted the importance of influential local figures in delivering vote blocks,

and the practice of buying the support of brokers in some competitions to deliver votes.

### Money Politics and Violence

Elections in Melanesia are increasingly marred by money politics and violence. Indeed 'money politics' is increasingly normalised in Melanesia and is changing the way electoral competitions are run. Incumbent members of parliament — overwhelmingly men — have access to increasing large constituency development funds to support their electoral prospects (Batley 2015). It is perhaps no coincidence that incumbency rates in the 2014 national election in Solomon Islands coincided with significant increases in constituency funding available to members of parliament in the last term of parliament (Haley et al. 2015).

Corruption also poses a major challenge for aspiring candidates in Melanesia. Vote buying is a particular challenge, although its illegality makes it difficult to quantify (Wood 2015). Candidates deploy a range of strategies to buy votes and influence electoral outcomes, not all of which are effective. Voter rolls in the region have been notoriously inflated (although the shift to biometric registration in Solomon Islands appears to have improved this). Election observations in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands have documented how candidates have used cash and gifts to influence voters, with many feeling coerced to accept money and gifts offered to them by candidates and/or their agents (Haley et al. 2013; Haley et al. 2015).

### Implications for Women Candidates

Developing effective political strategies in response to these challenges is no easy task for women candidates, but should be an important part of campaign preparations if women want to improve their chances of being elected. There are a range of dilemmas facing women candidates. If money is decisive in campaigning, how can women candidates form decisive coalitions if they have limited access to it? What is involved in forming decisive coalitions? Who is best placed to support this? What role can development partners play?

### Author Notes

Nicole Haley is convenor of the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program, Australian National University.

### References

- Barbara, J. and N. Haley 2014. *Analytical Framework to Engage with Developmental Leadership in the Pacific*. Pacific Leadership Program. Suva, Fiji: Cardno.
- Batley, J. 2015. *Constituency Development Funds in Solomon Islands: State of Play*. SSGM In Brief 2015/67. Canberra: ANU.
- Haley, N. and K. Zubrinich 2013. *2012 Papua New Guinea General Elections Domestic Observation Report*. Report prepared for Cardno Emerging Markets.
- Haley, N., K. Zubrinich, J. Barbara, K. Baker and H. McMahon 2015. *2014 Solomon Islands Election Report*. Canberra: ANU.
- Leftwich, A. 2006. *From Drivers of Change to the Politics of Development: Refining the Analytical Framework to Understand the Politics of the Places Where We Work. Part 3: Final Report*. Department of Politics, University of York.
- Wood, T. 2015. *Understanding Electoral Politics in Solomon Islands*. CDI Discussion Paper 2014/2. Canberra: ANU.

