

A Brief Summary of Terence Wood's PhD Thesis on Ethnic Voting in Solomon Islands

From 2010 until 2014 I worked on my PhD on ethnic identity and voters' choices in Solomon Islands elections.

The dissertation and other analysis is online at: <https://solomonislandselections.wordpress.com/analysis/>

Many, many people helped me during my research. I list some of those people on page xiii of my dissertation. If you helped in any way with my research: thank you very much!

What was the PhD about?

My PhD research focused on ethnic identity and electoral politics in national elections in Solomon Islands. The research examines when and why Solomon Islanders vote for candidates who they share ethnic ties with, which ethnic identities are electorally important, and how ethnic voting is associated with broader features of the country's politics. The ethnic identities studied in the thesis include: island groups, language groups, churches and clans.

What did I find?

I found that only some ethnic identities (particularly those to do with clans and some churches) are electorally important. And that even within groups associated with these identities support is not guaranteed.

In my thesis I argue that ethnic identities only play an important role in electoral politics in Solomon Islands when the groups associated with them are home to social rules (informal institutions) which enable effective electoral collective action. Such rules include: norms of obligation which may make co-ethnic candidates more likely to follow up on electoral promises; rules which enhance the loyalty of the brokers (campaign managers, and local agents in villages) candidates use in their attempts to gain votes; and rules which enable key political actors to coordinate support behind favoured candidates. Importantly, rules have to be present within ethnic groups for ethnic voting to occur. Clans commonly possess such rules and so are often electorally important groups. Language and island groups do not typically possess such rules and so are rarely electorally important. In the case of churches, the presence of electorally useful social rules varies between denominations.

This type of conditional ethnic voting is associated with the clientelist nature of Solomon Islands' electoral politics. In political science the term clientelism is used to describe politics in which voters (when they are free to choose) typically vote for the candidate that they think is most likely to help them personally, or help their family or community if they are elected. In Solomon Islands the ethnic voting that comes coupled with these objectives does not involve blind loyalties but rather the calculations of voters and political actors. Social rules associated with ethnic identities play an important role in structuring these calculations but, except in rare instances where rules are very strong, they do not perfectly determine behaviour. As a result, other factors have a major impact on voters' choices: where they are free to choose, voters will vote for candidates who are not co-ethnics if given good cause to believe they are more likely to help.

Electoral clientelism in Solomon Islands is very similar to that seen in other developing countries. However, the nature of ethnic voting in Solomon Islands appears to be different from ethnic voting as described in some major political science work based on other countries.