

## **Some Basic Information About Voter Behaviour and Electoral Politics in Solomon Islands – Terence Wood**

From 2010 until 2014 I worked on my PhD on ethnic identity and voters' choices in Solomon Islands elections. My full PhD dissertation and other analysis is online at: <https://solomonislandselections.wordpress.com/analysis/>

This document is a non-technical document that attempts to answer some basic questions about the choices voters make in Solomon Islands elections. For a history of elections and election results see: [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2488857](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2488857)

### **Are votes secret in Solomon Islands elections?**

Yes, they almost certainly are. This possibly wasn't true in the past and some candidates claim that they can get access to ballot boxes after elections and determine who has voted for them from these, but this claim is false. On the other hand, candidates are often able to guess who voted for them from village gossip, or to guess on the basis of family ties and similar traits.

### **Are voters free to choose who they can vote for in Solomon Islands elections?**

It depends. Solomon Islands is a democracy and the government does not directly interfere with the choices of voters. However, some voters are not fully free to choose who to vote for: quite often younger members of families and women are expected to vote as male family heads tell them to.

### **What do voters seek when they choose who to vote for in elections in Solomon Islands?**

Voters in Solomon Islands almost always vote for candidates who they think are likely to help them, their families or their communities if elected. Generally voters do not assess MPs on the basis of their performance in governing the country as a whole.

### **Is this type of voting something that only happens in Solomon Islands?**

No, political scientists call this type of electoral politics clientelism, and it occurs in many developing countries. It occurs in other parts of the Pacific. And you can find examples of it in the history of countries such as England and Australia.

### **Are voters making a mistake when they vote this way?**

No. Given Solomon Islands is a weak state, and given voters' in rural Solomon Islands have immediate needs, voters voting for candidates who can help them directly makes sense, particularly for voters who have never experienced a well-governed country. The problem is that by voting this way, voters reward MPs for focusing on delivering material support to their supporters (support like the RCDF funding) rather than for focusing on improving development across Solomon Islands as a whole.

### **Why do voters in Solomon Islands vote for *wantoks*?**

Voters in Solomon Islands don't always vote for *wantoks* (people who they share relational ties, such as clan ties, with) and when they do it isn't because of blind loyalty. Rather, when voters vote for *wantoks* it's either because they feel obliged to, or because they think a *wantok* will be more likely to help (than a stranger) if elected. However, if voters think a candidate who is a *wantok* won't help, or think someone else is more likely to help, they will often vote for another candidate.

### **What could improve the quality of elections and political governance in Solomon Islands?**

I don't know the answer to this question (sorry). I don't think simply changing the electoral system will help (the change in PNG hasn't helped much). I do think that preventing electoral corruption is important though. And my guess is that growing larger social movements, which can encourage people to work together (and vote together) to change how the country as a whole is governed is likely to be important.